

E C H O E S
of memory

VOLUME
I

UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM

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STORIES FROM THE MEMORY PROJECT

UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM

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C O N T E N T S

Echoes of Memory

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*Works of fiction

LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

Sara J. Bloomfield

After World War II, the few European Jews who had not been killed in the Nazi onslaught began thinking of their future as they were mourning their past. Their loss was unimaginable, but their resilience was unmatched. They set about finding loved ones, making families, establishing new homes, and rebuilding their lives. They were not called “Holocaust survivors” at first—they were displaced persons, immigrants, refugees. In the United States they were busy starting over, and the rest of the country was busy fighting the Cold War. They had lived through one of history’s greatest cataclysms, but they were not ready to talk about their experiences—and the world was not yet ready to listen.

In the late 1970s that began to change. Their singular ordeal had become known as “the Holocaust,” and the public was becoming increasingly interested. Some—but not all—survivors began talking and writing about their experiences. In 1978, President Carter established a commission on the Holocaust that led to the creation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, which opened in 1993. The Museum itself provided a unique venue for survivors to share their experiences and to make a variety of meaningful contributions to Holocaust education.

Now, almost 60 years after the end of World War II, the Museum is celebrating its 10th Anniversary, having welcomed over 20 million visitors. Its enormous success is due in no small measure to the efforts of more than 60 survivors who volunteer at the Museum. They work in Visitor Services, Education, the Speakers Bureau, Development, Special Events, Collections, Exhibitions, Oral History, the Photo Archives, the Archives, the Survivors Registry, and the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies.

LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

The survivors have enriched the Museum's staff and visitors in innumerable ways, and many warm relationships and exciting ideas have emerged from our shared experience. One of them—the *Memory Project*—is a most unusual project and the result of more than two years of writing workshops for our survivor volunteers. Because every story is unique, because every story is precious, it was our obligation—indeed our privilege—to ensure that their memories were captured, preserved, and transmitted to new generations. Their legacy speaks of the past, but it has the power to shape our future. We are eternally grateful to each of them.



Sara J. Bloomfield

Director

September 21, 2003

FOREWORD

Elizabeth Anthony

Holocaust survivors find it difficult to relate what they experienced during the Holocaust. Relatively few have the opportunity to speak and even fewer are comfortable speaking publicly. Still, many feel a sense of duty and obligation to share their experiences and memories. Therefore, it is essential to provide survivors other outlets through which to share their memories.

At the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, more than 60 Holocaust survivors volunteer their time. Some speak to student and community groups, but the majority work behind the scenes, translating documents, doing administrative tasks, and consulting on exhibitions. They work with a commitment to the memory of lost loved ones and to teaching the lessons of the Holocaust. Few, however, find ways to convey their feelings and memories; many do not have an opportunity to share.

To answer that need, the Museum offers its survivor volunteers the *Memory Project* writing workshop as a means of recounting their experiences, whether in biographical accounts or in fictional form. It is designed to teach participants the writing process, including style, grammar, and structure. These workshops have met the needs of many survivors who want to tell their story but who have not previously had the right place or time to do so.

The *Memory Project* grew from a conversation with a colleague from the Drew University Center for Holocaust/Genocide Study. Drew's "Leave-A-Legacy" writing program also helps Holocaust survivors record their memories while learning the craft of writing. The Drew workshop coordinators were kind

FOREWORD

enough to welcome me into their group for a number of research visits and made three trips to Washington, D.C., to demonstrate their model for our survivor group and our instructor, Maggie Peterson. Since then, Maggie has worked with our volunteers, building upon the exceptional idea of Drew University and creating our own offering for our survivor volunteers.

My involvement in bringing the *Memory Project* to our volunteers is a professional and personal privilege. I have attended almost every meeting of the writing group and have seen the participants grow in ways we—and I venture to say, they—never imagined. I have seen the look on a friend’s face when he or she remembers something not thought or spoken of in more than 60 years. I have heard stories that survivors have previously been afraid to share, sometimes fearing deep emotional reaction or other times underestimating the importance of their experience. As a result, I have witnessed stories previously untold and gained invaluable insight into my survivor friends’ experiences. I am thrilled to help them share these thoughts and stories with you in written form and to bring *Echoes of Memory* to light.



Elizabeth Anthony

Memory Project Coordinator

INTRODUCTION

Margaret Peterson

When I first began working with the Holocaust survivors in the *Memory Project*, I was unsure what I might be able to contribute. I wondered how it would be possible for me to teach these survivors anything. During our very first meeting I asked our workshop participants what they wanted from me, from a writing workshop, and from each other. Almost without exception, they responded that they wanted to find a clearer voice in which to tell their story. They wanted to gather the tools of the writing craft and produce work that was true to their vision. When I heard this I was relieved, because although these are daunting tasks, they are the goals of all writers. It seemed like familiar ground, a good place to start.

From that day on, I have used the premise that the best “teachers” of writing are writers. I base each class loosely on a piece of writing by a published author of prose or poetry. We have read Holocaust survivors Charlotte Delbo, Ida Fink, and Primo Levi, as well as poet Gerald Stern, novelist Eudora Welty, and others. I began our very first class with an article by novelist and teacher Alice McDermott that begins, “I am wary of any advice to writers that smacks of ‘how to.’” I, too, am wary of this type of advice and use well-written fiction and poetry as a guide rather than coming up with a laundry list of “do’s and don’ts” for writers. In addition to the works of published writers, workshop participants read and comment on each other’s work. During most classes, participants are given a sort of prompt and asked to write on the spur of the moment. These exercises are almost always met with some type of anxiety, terror, or reluctance but usually yield beautiful and profound work.

INTRODUCTION

From my very first day with the Holocaust survivors, when I strongly questioned my role among them, until now, I marvel that I am there as a teacher. I have learned more about myself as a writer, as a leader, and as a human being than I could have ever imagined at the beginning of this project. I have seen the writing of the survivors become clearer, more precise, more detailed, and more moving. At least once a session, I have been brought to tears by the valiant and beautiful efforts these survivors make to tell unaffectedly a truth that seems nearly beyond the human ability to communicate. They have tuned their voices and are bearing witness to their lives, and I am honored to have played any part in that process.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Margaret Peterson', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Margaret Peterson

Memory Project Instructor



Erika Eckstut

Erika (Neuman) Eckstut was born on June 12, 1928, in Znojmo, a town in the Moravian region of Czechoslovakia with a Jewish community dating back to the thirteenth century. Her father was a respected attorney and an ardent Zionist who hoped to emigrate with his family to Palestine. In 1931, the Neumans moved to Stanesti, a town in the Romanian province of Bukovina, where Erika's paternal grandparents lived.

In Stanesti, Erika attended the public school as well as the Hebrew school, which her father had helped found. She loved to play with her sister Beatrice and the other children in the town and enjoyed being with her grandfather. Her childhood was filled with hopes and dreams for the future. In 1937, however, members of the fascist Iron Guard tried to remove Erika's father from his position as the chief civil official in Stanesti. Eventually, a court cleared him of the fabricated charges and he was restored to his post.

In 1940, the Soviet Union occupied Bukovina. A year later, when Romania joined Nazi Germany in the war against the Soviet Union, the Soviets were driven from Stanesti. Mobs then carried out bloody attacks on the town's Jews. During the violence, Erika and her family fled to Czernowitz with the aid of the local police chief. In fall of 1941, the Neumans were forced to settle in the Czernowitz ghetto, where living conditions were poor and they were subject to deportation to Transnistria. In 1943, Erika and Beatrice escaped from the ghetto using false papers that their father had obtained. After escaping to the Soviet Union, Erika and Beatrice returned to Czechoslovakia after World War II, where they were eventually reunited with their parents.

Erika married an officer in the Czech army and raised two children. After many years of hard effort and her mother and sister's appeals to Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, she was permitted to emigrate from Czechoslovakia to the United States in 1960, three years after the death of her husband. Once in the United States, Erika became a supervisor of a pathology lab.

TEACH LOVE, NOT HATE

Erika Eckstut

One day in 1941, four men came to our house. They took my family and me to the outskirts of the town, where all the Jews from the town were gathered. We were about 500 Jews. The saddest part was that a lot of the killers were our neighbors. Up to that time, we had a very good life. The first ones that they shot were the Rabbi and his two sons. They continued to shoot only men. People were crying and praying. I turned to my father and asked him why I had to die. My father did not have an answer for me. He said, please don't cry. When they ran out of ammunition, they took us to the courthouse until they could get more bullets.

As my father stood there, a man offered to take us back to our house. When we arrived at the house, it had been ransacked. The next day they came for my father. My sister went with him. On the way they met a man in a gray suit. He said that my father did not belong there and sent my father and sister back home.

The same afternoon the police chief came to us and helped us get away from that little town. We had several valuable possessions including silverware. We gave all of it to the police chief. He took us at night part way to the town of Czernowitz. When we arrived at the town we were forced to go into the town ghetto.

I now go as a speaker to all kinds of groups of people—from schools and the military, adults and children.

I was called to speak to eight year olds at the Children's Museum. At first I did not want to speak because I did not know how I could talk to young children about the Holocaust. But I did go, and I told them about my happy childhood. I could not talk about my Holocaust experiences to them.

But then I thought of the movie *The Hundred and One Dalmatians*. I asked if any of the children had seen the movie. They all indicated by raised arms that they had. The five teachers had frowns on their faces.

They expected me to talk about the Holocaust, not a movie. I asked the children to tell me the moral of the story. They did not answer. I said to them that we would go through the story together and find the moral. And so I said: “There was a Mama dog and a Papa dog. They had nice little puppies. There was a mean lady who wanted a fur coat and was willing to kill all the puppies to get her coat.” And I asked the children what happened. They answered, “The puppies were saved.” I said that was true.

And then I asked them who ran with Mama dog and Papa dog when they ran in the street. I answered, a white dog, a black dog, a bird, a mouse, and so on. They all ran, small and big, to help Mama and Papa dog. But when my Mama and Papa ran in the street with my sister and me, no one ran with us. The moral of the story is, if you see anybody who needs help, don’t worry if he is white or black or yellow, or a Jew or a Muslim or a Christian. If you are a good human being, the first thing you must do is help those in need.

I would like to leave you with the thought of how important it is to love and never to hate.




Erika Eckstut

I remember the time in the Czernowitz ghetto when I used to take off the star from my coat, leave my ID, and go out to look for food. I was always hungry and scared. I went to a store that sold food to the clergy, because I knew my father had an old schoolmate who was a priest. It was easy for me to go out since I was blonde, blue-eyed, and spoke German fluently.

One day I saw a German soldier beating a man on the ground who was bleeding. The soldier was on crutches and his chest was full of decorations. He stood on one of the crutches and with the other he beat the man. I approached the soldier and in my perfect German lectured him on how wrong he was to beat a man who did not defend himself. As I was busy giving my lecture, people stood around listening. All of a sudden a policeman touched my arm and said, "That will be enough little girl; let's go home."

At that moment I realized, "I can't go home. If I take him to the ghetto my whole family will be killed." So I took him to an opera singer who lived not far from the ghetto. She was, of course, a gentile. When we arrived at the door and rang the bell a beautiful lady opened the door and I said, "Mama." The policeman at the same time said, "Is this your daughter, Madame?" She ignored him, and pointing a finger at me, she said: "I told you once, I told you twice, home and homework." The policeman in the meantime kept repeating his question, and, in desperation, she started hitting me in the face. It was so painful that I hardly cared what happened at this point. Then, as if in a dream, I heard the policeman saying, "Keep her, keep her, just stop hitting her." After the policeman left, she took me inside, gave me a hug, and asked, "Are you from the ghetto?"

I have forgotten so many names from during the Holocaust, but I still remember hers. 



Frank Ephraim

Frank Ephraim was born on February 19, 1931, in Berlin, Germany. His father was an inventor who held several patents in the field of radio before the stock market crash of 1929. He then joined a company manufacturing diesel locomotives, but when the Nazis came to power he found employment with a textile exporter. Frank's mother worked as a secretary for a Berlin business firm. In February 1939, soon after *Kristallnacht* attacks on Jews, the family managed to emigrate from Germany to the Philippines, where they lived for eight years, including three years under Japanese occupation during World War II. Frank learned to speak English in Manila. When Frank was 15 years old he and his family immigrated to the United States, landing in San Francisco, where he continued high school. He was drafted into the army during the Korean War and later, in 1957, graduated from the University of California at Berkeley with a degree in mechanical engineering and naval architecture. He also holds an MBA from George Washington University. Frank is the author of *Escape to Manila* (University of Illinois Press, 2003).

SARDINES

Frank Ephraim

“We have to eat the sardines,” my mother said. She always bought the ones canned in tomato sauce. I did not like the combination; I preferred oil.


“Why can’t you get the ones in olive oil?” I asked.

“No, oil is not good for you. Tomatoes are much better—they are a vegetable,” she answered with a stern look at me. It was no use to argue. I knew she would never buy the sardines I liked.

We had sardines every few weeks from the stock of a dozen cans stacked in the linen closet. The idea was simple. The canned sardines served as the “escape” provisions for the family.

My father had put it this way: “In case we have to run, small cans of sardines are easy to slip into one’s pockets, or pack in a bag. They do not spoil and provide a meal that is nourishing.”

To keep them edible, even though they were canned, this emergency food was opened and eaten periodically, and then replenished for “fresh” cans of sardines.

This was in 1960. World War II was long over. Our wartime experiences were a memory, but to my parents they were a lesson never forgotten. 

Frank Ephraim

I like to have a destination in my daily walk that serves as exercise, but I suspect it is also a subconscious attempt to get away from my frustration with writing. Today, for the umpteenth time, I chose the trail near my house that would lead me to the local Barnes and Noble bookstore in Bethesda. Dressed for my walk, I wore blue jeans, a sweatshirt, a visored cap, and running shoes. Once inside the store I planned, as usual, to give the new books a quick look to see if a promising spy thriller had been published in paperback. World War II espionage is my favorite genre.

The shelves at the front of the bookstore had little to offer me, so I stepped on the escalator to browse among the books displayed on tables on the second floor. There was nothing inspiring there today and I began to scan books on the long rows of shelves. I stopped at the Holocaust section and started to read the titles.

I did not notice him right away, but as he inched closer I turned my head. The man was elderly, wearing a dark blue pin-striped suit, a white shirt, and a tie with a fleur-de-lis pattern. A white silk handkerchief protruded neatly from his coat pocket. Wearing heavy, black-rimmed eyeglasses, he seemed to concentrate on the books just to my left. Then he pulled one out to examine it, opening the volume to read the back flap.

I continued my own search, fully expecting to soon give up and leave the bookstore for my return trek. That is when the well-dressed man began to speak to me. The accent was strong, and by his appearance, I guessed middle European.

“Yes, those were brutal times,” he said. He had, of course, noticed my interest in the books about the Holocaust. “One can never forget and, believe me, I have tried.”

I immediately knew he was a survivor, but all I could say was, "Yes, I can imagine." How trite that sounded to me. He did not seem annoyed and continued. "I come to this bookstore as often as my busy schedule allows to see if anyone has written about my camp."

He must have expected me to ask what camp that was, and so I did.

"Entlingen?" I had never heard of it, but then most camps were unknown to me, except for places like Auschwitz, Buchenwald, and a few other infamous names.

"Not many survivors, probably all dead now anyway," he said, looking at his watch. "Still time for a cup of coffee."

I do not, to this day, know why I asked him if he would like to join me in a cup at the Starbucks coffee bar located in the back near the magazines.

"Delighted," he said, not seeming to notice or care about my very casual outfit next to his business attire. Still, I felt uncomfortable and crossed my arms as if to hide behind them.

We ordered café lattes and scones and sat down at a small table. He introduced himself as Lucas Pen. He laughed as he explained his name had been Perlstein and to Americanize he had decided to just pick three letters to construct his new name. For the next 30 minutes he mesmerized me with the story of his experiences. My insignificant attempts to write fiction over the past few years might now lead to a true story if I could only scribble notes fast enough.

"Perhaps I can write your story," I interjected quickly. Was it stupid of me to think I could do justice to such a powerful chronicle? But then, I was really desperate because nothing had worked for me so far.

Frowning as he looked at his watch, he muttered something and said his chauffeur was waiting for him outside and that he had to leave for an important meeting. As he reached for his wallet I quickly held up a hand and said I would take care of the check and bade him hurry to his appointment.

“Please give me your telephone number,” he said. “I would really like to continue our conversation, and maybe you will write my book.” Not expecting ever to hear from him, I wrote my name and number on a napkin and he grabbed it as he hurriedly walked away.

It seemed less than two weeks later when the phone rang and Lucas Pen was on the line.

“How are you, young man?” he said. I was not that much younger than he was, but compared to me he had lived several centuries’ worth of adventure. Just back from a business trip to China, Pen wanted to have lunch the next day. “Fine,” I said and suggested I make reservations at the Alsatian Village in Chevy Chase. I did not feel right lunching with so important—and interesting—a man at one of the noisy eateries usually crammed with office workers.

After talking about his trip and mentioning that next week he would be in New York for negotiations on a deal to open three supermarkets in Nairobi, Pen returned to his story. I was armed with my notebook because I told myself that this was going to be the beginning of “serious” writing.

Over dessert I brought up the subject of audio taping and asked Lucas—he had insisted on first names—if I might interview him at his home.

“Of course, of course,” he cheerfully replied. “But not at my house. My wife, you know, is very sensitive. She does not want to talk about the past.”

“All right,” I said, “let’s just meet for lunch or coffee at a quiet place until I have enough material to work on.”

Since it was to my benefit, I felt I should pick up the check, and signaled the waiter, but knew Pen would probably object, as he was, after all, a successful businessman. Pen raised his eyes as he slowly said, “No, on me.” I quickly grabbed the bill and slipped my Visa card into the leather folder, as Pen shook his head smiling at my insistence. I liked the man.

We met for lunch once a month for almost a year, trying to accommodate Pen's absences from town and working around his frequent business conferences. Then I did not hear from him for a couple of months.

Attributing his failure to phone me to his busy schedule, or perhaps to illness, I concentrated on the material I had recorded and transcribed, using my daily walks to think about how Pen's story would unfold. I was not prepared for what happened next.

My phone rang and the woman on the other end of the line spoke in a sad, accented voice. She had obtained my phone number from her husband's address book and knew all about our lunches, she said, and apologized for her husband.

"No need," I said. "Lucas has resuscitated my limp writer's life with his story, and I looked forward to continuing our relationship."

"That will not be possible," she replied. "Lucas died two days ago. He had been very ill. I am sorry."

I was shocked despite the fact he was not a youngster and was still pursuing a busy life. I wanted at least to attend the funeral, but she seemed reluctant to provide any information. I insisted on coming and she gave me the time and place for "graveside services."

The burial was a simple ceremony with just five people attending. This surprised me as I had expected Lucas to have a sizable circle of business contacts.


Walking back to my car, Lucas's widow approached me. "Excuse me," she began. "I must talk to you."

I started to ask if perhaps another time would be better since I did not want to intrude at this moment of bereavement.

"No," she said. "Here is just fine." And we stopped near my car.

“Lucas could never get used to America. He tried so many things, drifting from job to job without success. His one good suit was a hand-me-down, a gift from one of his last employers, and I shortened the pants. But Lucas liked bookstores and would meet people there—strangers—whom, like you, he befriended. He could never have afforded those lunches without the generosity of people he met, because my small pension and the social security barely kept us going.”

I was sure my face showed surprise, but Mrs. Pen seemed not to notice. She continued.

“I heard all about you and your writing. That’s why I called you when he died, I don’t like it when things are left hanging. Anyway, I am glad you came and I was able to tell you about Lucas.” 

TEAPOT IN A TEMPEST

Frank Ephraim

AUTHOR'S NOTE: THE FOLLOWING PIECE IS FICTION BASED ON THE ACTUAL EVENTS MY FAMILY EXPERIENCED DURING WORLD WAR II.

I was uncomfortable in my box. Sure, there I lay wrapped in soft tissue, but the cardboard lid pressed against me so that I felt completely confined, unable to move. I was hoping the rowdy party would soon subside so that the bride could start opening her presents. The noise was deafening. People were laughing and shouting, and I could hear the clink of glasses as one drunken toast after another resounded through what must have been a large room.

I was packed with loving care as a gift from the bride's aunt. She selected me from among dozens of other teapots in the little specialty shop. I was so proud, so satisfied with myself, as the shop clerk lifted me off the display shelf and let the refined lady touch me. Her smooth fingers stroked across my pear-shaped, scalloped body, with one finger tracing the curve of my spout. It was no ordinary spout with an abrupt end. No, it was a florid spout that culminated in the shape of rose petals. The lady peered straight into the spout, curious, I suppose, at what the inner walls might offer. Nothing out of the ordinary, just the dark, slightly rough pewter inside of me.

With a thumb and forefinger she gently held the ornamental nob on top of the artful, sculpted lid. She lifted the lid slowly, getting the feel of the hinge, and swung it wide open to reveal my gaping neck. By her expression I knew I was her choice. A shudder went through my spine—actually my ornate handle, which was wrapped with an intricate rattan pattern to protect against burns.

Anyway, all that was in the past. Here I was, waiting patiently to be unpacked and admired. It took a while, as I was only one of the many presents, and I began to get impatient. Finally I must have just dozed off, because a sudden movement jarred me awake, and the next thing I sensed was the scratching noise of paper being ripped. It was my turn.

“A metal teapot?” It was not a happy voice.

“A funny looking metal, not shiny. Maybe it needs polish,” a male speaker exclaimed.

“Well, at least somebody gave us a good coffee pot.” It was the woman again. Was I, the charming pewter teapot, playing second fiddle? I should have known. Who in Germany, in 1928, drank tea? Coffee, coffee, that arrogant black brew, was king. Tea, yes I know, was for the more genteel, or if you were sick.

I shared the narrow kitchen cabinet shelf with that damn coffeepot. The cabinet door opened every morning and out it came. I just sat, and sat. I must have sat for several months before my debut. Of course, I should have guessed. The lady who selected me at the little shop came to visit—to have tea—and I was displayed, fussed over in that phony patronizing way people drooled over small children of people they despised.

Then it was over. A quick rinse with soapy water and dried with a damp kitchen towel, I was back next to the coffee pot.

As the years went by, I could sense changes. There was less talk. The words became harsher, and fewer people came to visit. I do not know the exact year, but one cold night the cabinet door opened and I was yanked from the shelf. Tea was made and the couple drank two cups—in the dark—without uttering a word. It was terrifying. Then the woman began to weep. I hoped it was not because of a bad brew of tea, making this my fault. Then it was back into the cabinet, in silence and gloom.

One morning I heard the thud of furniture being moved about and some heavy object was dragged over the bare floor. What happened to the carpets? The cabinet door next to mine was opened and dishes were removed, accompanied by the sound of newspaper being crunched. Suddenly the door of my cabinet opened and the woman’s anxious face appeared.

“Should we take the coffee pot?” I sensed my neighbor’s anticipation.

“No, better not, porcelain can break on the trip.” It was the husky voice of the man.

“Let’s pack the teapot. Sturdy pewter and it will be good to boil water, which you have to do in the tropics, I hear.” Trip? Tropics? What is going on?

The woman took me from the shelf and for the first time examined me from lid to base.

“It may even be valuable. If we need money the pot could fetch some.” That came as a mixed message. Finally some recognition of my worth, but then only as an object of exchange. Well, one cannot have it all, and besides, I began to feel a little guilty. The once popular coffee pot was to be left behind to an uncertain fate. I, instead, was going to travel.

The old newspapers cushioned me in a heavy cardboard box, and it was not long before I felt myself being lifted up and put into a large case. The voices became faint and soon new sounds penetrated my dark abode. Coarse commands, scraping noises, and the motion of a heavy vehicle over roadways gave me many frightening moments. Where was my journey taking me and when would it end?

I did not feel it, but the case I was in must have been lifted high in the air, because I landed with a jarring thump that reverberated within a large space. The voices had a different lilt, sea folk I guessed. A ship no doubt. They did say the tropics, and I knew it would be a long time before I could be of service again.

The heave and roll were almost unbearable. Some days were worse than others. I do not know how long I suffered, but one day the ride was very smooth and then I felt the ship bump against something. Were we there, or was this just another stop along the way? What a relief it was when I heard voices again. They sounded softer and very different from those at the beginning of the voyage. The voices came closer and I sensed hands moving the case, and not long thereafter I felt my case being deposited somewhere, but I was not upright.

With the greatest joy my box was lifted out of the case and opened by the woman.

“Look, undamaged and ready to use,” she said. A cold water bath greeted me instantly as I was washed to clear debris and dirt from my elegant pear-shaped body. They boiled water for tea and the man lifted his cup to the woman.

“To our escape, and to our new life in Manila,” he exclaimed. Manila? Where on earth was that? Oh well, it did not matter to me. I looked forward to my new status as a vital household object.

The years seemed to flit along. I saw heavy duty and ever more loving care devoted to my well-being. I in turn gave my body—and, yes, soul—to the couple, who worked in the oppressive heat to make a living. They bought another coffee pot, which, I heard them say, was cheap and made in Japan.

Things changed again. The woman often cried and there was talk about war and her family back in Germany. Then the man lost his job and they were struggling. The coffee pot, poor thing, had less and less to do. I was again the primary utility vessel, and was by now like part of the family.

Something else was going on that I did not understand for a long time. Visitors kept talking about Japanese. Was I to know that this war thing had brought soldiers from Japan to occupy Manila? Of course not. I did not read newspapers, and the voices all sounded alike, until the man talked about news he had heard on the “radio.” He used the word “bombing.”

The word meant nothing to me until one morning when both the man and the woman were out. Loud intermittent sounds penetrated the walls of the little house. Soon explosions shook the floor and went on for a long time. Then they stopped and I heard first the woman, and a little later the man, burst through the door. They sounded frightened but sighed with relief to find each other safe. It was again my turn to shine as the woman took me from the shelf to make tea. They both drank deeply. It seemed to calm their nerves and I was proud to be of service.

The man talked endlessly about “bombing.” Now I grasped the connection between the earth-shattering explosions and the word. There was no let-up in the bombing. The man and woman crawled under a table every time the bombing began.

It was weeks later that I was snatched from my post and unceremoniously dumped into a small cart. I joined bottles of water boiled by me, some canned food, and a tiny sack of rice. The man hurriedly wheeled the cart out of the house and the woman followed with a blanket, two pillows, and a large straw bag filled with clothes and shoes.

It was a nightmare. Walls of fire soon surrounded our encampment as hundreds of people scurried about, their children screaming. Artillery shells fell, ripping people and their belongings asunder. The man and woman scurried away from the blanket that they had laid down and over which they had pitched a bed sheet for protection from the sun. I sat on the blanket in one corner.

I barely remember what happened next. I was tossed up in the air and struck hard by an object I could not identify. The blow sent me rolling as I crashed on the rubble-strewn ground. My lid was gone, leaving a rough edge where the hinge had been. My poor pear-shaped body had been bashed in, leaving a large, gaping and ragged hole. My graceful curved spout was sliced off and there were dozens of jagged holes throughout my body. I would never hold water again.

Night fell and still the bombs kept coming. I was alone; the man and woman were gone. I was left with desperate screams and flying debris. Day brought no relief. The sun cast its hot rays over the desolate scene. I do not know how long I lay in my agony.

It rained early one morning, adding more misery. The bombs no longer fell and I lost track of time. Then one day I heard voices. I was filled with anticipation as I heard the woman speaking.

“Not much left except shreds and shards,” she said. “I do not know why we came back here.”

“Ah, there is where our shelter must have been,” the man said. “I recognize remnants of our blanket.” They were coming closer; I could sense they were just steps away.


“Look,” the woman exclaimed, as she pointed down at me, “the teapot.” She leaned down and picked up what was left of me. “Look, it is ruined. Oh, the teapot—ruined.” The man reached out to hold me. Both cradled my ravaged body in their hands.

“Over there,” the woman said, pointing, “the lid.” So my top had rolled farther after separating from my body. She went to pick it up. Please take me away with you, I pined.

“To think what this teapot has gone through. I feel it has been like a trusted friend, always there when needed, but now gravely ill. We cannot leave the teapot here, at least it will be a souvenir of our past life,” said the man. “It survived, let us take it along.”

Had I a set of hands I would have clasped them in a thanksgiving prayer.



For me, life was changed forever. The couple wrapped me in old rags and took me with them wherever they went. It was not until we arrived in the United States that my role became clear. When newly won friends visited the home, I was unwrapped—they now bundled me in something called plastic. Held by the handle I was put on display for all guests to see. Once they focused on my bashed and riven body, the man said: “This is what the battle of Manila was like.” He did not have to say more. 





Manya Friedman

Manya Friedman was born on December 30, 1925, in Chmielnik, a small Polish town with a Jewish community dating back to the sixteenth century. Her father owned a furniture shop and her mother took care of the home. Manya had two younger brothers, David and Mordechai, and was surrounded by many close relatives. She attended both public and Hebrew schools and had many friends.

In 1938, Manya's family moved to Sosnowiec, a larger city located near the German border. There she had her first experience with antisemitism. Signs appeared urging Polish citizens to boycott Jewish businesses. The following year, German troops invaded Poland. On September 4, 1939, at 2 p.m., Sosnowiec was occupied. That same day, local Jews, including Manya's father, were rounded up. The following morning, they were marched to a factory, where their heads and beards were shaved. They were held overnight without food or water and then selected for forced labor. Manya's father was assigned to build army latrines. A month later, her mother was arrested for violating the curfew.

In 1941, Manya was forced to work for a German company that produced military uniforms. The following year, the Nazis began deporting Jews from Sosnowiec to the Auschwitz-Birkenau killing center. Manya and her family were temporarily saved from deportation because they had work permits. In March 1943, however, she was forcibly taken to the Gogolin transit camp, and from there to the Gleiwitz forced labor camp. She never saw her family again; they were deported to Auschwitz. In January 1945, as the Soviet army approached, the prisoners were evacuated on a death march.

Manya and the other prisoners were transported for ten days in open freight cars in the bitter cold to the Ravensbrück concentration camp. During the journey, she shielded a sick friend from being crushed in the overcrowded car. Manya's arms were bruised and swollen. Later she was taken to the Rechlin camp, where she was rescued by the Swedish Red Cross in April 1945. In 1950 she emigrated from Sweden to the United States.

ONE SNOWY WINTER NIGHT

Manya Friedman

The snow had fallen, uninterrupted, since morning. Big, fluffy flakes fell on top of each other, covering the everyday grime with a pure white blanket. Our side street was devoid of any traffic, only here and there footprints made by men or animals were visible, breaking up the smooth surface. It was fun looking out the window and enjoying the weekend off from school. By afternoon we ventured out, so bundled up one could hardly see our faces, trying to throw some snowballs. The snow was too dry and fluffy to form a ball, and the sleds were useless; the runners sank into the snow and would not move. Only the young children had fun, stretched out in the snow trying to make angels.

By evening the snow had stopped, after accumulating about a foot of white powder, and the temperature dropped sharply, creating an excruciating chill. The frost-covered windowpanes let the imagination form all kinds of patterns. We huddled around the tall tile stove, fed by chunks of coal from the bin outside. The waves of warmth emitted from the stove reminded me of sitting around a campfire on a chilly evening; though my front was warm, I could feel the chill on my back.

Mother served hot soup; we did some homework, read, played games, or asked grandmother to tell us a story, until it was time to go to bed. There were a few moments of shivering between getting undressed and jumping into bed, but once under the heavy down-feather blanket we were quite comfortable. The grown-ups stayed up longer, sipping hot tea, till it was their time to retire for the night.

Late that night there was a tap on the door, at first lightly, then more intense. Nothing to be concerned about, I thought. Most likely a neighbor needed some help, maybe to borrow some aspirin for a sick child. Father opened the door. It was Father's business partner; I recognized his voice, though he only whispered. Probably a machine broke down, I thought, and turned over trying to go back to sleep.

When I woke up early next morning, curious to find out about the world outside, I noticed Father's warm coat hanging over the kitchen chair. He must have gotten dressed and gone out during the night.


Though it was still very early, the sun was shining bright and some of the frost from the windowpanes had started to melt. Assisted by my warm breath, I rubbed a spot in the window pane to look out. (I had learned from experience not to use the warm palm of my hand to melt the ice; it could freeze to the pane. We had had many long and cold winters to experiment.) The view outside was almost blinding from the glitter of the snow reflecting the sun's rays. The snow on the roofs had started to melt. The house across the street looked like it had been decorated for Christmas with all the icicles hanging from the eaves of the roof. There must have been a strong wind during the night; a drift of snow was almost up to the windowsill. I went back to bed under the warm covers.

Except for Father, who got up to tend to the stoves while there were still live embers, we all slept late that morning. Later in the day two policemen knocked at the door. Mother let them in, offered them seats, and tea, but they refused. They asked Mother some questions, and asked where Father was. My two younger brothers were very excited with the officers' visit, this being a time when every young boy hoped to grow up and become a policeman, but somehow we sensed that this was not exactly a social visit. However, it never entered our minds that our parents could have done anything unlawful. Mother told them where they could locate Father, and after they left, she seemed so preoccupied with their visit that she did not even hear or respond to our questions. We were curious for a while, but being so young we did not linger very long for an answer; we went back to whatever we were doing before the officers' visit. When Father came home the boys greeted him excitedly: "Daddy, daddy, do you know two policemen were here, and they were asking for you? Did you see them, did you?" Father glanced at Mother's face, and from her expression knew that he would have a lot to explain.

Several days later we learned that some young people were arrested in town, accused of belonging to a Communist organization. My father's partner's daughter was on that list, but somehow she had disap-

peared, hence the visit from the police to find out if Father could provide any information. Quite some time later I found out that on that snowy night in the mid-1930s the urgent knock on the door late at night had had nothing to do with a broken-down machine—it was indeed Father’s business partner who came during the night, only to ask Father for help assisting his daughter to leave town. It was a risky decision, especially on such a bright, snow-covered night, where every silhouette was visible, but Father was not one to refuse a friend a favor, even when he had to take a risk.

Our house was quite a distance from the railroad station, and on that night every footstep left a distinguishing mark in the snow. Behind our house was a large fenced-in yard, adjoining a large fenced-in field where we played volleyball and the boys played soccer. After that was a farmer’s field. Father decided that in the backyard and in the adjoining field, he and the young woman should trample around in the snow leaving the impression that the kids had been playing there, but when it came to crossing the fence that separated the soccer field from the farmer’s field he crossed over by himself and carried the young woman on his back until they reached a grove of trees. This way there was only one set of footprints in the snow. Father put her on the next train that left the station and returned home by a different route.

After the war ended I found out that Father’s business partner had survived the Holocaust and had gone to Brazil to live with his rescued daughter. Unfortunately, my father, though much younger, did not survive; there had been no one around to rescue him. 

Manya Friedman

It was about the end of April 1945. Days in camp turned into long months, months into years, one day resembling the other. This day in this small camp, a subcamp of Ravensbrück, began like any other day. Wake-up call at dawn, with all my strength I gathered my weary, aching bones to face another day of misery and abuse. If by chance I managed to rinse out my underwear the night before, it was often still damp in the morning, but I had to put it on anyway, even in the wintertime, there was no choice. Then I lowered myself from the upper bunk, with a bent back not to hit my head on the ceiling, my wooden shoes in one hand, being careful not to step on someone below, and I rushed to the latrine to get in line. I often tripped in the dark over bodies that had expired during the night. On the way I caught a fistful of water from the dripping, rusty faucet, to apply to my face in a hope to wake up. Again I rushed with the tin cup to get some of that foul-tasting, brownish, lukewarm brew called “coffee.” Sometimes it had a faint taste of the soup from the previous night, because the kettles were not washed well. But who cared? It tasted just the same.

The shrill sound of the Kapo’s whistle, like a whip cutting through the air and through our shivering bodies, reminded that it was time for the *appell* (roll call). I rushed to get in line—lines of grotesque-looking figures. In the winter we shivered from the cold underneath the striped, thin dresses; in the summer we sweltered under the oppressive heat, waiting to be counted, while standing at attention. The countless reading of the numbers, no names, the faint reply “here,” counting by one of the Kapos then another; often someone in line fainted from exhaustion and weakness, and had to be supported by others. Even in this small camp it seemed like an eternity, being counted and recounted, again and again.

But that day was different. While we were standing in line to be counted, a Kapo accompanied by a military person walked up to our group, pointed a finger at about a dozen or so girls, and ordered them

to step forward. You could sense the uneasiness and anticipation in the lines; the lines shifted like an ocean wave. What now? In those few seconds all kinds of thoughts flashed through my mind. Why me? Where to? Sneaking a quick glance at the others around me, I tried to figure out how I differed from the rest. Again the thought, why me? And why now, when there is a spark of hope that this hell may finally end, judging by the frequency of the air raids, and the roar of Allied planes above our heads. There was no use trying to find a reason; there was no reasoning in camp. To the many questions circling in my head, there were no answers. Though one thing was certain, a selection had never meant a better lot.

After the selection, our small group of girls, with stooped shoulders under the weight of uncertainty, resigned to feeling helpless, and dragging our feet in the wooden shoes, was marched toward the gate of the camp, leaving the others behind, and not knowing what the future would bring. Would there be a future?

Outside the gate, a white, covered truck was waiting, a few Kapos and soldiers were mingling about, flirting and laughing, a familiar sight. The Kapos motioned to us to climb up into the truck, but it brought few results. Though the truck's tailgate was down and we tried hard, we were too weak to conquer this hurdle, despite the fear that at any moment the Kapo's whip would come down on our emaciated bodies. Instead, to everyone's disbelief and amazement the Kapos actually helped us climb up into the truck. Somehow, from nowhere a crate appeared that we used for a step to climb up. I thought I was hallucinating or this must be a dream. I did not trust my senses any longer. But momentarily I recalled how the Germans often used all kinds of tricks to get the people to come to an assembly point, using the pretense either to register, or to check and stamp the passports, but instead were put in trains or trucks and deported.

After being settled in the truck, each one of us received a "C.A.R.E." package. Again disbelief, but no time to rationalize *how* or *why*, even if this would represent our last meal. Within seconds the packages were

ripped open and the contents devoured. *It was food.* There was powdered milk, cocoa, sardines, crackers—everything was eaten at once, we were not even aware what it was. Some of the girls got sick, our stomachs not used to digesting such food.

The truck kept rolling on with its exhausted, helpless, resigned cargo, and we had no clue where to. No one spoke, each one of us preoccupied with our own thoughts. Then, lo and behold, the truck reached Denmark. FREEDOM? Incomprehensible! We were all dazed, unable to comprehend what was going on around us. (It was the end of April 1945, and Denmark was still under German occupation.)

Apparently the white truck that our group was being transported in was from the Swedish Red Cross, hence the helpful gesture from the Kapos to show the Red Cross personnel that we were treated humanely. The white truck had markings on the sides and on the roof, but we were not aware of it. Later we learned that negotiations were going on between Swedish Count Folke Bernadotte, head of the Swedish Red Cross, and Himmler, head of the Gestapo, about the release of Norwegian POWs. But since it was the end of April, and Himmler was realizing that Germany had lost the war, he agreed to Bernadotte's request to release from the camps some women of "Polish" origin and hand them over to the Swedish Red Cross. I later learned that the word "Jewish" was never mentioned. Thus began the brave rescue operation.

The courageous Danish people were waiting for us with food and a place to rest up. A small boat carried the few of us from Denmark to the shore of Malmö, Sweden. What a sad-looking group we presented. Now, out of camp, among normal-looking people, the sight of us was deplorable. Our short-cropped hair growing untamed in all directions, the sunken wide eyes, the shapeless striped dresses covering our skeletal bodies, tied at the waist with a piece of frayed rope. And the wooden shoes. Somewhere I found a pair of high-laced leather shoes on raised heels to replace my wooden ones, but without shoelaces. It took some searching to find two pieces of string long enough to pull through two eyelets to hold the upper part of the shoe together, and even more strategy to place the strings in the right place to hold up the long tongues attached to the shoes, so as not to trip over them.

In this pose I was approached by two reporters who accompanied us on the boat. I do not recall what they asked me, nor what I told them, but I vividly recall feeling embarrassed. One hand nervously reached for my head trying to slick my hair down a bit, the other pulling at my dress trying to smooth out some folds. Could this have been the moment when I regained the feeling of being human again? After all, I was still a teenager.

At the shore in Malmö, our group was greeted by some dignitaries—a rabbi and a clergyman, either a minister or priest—and an orchestra or maybe a band was playing, I could not distinguish one from the other. We were mesmerized by the sight. All those people came to greet us. Yet, somehow, I felt detached from all this, like viewing it all through a sheer curtain. There were people making speeches, I assume to welcome us, but we were incapable of listening or comprehending what was going on. There were also many onlookers, some probably came out of curiosity, others out of sympathy. The entire situation seemed so unreal.

There was also the medical staff of the Red Cross waiting, and they took us to a large hall where people wearing masks and gloves met our group. Our group huddled together, more comfortable with the girls from our own camp. The sick were taken immediately to the hospital while the rest of us went through a hot shower, with real soap (I can still feel the luxury), delousing, and disinfecting. We were scrubbed, sprayed, and dusted, then received clean clothing donated by the local people. It felt good to be rid of the lice that consumed every moment of our free time trying to eradicate them, without success. The clean outfits that replaced our soiled, striped dresses felt as splendid as if they were made of pure silk.

We were put up in some school buildings. Each one of us got a mattress covered with soft paper sheets. We felt pampered. Yet, it still didn't sink in that we were really free. At night, if you woke up, you could always see girls looking out the windows to make sure that we were no longer in camp. But the nightmares persisted.

A few days later, in the middle of the night we heard a big commotion going on. Students, in their handsome uniforms and white round caps, came running up the stairs shouting: "The war is over. The war is over." We all ran out to greet them, forgetting that we were only in our underwear, hugging, kissing, and jumping up and down with joy. A lot of celebrating was also going on in the streets. People dancing and singing, people blowing the car horns, nobody slept the rest of the night. The next day there was a lavish reception in the school's recreation hall. Since there were among us people from different countries, the band was playing everyone's national anthem. Never before, or since, was I so touched listening to the Polish anthem, because this time the sound of it had for me a different meaning. A sign that the war had ended, and so had our suffering, but most of all, hope of finding somebody from the family.

"The war was over," but I was left all alone.... 

Manya Friedman

The news of the approaching German army spread like an uncontained fire in this small town in central Poland. The defenseless population was devastated. Only one brave young man, with a rifle slung over his shoulder, a military cap askew on his head, patrolled the streets of his hometown with the illusion that he could single-handedly defend and protect it from the approaching mighty power.

A streak of stubbornness and the cocksure attitude of the young men of his generation convinced him that he could conquer the world. Even the roar of the motorized military column heard from a distance did not dim his determination. He was willing to sacrifice his life in defense of his hometown.

The first tank, preceding the armored column, with its machine guns ready to fire, entered the town and scattered the young man's body all over the pavement near his home. After his burial, pieces of his flesh were still found in that street. Thus he became the first casualty in this small town invaded by the merciless German army—a lesson for the inhabitants—the price they would have to pay for resistance.

The young man left behind a mournful town and a bereft family: his parents, two brothers, two sisters, a brother-in-law, and his adorable baby niece. His older sister, with her husband and the baby, had only recently returned to this small town from the big city in western Poland in the hope that Hitler would be stopped before his army could reach central Poland. They were wrong.

During the deportation of the local Jews and the Jews brought in from the neighboring towns, the young man's sister was in line clutching her baby girl to her chest when an SS man approached and tried to take the child from her mother's arms. She resisted and would not give up the baby. The SS man shoved them both into the group of people destined for death. The child's grandmother, thinking that she might be of support to them, stepped forward, and she, too, was pushed into that group to share the destiny of the others.

The deportations continued. Young people were sent to slave-labor camps, others directly to the death factories. The two brothers and the brother-in-law of the young man in the street were among those sent to labor camps in Germany. None of the three young men returned.

The father and his youngest daughter, who was my age, together with others, were sent to a munitions factory, Hasag, in Kielce. One day, rumors were spreading about a forthcoming deportation. Some of the workers hid in the attic at the factory. They were, however, soon discovered, and as they descended the stairs, each one of them was shot. Among them were the father and his daughter.

Historians, scholars of the Holocaust, and the world in general consider them among the six million Jews murdered in Europe. To me, they were my uncle (my father's oldest brother), my aunt, and my cousins. Each one of them had a name, and each had a face, which I recall often among my haunting memories.

After my memory is gone, and I can say kaddish no more, do not forget them. 






Fritz Gluckstein

Fritz Gluckstein was born on January 24, 1927, in Berlin, Germany. His father, a liberal Jewish judge in Berlin, was quite patriotic and a decorated veteran of World War I. Fritz's father lost his job when Hitler came to power in 1933. Fritz's mother was not Jewish, and Fritz was considered a *Geltungsjude*, a counted Jew. In 1942, his Jewish school was closed and he was sent to work at a Jewish cemetery. He was later forced to work in a factory and then in a cleanup crew for air raids. Life became exceptionally difficult for his family as food rations continued to decrease. In 1948, Fritz came to the United States.

Fritz Gluckstein

Berlin, fall 1944, the Americans and British are approaching the Rhine, and the Russians are on German soil. Our group of Jewish husbands and sons of mixed marriages was doing its usual work, demolishing ruins and cleaning up after air raids, when suddenly we were “detached to special duty.” The special duty meant laying the foundation of a building complex for a “new Berlin” to be completed after the final victory. Actually, this was not an unwelcome change, since for once we were building rather than tearing down. But after two weeks our building experience came to a permanent end—we were detached again—this time to the southern outskirts of the city to set up antitank obstacles protecting a bridge over the Teltow canal.

At the new work site, a large sign greeted us; it read, “An die Arbeit Schanzer, Tod dem Sowiet Panzer.” In English, its meaning was something like, “On to work, no shirking; death to Soviet panzers lurking.” We dug trenches and sank iron beams halfway into the ground in a 45-degree angle. About midnight we were loaded into a moving van and transported to a social hall for some soup. An hour later we had the almost nightly air-raid warning and marched to a nearby shelter. We did not stay very long; this time the bombs fell into the northern part of the city. At noon the next day we were told that enough had been accomplished to stop the Russian tanks.

Before leaving we looked at our handiwork and wondered how long it would hold up the tanks—31 minutes, we decided. The tanks would come to the obstacles, stop, their crews would laugh for 30 minutes, and then it would take them one minute to get through. Actually, that is probably pretty close to what happened. Marshal Koniev’s forces entered the city so fast that no effective resistance could be mounted, and fanatic Nazis had no time “to get” the remaining Jews. I feel that my fellow workers and I had a tiny part in the liberation of Berlin—we did not do a very good job with those antitank obstacles. 

EVERYDAY HEROES

Fritz Gluckstein


Every school day in an oppressive time, you came to teach my high school classmates and me. You gave your very best in the face of imminent deportation, or evacuation as it was called then. You helped me forget for a while the ever present threats and uncertainties. You gave me a foundation on which I could build when I went back to school after the war. All of you perished, but to me you are not dead; I remember you.

Salomon Birnbaum, you introduced me to algebra and geometry and later on led me through the intricacies of logarithms and the laws of chemistry. I still hear you exclaim, "*Nein, das geht nicht, das ist unmöglich!*" (No, that won't do, that is impossible!) when one of us made a really serious mistake. Your enthusiasm inspired us to learn. You were an observant Jew, and my father and I would meet you whenever we attended services at the nearby conservative synagogue. One Friday night, you were sitting two rows in front of us, and throughout the service, I was in fear that you would mention to my father that I had not done too well on the last mathematics test, about which I had not yet told him. But of course, my fears were utterly unfounded. You would not have discussed school matters on Shabbat, and above all you never would have embarrassed me in front of my father. Remembering you, I always think, "What a teacher! What a man!"

Erich Bandmann, from you I learned to solve quadratic equations and to deal with congruent triangles. You were easygoing, mild mannered, absentminded, and forgetful. You were always searching through your various pockets for little pieces of paper on which to make notes. As our homeroom teacher, you wanted us to keep special booklets in order not to forget our homework assignments. I was not happy about this and said that the booklets were unnecessary and were preventing us from learning to keep things in our heads. You relented but made it very clear that you would be most unhappy to hear about missing, incomplete, or incorrect homework assignments in your or any other teacher's class. Of course, I had to be especially careful to remember my assignments, and, as unbelievable as it appears now, as far as I can recall, I actually succeeded.

Martin Königsberger, since you were slightly rotund (at least at the outset) we called you “Klops” (dumpling) after the popular meat dish Königsberger Klopse. You did not mind your nickname but admonished us not to shout “Klops” after you in the hall or schoolyard, as someone apparently had done. You taught me Latin, and you taught it well; I am embarrassed to admit how much of it I have forgotten. You strode into the room determinedly, stood in front of the class, and, while rocking on your heels, called out a German sentence to be translated. You looked around for a second or two, and then called upon one of us. Sometimes you would look toward the desk where Giesa and Gisela—two rather timid girls—were sitting side by side. And then it always happened: You would call “Gie ...” drawing it out a bit, and both girls would stiffen in anticipation. Then came the crucial second syllable, either “sa” for Giesa or “se” for Gisela, and one of the girls would relax with a barely audible sigh of relief. Actually neither had reason to be afraid; they were both good students. (They, too, perished.)

Oscar Behr, you helped us overcome the difficulties of English grammar and syntax. You also encouraged us to sing English songs, in which you joined. But what did we do? At a prearranged sign, we suddenly stopped in midsong and let you sing on in your thin, wavering voice. We also played other tricks on you, but actually we liked you. From teachers we did not care for, we literally kept our distance.

When I was your student, I did not fully appreciate what each of you was doing for me. It did not occur to me then that your daily efforts to be true to your profession were acts of heroism. With maturity it became clear that, indeed, they were, and that I owe you all a great debt. Thank you. 

IN THE DEVIL'S DEN

Fritz Gluckstein

In Berlin, during the fall of 1943, the devil's den—that is, Adolf Eichmann's headquarters—was hit by a bomb from an American plane, and the SS decided on immediate repairs. My parents and I had just been bombed out for the second time and were staying temporarily at the Jewish Hospital. One morning, on my way to work with the demolition and cleanup crews, I was stopped by hospital officials and told that I had been selected to be part of a Gestapo-ordered “catastrophe mission.” Together with about a dozen other “selectees” I climbed aboard a moving van; the doors closed, and off we went in complete darkness.

After half an hour's bumpy and swaying ride—no wonder, I realized, that so many things are broken during a move—the doors opened again; we climbed out and found ourselves in front of Kurfürstenstrasse 115-116; the infamous headquarters of Adolf Eichmann. We stood around for a few minutes until a man wearing the Yellow Star—the foreman of a group already working at the headquarters, as I learned later on—and an SS officer came out of the building and looked us over. The officer pointed at me saying, “I want him; he looks strong.” He motioned me to follow him, led me into the basement and told me to wait for the building caretaker.

SS Second Lieutenant Hardenberg—his full name was Ernst Henning von Hardenberg, I later learned from a list of SS officers in the library of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum—was always polite, never raised his voice, never threatened me or made an antisemitic remark. Frankly, I still wonder how he got into the SS, let alone into Eichmann's headquarters; he definitely did not seem to belong there. I believe it is quite likely that he was a descendant of Karl August von Hardenberg, a steadfast champion of Jewish causes. Karl August von Hardenberg, according to the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, was the Prussian chancellor who, in 1812, was instrumental in enacting the edict concerning the civil status of Jews.

My first job was to help the building caretaker clean and straighten out the basement. After that I was assigned to various kinds of work inside and outside the building, alone or with a group of others.

Lt. Hardenberg came by from time to time and occasionally spoke to me. I soon realized how lucky I was to have him as supervisor. Most of the other officers, I was told, were quite nasty. One day I was told to help Captain Stuschka, who lived at the headquarters, move some furniture. He was barely civil, but at least he did not live up to his reputation as one of the most malevolent and aggressive officers. Several times I saw the notorious Major Rolf Gunther, Eichmann's deputy. Either he was marching around leading a big German shepherd dog and scowling at every Jewish worker, or he was standing on a courtyard balcony cursing us. They told me that he liked to sneak up on Jewish workers in order to catch them taking a rest.


The head devil I saw only once. Working in the courtyard, I heard, "Eichmann is coming." I knew who Eichmann was. Every Jew in Berlin knew who Eichmann was—the driving force behind the deportations, or evacuations as they were called. I wondered how he would look. I did not know what to expect. Then I saw him—ordinary, nondescript; nobody would have noticed him in a crowd. He approached with a group of civilians, apparently demolition experts, stopped right next to me, and discussed whether a side entrance ought to be cleared of rubble. He decided not to have anything done, if I recall correctly, and left without another word.

One day a group of about six of us had to clear the rubble that had been thrown out of the top floor windows and had landed right in front of the main entrance. We loaded the broken bricks, plaster, and other debris mostly by hand—there were only two or three shovels—into wheelbarrows and moved it down the street. Two enlisted SS men alternated in guarding the main entrance. It was a rather pro forma guard duty; they did not have to stand in one place or walk a prescribed number of paces. They just had to be somewhere in front of the headquarters.

One of the two guards was short, in fact quite short for an SS man, stocky, and had a distinctly ruddy complexion. The other was taller, perhaps six feet, pale, and had a sullen expression. The two men exchanged places every two hours, but we always knew right away, without looking, which one was on duty. The taller guard was constantly standing behind us, frequently cursing, sometimes under his breath to himself, other times loudly, directly at us. Whenever we tried to take a brief rest, he truly let go, “You damned, lousy gang get going, or I’ll give you a kick.” He really seemed to enjoy his crude tirades. In fact, he appeared to be just waiting for us to take a break so that he could cut loose. We, of course, did not so much as look at him.

How different it was when the short guard was on duty. He mostly paced up and down in front of the building; occasionally he looked at us but never said a word. Whenever we took a breather, he always found something across the street that needed his attention; even today I can clearly picture his face. It was obvious that the man made a point of not harassing us. Why? As in the case of Lt. Hardenberg, I wondered how he got into the SS.

For four days the moving van brought us to the Kurfürstenstrasse in the morning and returned us to the Jewish Hospital in the evening. However, at the end of the fifth day we were told that our special assignment had ended and to get back to the hospital on our own. The next morning on the way to my regular work, I did not leave the hospital through the main entrance. I climbed over the back fence, just in case.

In retrospect, I find it noteworthy that, even in the devil’s den, there were two apparently decent men, Lt. Hardenberg and the short, stocky, ruddy guard. I still wonder what became of them. 





Nesse Godin

Nesse Godin was born to an observant Jewish family in Siauliai, known in Yiddish as Shavl, Lithuania. Her parents owned a store that sold dairy products. The city was home to a vibrant Jewish community of almost 10,000 people. It had more than a dozen synagogues and was renowned for its impressive cultural and social organizations.

Nesse's family was very religious and observed all the Jewish laws.

Nesse attended Hebrew school and was raised in a loving household, where the values of community and caring always were stressed. After the Germans invaded Poland in 1939, Nesse's family heard from relatives in Łódź that Jews there were being treated horribly. They could not believe it.

On June 26, 1941, the Germans occupied Siauliai, just four days after the invasion of the Soviet Union. In the weeks that followed, SS killing units and Lithuanian collaborators shot about 1,000 Jews in the nearby Kuziai forest. In August, Nesse and her family were forced to move into a ghetto, where they lived in constant hunger and fear. There, Nesse witnessed many "selections," during which men, women, and children were taken to their deaths. Nesse's father was among them. In 1944, as the Soviet army approached, the remaining Jews were deported to the Stutthof concentration camp. There, Nesse was given the number 54015.

From Stutthof, Nesse was transported to four labor camps and was sent on a death march in January 1945. In the freezing cold winter weather and with little food, many of the prisoners died. On March 10, 1945, she was liberated by Soviet troops in Chinow, near the southwestern part of the Baltic Sea. In 1950, after spending five years in the displaced persons camp in Feldafing, Germany, Nesse immigrated to the United States.

THE RUSSIAN PRISONER OF WAR

Nesse Godin

AUTHOR'S NOTE: THE FOLLOWING PIECE IS FICTION BASED ON AN EVENT I ACTUALLY WITNESSED AS A PRISONER DURING WORLD WAR II. FOR A SPECIAL EXERCISE DURING THE *MEMORY PROJECT* WRITING WORKSHOPS, WE WERE ASKED TO TELL A STORY FROM A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE AND TO FICTIONALIZE IT. THIS PIECE IS A PRODUCT OF THAT EXERCISE.


It was dark in the barrack where more than a hundred Russian prisoners of war were kept. About a dozen of them gathered in the dark to finalize the plan to escape. They had been planning it for months, checking all kinds of possibilities.

Now the time was ripe. They had been working at the airport where it was possible to hijack a plane. Many of the war prisoners were expert flyers. If they could just get rid of the guards. They needed a volunteer willing to risk his own life to save all of his comrades. One of the prisoners came forward and offered to be the one to do the job. The plan was for the volunteer to grab one of the guards by the neck with the hope that all the guards would come to his rescue. If they could just get the guards in one place, they would jump them and take away their guns. Their only other possible weapons were the shovels and picks they worked with. Only at noon when the daily plane came in did they have a chance.

The next day when the Russian prisoners came to work they were ready for the escape. At noon the plane landed, the passengers got off the plane, the cleaning crew came to clean, and the time was right. The leader signaled to start the mission.

The prisoner who volunteered jumped forward, grabbed the German guard by the neck, and started to choke him. The rest of the guards rushed to his rescue. As planned, the prisoners started to hit the Germans with the shovels and picks. Some of the guards fell injured, some dead. Many of the prisoners were killed, but many succeeded in getting on the plane and escaping to Russia.

The prisoner who volunteered to help his friends escape paid with his own life. He was ordered to dig a hole in the ground and get in it and was buried alive up to his neck. The pressure of the earth was so strong that it killed him.

We, the Jewish prisoners who worked across the road, were ordered to witness the punishment. The head of the guards made a speech telling us that this is the punishment if anyone hurts a German guard. On the ground, the prisoner lay dead with his eyes open, looking up to the heavens, hoping that the Lord guided his comrades to freedom. 

Nesse Godin

I am a baby in my mother's arms, surrounded by the sound of laughter from my older two brothers and the shining eyes of my father's gaze upon me.

I am a little toddler running in the park, picking up chestnuts that fell from the tall trees whose branches and leaves cover the light of the sun.

I am the little girl who is in the circle of friends, boys and girls, our hands clapping, our feet stomping, our voices loud in song to the Lord above.

I am the preteen walking on the path of roses, smelling the sweet fragrance and aroma of the flowers around me.

I am the girl who is caught in the horrible storm. The lightning, the thunder, and the blowing wind.

I am the child trying to hold onto my mother's hand but am torn away by the storm.

I am walking on the road covered with thorns searching for the roses and the aroma of the flowers.

I am the teenager walking on that road, nothing but corpses and the smell of death around me.

I am the walking skeleton surrounded by strangers, women who grab my bony hand and give me hope to go on.

I am holding on to those outstretched arms that help me walk and fight that storm.

I am sick.

I am cold.

I am hungry.

I am ready to give up.

I am listening to the sounds of hope, a sound of a commandment.

Do not let us be forgotten.

Tell the world what this terrible storm did to the world.

Tell what hatred and indifference can do.

I am almost at the end of that road covered with thorns.

I am out of the storm.

I am looking for the path with the roses and aroma of the flowers.

I am alive.

I am never going to forget that storm.

I am not going to allow that path to be covered with thorns.

I am going to remember the last commandment that I was given by the women around me.

I am a Jew. I will fulfill this commandment.

I am a Jewish woman, feed the hungry, I speak up for the oppressed, I love all the children of the world,

I praise the Lord for all that he gave me.

I am a Jew. I will never forget that storm. 





Pete Philipps

Pete Phillips was born in Essen, a major industrial city on Germany's Ruhr River. His father worked for an international trading firm in nearby Mühlheim. His mother was a designer for a fashionable women's dress shop.

Pete had barely passed his first birthday when the Nazis came to power in 1933. His parents realized the danger that now faced Jews in Germany, and the family left for Prague, Czechoslovakia, in 1936. Pete attended

Jewish school there, but the times were unsettling. In fall 1938, the Sudetenland, a region of Czechoslovakia, was incorporated into the Nazi Reich, and the following March, German troops entered Prague. In June 1939, the family moved to Italy. Soon after Germany invaded Poland in September 1939, the family immigrated to Ecuador.

In Quito, Pete attended a private boys school. His father set up business making margarine, while his mother did clothing alterations. In May 1941, just six months before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the Philippses arrived in New York. Pete's father went to work for the United States branch of his former company; his mother worked at various jobs, including assembling cigarette lighters for the U.S. Army.

After the war, Pete learned that his paternal grandmother, who had fled earlier to the Netherlands, had been deported to Auschwitz, where she perished. He completed his education and, after a tour of military duty in Germany, became a journalist with the *New York Times*.

Pete Philipps

Anneliese Brandt hadn't crossed my mind in some time—until that day I was in Washington on some now-forgotten business and later stopped at the Holocaust Museum before flying home. Afterward, as I was leaving the building and waiting for my eyes to adjust to the light, I thought of another spectacular spring afternoon, the day my father and I went to the season's first outdoor chamber music concert at the Brandts' stately villa in Berlin.

I remembered taking the streetcar, the Number 76, because my father was too tired for our customary walk, and that we got to the Brandts three-quarters of an hour too early. Although my father was to play the viola in Haydn's "Emperor" Quartet, my mother stayed home, drained after another week of standing in line for our visas.

We entered the garden just as a photographer was directing the Brandts to take their places for a family portrait. They were all so intent on following the woman's orders that no one saw us. Frau Brandt later told us the portrait was a going-away present for Rolf, the oldest of her four children, who was leaving for the army.

Against a backdrop of blossoming apple trees the family seemed the epitome of *Gemütlichkeit*: Herr Doktor and Frau Brandt (he in *Lederhosen*), Rolf, Hans, Eva, and Anneliese. Anyone coming upon the cloudless scene might have concluded that all was right with the world.

But not our world, as one look at my father attested. Pale and gaunt, his fingers drumming on the viola case resting between his knees, he looked as if he were waiting for a funeral procession. Little wonder. Days earlier the double bassist had hanged himself when the University of Berlin notified him and all other Jews on the faculty that their services were no longer needed. Sickened by the death of his

friend, my father lost all hope that a catastrophe could still be avoided; the whole thing wasn't a bad dream after all. Yet, as soon as he began to tune his instrument he seemed transported to another world, shut off from the awful reality closing in around us. Ever since, the scene of the Brandts languidly posing in their garden is etched in my mind's eye—an image that may be all that remains of them.

The Brandts were genial hosts and they insisted on keeping the concerts informal. The musicians, all accomplished amateurs, played strictly for their own enjoyment, their families, and a few friends. Dr. Brandt was a prominent surgeon; playing the clarinet was his hobby. My father, who was equally at home on the violin and viola, had known him since they attended medical school together in Heidelberg. The programs depended on which of the dozen or so instrumentalists showed up at any one time and so tended to be impromptu. Only the venue remained constant, because the Brandts, in addition to their spacious and elegant home, had a Bechstein concert grand.

I had recently turned 14 and was still years from becoming a music lover. Even so, my parents never had to drag me to the Brandts. It wasn't the music that drew me, but Anneliese. I could barely wait for Sunday to come around. A year younger than I, she was the girl I'd made up my mind I was going to marry. Never mind that she was Catholic. We were, in all other respects as well, still so innocent. My favorite game (how silly it sounds today) was to pretend to be absorbed in the music, then suddenly glance up in hopes of catching Anneliese looking at me.

It was unseasonably warm that afternoon and the Bechstein was rolled out to the terrace. The small audience sat on the lawn in folding, wood-and-canvas deck chairs. The other kids and I lolled in the grass and did our best to be *artig*, well behaved. Frau Brandt, who was known for her pastries, had as usual done all the baking. Rumor had it that she was a gifted pianist in her own right, but she never took part in the music making.

I can only guess why the Brandts' children hung around all those afternoons. Did Dr. Brandt insist in the name of *Kultur*? Eva and Hans may have needed little parental prodding because both of them were

taking music lessons. Anneliese had briefly tried the cello before giving up, so I convinced myself that she was sweet on me. As for Rolf, he looked positively indifferent—almost remote. I still see him: hands buried in the pockets of his knickerbockers, a grin on his pale face that was nearly a smirk, he gave the impression of someone who wanted nothing so much as to be elsewhere.

The first half of the concert consisted of the Haydn and Beethoven's Piano Trio in G Major. During intermission, while Frau Brandt was busy serving refreshments, Anneliese and I stole away to the swing that hung from a large oak in back of the garden. Sometimes I can still hear the hilarity of her shrieks when I pushed her as high as the swing would go. Somehow, though, I never summoned the courage to kiss her.

The second half of the afternoon was given over to Schubert's *Trout Quintet*. Dr. Brandt had recruited a patient, a member of the Berlin Philharmonic, to sit in for the occasion. After only a few bars I became aware of something gone wrong. My father repeatedly lost his place and threw the others off. It was unlike him to be so inattentive; I only hoped Anneliese didn't notice.

"Papa, are you not feeling well?" I asked him afterward. He was putting away his viola without first wiping the instrument with the special cloth he carried for that purpose. I suggested calling a taxi, but he said he preferred to walk. As soon as we passed through the gate he stopped and leaned against a lamp-post. I was afraid he would faint.

"We Jews are finished," he said—not to me, but to the nearly empty street.

"Why, Papa?"

He didn't say anything and started to walk again, his steps so small that I had no trouble keeping up. Just when I thought we would continue all the way home in silence, he stopped short and looked me straight in the eye. "We will never set foot in that house again—never!" Too stunned to say a word, I waited

for him to go on. After what seemed like a long time but couldn't have been more than a second or two, he said, "The Brandts are Nazis." My thoughts vaulted to Anneliese. She was one of *them*? I was about to object but stopped myself when I saw the look on my father's face. At least I didn't give way to tears.

Late that night I overheard my parents in the next room and found out why my father had been so angry. During the intermission, he told my mother, he'd walked through the library on the way to the bathroom and come upon a silver-framed photograph of Hitler on Dr. Brandt's writing table. "When a distinguished surgeon, a man as intelligent and cultured as Walter Brandt, becomes an apostle of that guttersnipe, it's all over for us," he said.

"It's incomprehensible," said my mother. I could picture her shaking her head.

"Imagine my shock. I'm still in shock."

"Did you say anything to Walter?"

"What could I say? I couldn't wait to get out of that house."

"I only hope we get our papers before it's too late," said my mother between sobs. "It hardly matters anymore where we end up."

My father kept his word; not only did we never go back to the Brandts, but two of his fellow musicians followed his example. One, Fritz Landauer, was a prominent attorney who played the cello. The other, Ernst Weinberg, was a radiologist and pianist of such caliber that my father thought he could have been another Serkin. One night over dinner at our house they agreed to form their own ensemble. But first they had to find a piano to replace the one Dr. Weinberg's wife, an Aryan, had recently taken when she left him. They also needed a new venue.

My mother hit upon an ingenious solution, solving both problems at once. She announced that she would have a little chat with the elderly widow in the apartment below us, a former voice teacher who still gave occasional lessons. My mother rarely went to the store without stopping at Frau Wanzel's to ask if she needed anything. "You will see, Albert," my mother said. "As soon as he can make music again, Papa will cheer up." But I preferred sudden death to sitting through another chamber music concert without Anneliese. I hoped Frau Wanzel would say no.

Of course I was disappointed; Frau Wanzel was only too happy to turn her modest apartment into what she called a "salon." Worse, my father wouldn't let me invite Anneliese. "I forbid you to have anything to do with her again!" he said, practically shouting. I locked myself in my room and promised myself to try again another time.

But events were outrunning us. A few days later thousands of students marched to a square on Unter den Linden and burned piles of books in front of the university. "German culture is going up in flames," said my father as we stood in front of our window and watched the torchlight parade below. I never mentioned Anneliese again.

I ended up tagging along to the first concert at Frau Wanzel's after all; the prospect of staying home by myself was even bleaker. In tribute to our new hostess, my father and Dr. Weinberg began the evening playing Beethoven's *Spring* Sonata. The sight of Frau Wanzel in tears, when I'd never so much as seen her dry old face break into a smile, was quite a surprise. As usual, my father threw himself into the music; one could almost see his worry lines soften. If Frau Wanzel's old upright sounded a bit clangorous, no one seemed to notice; nor did anyone object to sitting on her well-worn oriental when she ran out of chairs.

The whole time my mind was on Anneliese; the music seemed to come from somewhere far off. I imagined that she was sitting next to me in the lime-colored dress I loved, her slender legs crossed at the ankles, her long blond hair done up in a ponytail, her head resting against my arm. I thought a lot

about the secret she told me the last time we were together, and the way she looked at me with her mesmerizing eyes, eyes so blue you almost couldn't see the pupils.

For the following concert my father, Dr. Weinberg, and Fritz Landauer intended to play Schubert's B-flat Major Piano Trio, but it didn't happen. At first no one said anything when Fritz didn't show up; he was habitually late. We chatted and nibbled ginger cookies. To pass the time, my father and Dr. Weinberg played a movement from a Brahms sonata that was so filled with loss and longing that even I was affected. Fritz, as he had encouraged me to call him, never came.

In the morning my father went to the police and was told that his boyhood friend had been severely beaten by Nazi thugs who had accosted him on the way to Frau Wanzel's. He died of his injuries a few days later. I never forgot my father's lament: "Such a lovely human being. So decent, intelligent, and cultured. Ruthlessly murdered. Why? Because he was a homosexual." That was the first time I heard the word.

For days after the funeral my father didn't pick up an instrument. "These Jew-hating goons are the death of the arts and humanities," I overheard him say to my mother. But then something changed his mind. Maybe he felt uncomfortable quitting because he was the only violist. Maybe he believed that by making music he was defying the Nazis. All I know is that one day he simply picked up his violin and began to practice the Brahms Piano Quintet in F Minor, Fritz's great favorite, which the friends had decided to play in his memory. My father went himself to invite Fritz's parents to the next concert, but they declined. Who could blame them? Hardly anyone else showed up that night, just the five musicians, my mother, Frau Wanzel, and I, each of us acting as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

But nothing was any longer normal or predictable. Early one morning Frau Wanzel appeared at our door, ashen-faced, and informed my parents that her brother had been arrested for distributing Communist literature. She said she was afraid our building was being watched and so she could no longer make her apartment available. "I have nothing against you, Herr Doktor, or your Jewish friends," she said, clutching her chest with both hands, "but I cannot take the risk. The smallest gathering arouses the

suspicion of the Gestapo.” My father pleaded with her to relent, and she eventually agreed to make her apartment available one more time.

“I don’t blame her for losing courage,” said my mother after Frau Wanzel left. “Even the decent people who hate Hitler and his henchmen are cringing with fear.”

“God only knows how we would behave if we were in her shoes,” my father said.

Of the musicians, only my father and Dr. Weinberg showed up for what had been announced as the final concert. “Our ranks are thinning out,” my father whispered, looking at the dozen or so people seated around the piano. Judging from their ages, most were Frau Wanzel’s students. Were they there for the music, I wondered, or for my mother’s famous hazelnut torte?

I would have given anything to be elsewhere. The room was unbearably warm; though it was the middle of July, Frau Wanzel never opened a window. The pieces were unfamiliar and sounded sorrowful. To end the evening, Dr. Weinberg chose Schubert’s great final Sonata in B-flat, a grave piece for a teenager to sit through. Naturally I had no idea the music is imbued with Schubert’s awareness that he was dying—or that this was Dr. Weinberg’s valedictory: he’d recently been diagnosed with lung cancer. I knew only that I would never see Anneliese again; the realization struck me with a piercing clarity.



In the taxi back to the airport I found myself wondering, as I’d done so many times before, what became of her? I’d never allowed myself to think of Anneliese as one of *them*. And yet, after what I had just seen, after the disturbing memories that resurfaced during my tour of this remarkable portrayal of the destruction of the Jews of Europe, how could I be sure? All at once I wanted to know if she was still alive, and what it would be like to meet her once more. Would I still recognize the radiant girl who had confided that long-ago afternoon that she wanted to be a movie star? I still dream of her sometimes, and afterward I wonder—I can’t stop wondering—how everything might have turned out differently. •

Pete Philipps

Hands cupped around a glass of tea, Jakob Herz surveyed the scene from his sixth-floor window with wry satisfaction. The few languid flakes he'd seen the first time he got up during the night had turned into a heavy snowfall—the first since the death of his wife had persuaded him to give up the house they had lived in for nearly 50 years and move to this apartment. It's someone else's turn to shovel, he mused, and got up to answer the phone.

"Is everything all right, Pop?" the wife of his middle son wanted to know.

"What should be wrong?"

"I mean, do you have everything you need? They're predicting a major blizzard."

"Plenty, including toilet paper."

"Very funny. Please take care of yourself, Pop."

"Everything's under control. If only my damn paper would come."

"You know it will only depress you, Pop. Stay home and relax. Don't do anything foolish."

"Don't worry," he said and bid his daughter-in-law good-bye. He looked again for his newspaper, but it still hadn't arrived. He slammed the door shut, got dressed, and went down to the empty lobby. No sign of the doorman; nor had the sidewalk been cleared. He would call the building manager. He went back upstairs and was still fumbling with the keys when he heard his phone. One of the boys, he thought, and rushed inside. But it was the rabbi to inform him that Saturday's Bar Mitzvah had been postponed.

"Why postponed?"

“The boy’s grandparents were coming from New York and, as you probably heard, La Guardia and Kennedy are closed.”

Jakob hadn’t heard. “In that case we can use the little chapel tonight.”

The rabbi said that if the snow didn’t let up there might be no need to open the synagogue. “No one will come.”

“Have we ever not held services on a Friday night?”

“Not to my knowledge.”

“Well, I’m going,” said Jakob.

“Jake, this is no weather for you to venture outdoors.”

“I can handle it, Rabbi.”

“I know you can Jake, but what would be the point if no one shows up?”

Jakob broke out in perspiration. He took off his cardigan and wiped his forehead. “You know we always get a few regulars. I’ll be OK.”

“Anyone who comes would understand if you aren’t there. On a night like this—”

Jakob interrupted. “I’ve been through worse, Rabbi. Besides, the streets may be cleared by then.”

“In this city? Not likely. I may not be able to get there myself.”

“You’re coming from the suburbs, Rabbi. I can walk.”

“I wish you wouldn’t take the risk, Jake.”

“What about the mourners? We have a long *jahrzeit* list this week.”

There was a long pause before the rabbi said, “Surely God would understand.”

Jakob promised the rabbi to check back later in the day and hung up. He went into his minuscule kitchen and turned on the radio. Even his favorite classical music station was breaking into its regular schedule with bulletins on the storm. Schools were closed and all but essential workers were being sent home. Accumulations of as much as two feet were expected before the storm blew itself out over the Atlantic.

Jakob made himself another glass of tea and went back to the window. He studied the sky. If he stayed home people would think he was sick—maybe had another heart attack. On the other hand, going out was taking a risk—he could fall and break something. How hard even simple decisions were without Fanny. Not that he didn’t know what she would have said: “Jakob, on such a night you will not set one foot outside the door!”

A minute later his mind was made up. He was damned if he was going to let a little snow make him a prisoner in his own home. It simply was a question of dressing properly. With that he began a mental list: an extra sweater, his heavy parka, the scarf Fanny had knitted for him, the Russian hat with earflaps, fur-lined gloves, thick socks, galoshes, and his inhaler. When he had laid everything out on the bed, he added a flashlight.

Several times during the afternoon Jakob tried to call the rabbi, but the circuits were always busy. At four o’clock he still had not heard from his sons. Would it kill them to check on their father? On second thought, they probably couldn’t get through either. It was time for his nap. Certain he would wake if the phone rang, he stretched out under the afghan Fanny had made for him for his 75th birthday and closed his eyes.

At seven, rested and fortified by a bowl of leftover pea soup and two fingers of slivovitz, Jakob examined himself in the hall mirror and rang for the elevator. In the lobby, four women looked up from their knitting, but he had no time to get into a conversation and merely nodded. "His wife, may she rest in peace, should only know," he heard one of the women say as he passed. Still no sign of the doorman; he'd forgotten to call the manager. Jakob pushed open the thick glass door and was greeted by a blast of frigid air that almost cost him his balance. He wrapped the scarf around his mouth the way Fanny used to tell him and stepped into the street.

The snow was deeper than he had expected. There were no footprints to follow. By the time he got to the first corner he was short of breath and wheezing. No one was about. Abandoned cars were everywhere. Except for an occasional siren the city was eerily still. He looked up expectantly at each of the few cars that managed to slog past, but he might as well have been invisible. His hands and feet were getting numb. Another two blocks and he would be on the main thoroughfare; from there the going would be easier.

He resumed walking, barely able to see through the wind-driven snow. There was a mailbox at the next corner, he remembered; he would lean against it and take a short rest. But he lost his footing before he could get there and fell flat on his back. "Nothing broken," he said in the darkness. "Thank God." He tried to get up, but it was as if some strange force over which he had no control kept him pinned to the ground. For a moment he saw himself shoveling snow again under the oversight of the Kapo, the Ukrainian with a habit of punctuating his commands with a truncheon. Already beyond endurance, Jakob couldn't work fast enough to satisfy the sadistic brute. Several times he had fallen in an exhausted heap, overcome with pain, the will to live ebbing with each blow.

The horn of an emergency vehicle brought the present rushing back. He groped around until he found the flashlight, but it was dead. He struggled to his feet, found his bearings, and pushed on. He hated being late. At last he rounded the last corner, stopped, and gaped—the stainless steel obelisk in

front of the entrance, a memorial to the victims of the Holocaust, was unlit. The caretaker didn't make it, he thought. Good thing he had a set of keys; he had insisted on it years ago. He patted the reassuring bulge in his pocket and willed his legs on.

When he was within 20 yards he saw that the entryway was deserted. Nobody was waiting. Not a soul. The circular drive was unplowed. Foot-high drifts blocked the three massive oak doors. Under a single mercury vapor lamp, the empty parking lot glistened like a glacier. It was all Jakob could do to keep from sinking to his knees. A rivulet of sweat ran down his spine. In the darkness, the hulking granite building resembled his old synagogue on *Kristallnacht*.

Part of him said he should turn back and go home. Maybe the rabbi was right. On the other hand, he had come this far.... Jakob took two puffs from his inhaler, waited for his wheezing to subside, and went to work. In a few minutes he had brushed enough snow from the center door to squeeze past. Inside the only illumination came from the exit signs in the lobby. Above the Ark, the *ner tamid*, the eternal light, cast a fragile glow over the first row of plush mauve seats. He switched on a bank of lights. The sanctuary had never looked so cavernous. He raised the thermostat to 75 and went back to the lobby. Weary, his eyes half-lidded, he found a chair and sat down.

By nine o'clock, an hour past the usual starting time, Jakob resigned himself to the futility of waiting longer. Something, though, would not let him leave. He knew what had to be done—had known it all along. Slowly and with small steps lest his knees give way, he walked down the center aisle, ascended the three steps to the Ark, and opened the heavy brass doors. The sight of the seven Torahs, each dressed in a different multihued cover, made him feel inches shorter. He waited until he had collected himself and recited the *Shema*. Then he closed the Ark again, carefully descended the steps backward in the respectful manner of the rabbi, and approached the cantor's lectern. From the list in his pocket he began to read. "Mildred Adelson...Charles Anderman...David Bloomenthal..." and so on, until he came to "Frederick

Weiler and Dr. Alfred Young.” Finally came the names of four congregants who had been laid to rest that week. By now Jakob was hoarse. He popped a lozenge into his mouth, discreetly, as though the eyes of the entire congregation were on him, and recited kaddish.



The idea was heaven-sent, of that much Jakob was certain. Why else would it have popped into his head on Yom Kippur, minutes before the final blast of the shofar signaled the end of the all-day service? Before he died and was reunited with Fanny, he would perform a final *mitzvah*, a special good deed that would be pleasing in the sight of God. Not that anything was wrong with him, but at his age.... He left the thought unfinished. Pleased with his brainstorm—and tickled that he had once again defied his doctor by fasting all day—he left the synagogue in high spirits.

Two weeks later Jakob began to fret; he still had not determined how to keep his commitment. All sorts of ideas came to him at night, ideas that in the morning seemed trivial. Once he decided to call up his sons and ask them for suggestions, then changed his mind. What did they know about *mitzvahs*? Another time he started to dial the rabbi’s number but stopped himself. “What are you trying to prove?” he could hear the rabbi ask. Jakob was used to the question; his friends had been asking the same thing since he’d appointed himself head usher of the synagogue. Why would a sane person take on such a thankless job, let alone someone his age? Jakob never obliged them with an answer. He doubted that even Fanny knew what had led him to the decision. “What a nice idea, Dear,” was all she had said. “But shouldn’t you wait until you sell the business?”

“I won’t start until you’re fully recovered,” he promised.



“Non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma.”

Jakob asked the doctor to repeat the diagnosis and sank slowly into a chair. Better he should have died in the camp. He held his head in both hands. “What are her chances?”

“Difficult to say.” The doctor took off his rimless glasses and used his handkerchief to wipe them. “I recommend we begin treatment right away.”

Jakob nodded. “I want to call my sons.” He rose halfway from the chair and fell back again. “Would it be all right if one of them calls you so you can explain this non, non—”

“Non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma,” the doctor repeated.

Jakob tried but couldn’t make the words leave his mouth. He mumbled his thanks, started to rise, and passed out.

That Friday Jakob went to synagogue. No point in calling his sons, he told himself; they would find some reason to beg off. A few people recognized him and looked surprised; they were accustomed to seeing Fanny at services by herself. Early in their courtship Jakob had confided to her that his belief in God went up in ashes, along with the ashes of the Jews he’d seen being led to their deaths. “How can we continue to praise a God who could have stopped what was happening but didn’t?” he’d asked.

“God was present in the camps in every tiny act of human kindness,” she had replied. “God was within every Jew who shared a piece of bread, in every mother and father who comforted a child on the way to the gas chamber.”

Jakob envied those who could believe. He couldn’t. Even now he felt like a stranger. The prayers, though familiar, rang hollow.

After a while Jakob started to notice certain things. People got up in the middle of the rabbi's sermon and walked out of the sanctuary. Directly behind him two couples carried on an animated conversation. Three pews in front of him two teenagers were necking. Other teens were changing seats with stunning frequency. The woman on his right was chewing gum. By the end of the service Jakob had made a solemn vow: If Fanny beat the odds and recovered, he would volunteer to become the synagogue's full-time usher for as long as he lived.

After six weeks of radiation therapy and four cycles of chemotherapy, her doctors gave Fanny only a 50 percent chance of living another year—provided she finished the course. The chemotherapy, one week of medicine followed by three weeks of rest, so devastated her that her doctors doubted she'd have the strength. But Fanny not only endured but also began to rally.

And so it came to pass that Jakob became a synagogue fixture. Squat, bald, and impeccably dressed in a dark-blue, double-breasted blazer, he stood at the entrance of the sanctuary before each Sabbath service and handed out copies of the weekly bulletin. Soon he knew most congregants by name. He thought of everything—matches for the candles, wine for the cantor's *kiddush* blessing, that every seat had the correct prayer book. He tested the finicky sound system and adjusted the thermostat, tinkering with the setting as if he were at the controls of a jumbo jet. He patrolled the aisles like a movie matron from a bygone era. "This is a house of worship!" he repeatedly reminded people, from disorderly teenagers to board members talking above a whisper. After a year, impressed by the decorum he had achieved, the board proposed to give Jakob a modest gratuity. He wouldn't hear of it, not then and not six years later, when Fanny died of viral pneumonia and the board offered to put him on the payroll.



Jakob opened his eyes. The pain in his chest was gone. He seemed to be strapped to a narrow bed; everything around him shook and swayed. The only light came from a dim fixture over his head. In the distance he heard a muffled siren. All at once he realized he was in an ambulance.

“Where are you taking me?”

A man in a white jacket leaned over him and said he would be all right. “We’re giving you some oxygen, Jakob. Try not to talk.”

Jakob nodded and thought, I’m 83 and he calls me by my first name. “Are you taking me home?”


He felt a hand on his arm. “Just try to relax, Jakob.” This time it was a woman’s voice. “We’re almost there.”

He wondered who would say kaddish for him.

“I’m sorry, Jakob. Did you say something?” The woman put her ear close to his mouth. She was sucking on a mint.

He remained silent.

“Please try not to talk, OK?”

Jakob said OK. He closed his eyes and moistened his lips. With an effort he played the night over in his head, retracing every step before the blackness. At last he remembered and a weak smile flickered across his face. Surely, God was pleased. 





Charlene Schiff

The youngest of two daughters, Shulamit, known as Musia, was born on December 16, 1929, to a Jewish family in the town of Horochow, Poland, 50 miles northeast of Lvov. Her father was a philosophy professor who taught at the university in Lvov, and both of her parents were civic leaders in Horochow. Shulamit began her education with private tutors at the age of four.

In September 1939, Germany invaded Poland, and three weeks later the Soviet Union occupied eastern Poland, where Horochow was located. Hordes of refugees fleeing the Germans streamed through Horochow, but Soviet rule didn't change Shulamit or her family's life very much. They remained in their home and her father continued to teach in Lvov. The most important change for Shulamit was at school, where she was now taught in Russian.

In 1941, the Germans invaded the Soviet Union and set up a ghetto in Horochow. At that time, Shulamit's father was taken away and never heard from again. In 1942, amid rumors that the ghetto was about to be destroyed, Shulamit's mother found two hiding places for herself and her two daughters. The last time Shulamit saw her older sister was when she left them to go to her hiding place, a few days before Shulamit and her mother fled. She and her mother had just hidden in the underbrush at the river's edge when they heard shots. They hid, submerged in the water, all night, as machine guns blazed in the ghetto. By morning others were hiding in the brush, and Shulamit heard a Ukrainian guard scream, "I see you there, Jews; come out!" Most obeyed, but Shulamit and her mother hid in the water for several more days as the gunfire continued. Sometimes they would doze; once Shulamit woke to find that her mother had vanished. Shulamit never saw her mother again and never found out what happened to her. She spent the rest of the war alone, running from forest to forest searching for her mother. This lasted for a period of two years, including three winters. She is the only survivor of her family.

THE PROMISE

Charlene Schiff

I brought her home and had a difficult time finding the right place for her. At first, I put her on the couch in the living room. She disturbed me there—she was too prominent. Now she sits on a bunch of pillows in the corner of the living room where she seems comfortable, content, and not demanding.

Forty-nine years after the very first doll, this one greets me every morning when I walk into my living room. Bittersweet memories rush in, even though this is a different doll.

The year was 1939. It was time for the semiannual shopping trip for clothes. Mama usually outfitted my sister and me before Passover and before the High Holidays.

I came home from school on a lovely spring day, had some cookies and milk, then we set out to go shopping. Mama told me to put on clean socks as we were going for new shoes as well.

We stopped in one of the shoe stores and after trying on a number of shoes, we selected a pair of lovely light brown shiny shoes. As we walked out of the store, I glanced at the adjacent window display. What an enchanting picture. In the window was a floor-model Singer sewing machine and behind it sat the most beautiful mechanized doll in the world. She sat on a chair, her big blue eyes opened and closed, her blond long hair framed her lovely face in golden ringlets. She wore a pink ruffled blouse with puffed sleeves, and her arms and hands moved back and forth—I stood mesmerized.

Mama watched in amazement. I had never been interested in dolls. I was a tomboy. She looked at me lovingly and said, “You like this doll, don’t you?”

“Oh yes, Mama,” I replied.

“I’ll get it for you, my sweet child,” she said.

She went into the store while I admired the window display. After a few minutes, she came out and said, “This doll is not for sale—I’m so sorry.”

We continued with our shopping. My attention switched to pretty spring outfits, and by the time we returned home, I didn’t think much about the doll.

A few days later, Mama told me that she spoke with the manager of the Singer Sewing Machine store and he promised to sell her the doll in a few months when the display would be dismantled. “So you see, I’ll be able to keep my promise to you after all,” Mama said.

I went back a number of times to look at the doll, which I already considered mine.


For me as a child, summer was relaxing and carefree. I remember traveling to the consulate once more with Papa, Mama, and my older sister, Tia, and returning again without anything definite regarding our emigration to America.

Then came September 1 and World War II. Eastern Poland, including my town, Horochow, became part of the Soviet Union. The Singer Company display disappeared overnight.

We had barely adjusted to the Soviet occupation when Hitler broke his agreement with Stalin and invaded eastern Poland. My town was overrun almost immediately. With the arrival of the Germans, all our dreams and expectations for a normal life were shattered. In the first days, the Germans burned all our synagogues, Torahs, and prayer books. They took my father, along with other Jewish leaders, never to be heard from again. The rest of us were herded into a ghetto, where everyone over 14 years of age was ordered to slave labor. I still had my mother and sister, and their love compensated for all the horrible conditions.

When the ghetto was liquidated and I lost them both—that's when my difficult task of survival started. Somehow I cheated death, which was always one step behind me. By the end of the war, there I was, all alone, a childhood lost, my entire family and friends gone. The burden of my sole survival weighed heavily on my soul.

My new life in America became a great challenge. I worked hard to become Americanized. I met a wonderful man whom I married and my married life started with my becoming a military wife.

In 1988, my husband Ed, our son Stephen, and I visited Poland. After a traumatic trip to my hometown, we ended up in Warsaw, in an open market where I spotted a pretty doll. I bought it. She was not to be compared with the beautiful doll from the Singer window display. But she was lovely—a constant reminder of what might have been. 

I R E M E M B E R

Charlene Schiff

I Remember

Blowing bubbles in the air
Rainbow colors, all so fair
Nightingales and jasmine's scent
All that love and beauty meant.

I Remember

Rainbow colors, no, no more
Guards with rifles by the door
Star of David on my coat
I can't swim, I can't float.

I Remember

A haystack in a farmer's field
Used by seven as a shield
Then only one of us is left
Filled with sorrow and bereft.

I Remember

The bottom of a water well
Did someone see me, will they tell?
I'm slipping, clinging to the rounded wall
Dear God, don't let me fall.

I Remember

Being hungry, snow and frost
Cold, alone, and very lost
Why go on with such a life
Stalked by terror's cutting knife?

I Remember

My heart by now an empty shell
From all that pain, from all that hell
It's such a long and awful war
My wounds forever an open sore.

I Remember

Papa's hug and Mama's kiss
Darling Sister I'll always miss
Their loving, sweet and gentle faces
Gaze at me from empty spaces.
They're gone forever—all is vanished
And my soul to torment banished.



Charlene Schiff

It was an early autumn day—the forest was dark and I could hardly see the sun. I felt dampness all around me and I was tired, but there was nowhere to rest because this forest had sparse underbrush and it was difficult to find a hiding place.

By noon, after walking most of the night, I had reached the edge of the forest. A small group of people sat in a circle nearby. My first reaction was to run for cover. I thought I heard muffled words in Yiddish. Did I dream it? Quietly, I moved closer. The longing for human contact was so strong I disregarded all caution. I walked up to the group. A young woman moved a bit and motioned for me to join them. There were six of them; the young woman, with a peasant kerchief tied around her forehead and behind her ears, cradled an infant in her arms. The baby was strapped to her chest with a heavy shawl. On her feet she wore flimsy sandals; her dress was old and faded. The baby was listless and sucked on his mother's finger. Next to the woman sat two young men, well dressed; both were wearing almost new, knee-high boots; each of them had a leather briefcase bulging at the seams. I wondered what was in them—food, clothing—they didn't offer any information.

To their left sat another woman, in her early thirties, with a worried look on her face, somewhat disheveled, in summer clothing and light shoes. To complete the circle, there was another man with a short red beard. All I remember about him is his annoying, constant nervous tugging at his beard. I took out one of my two treasured carrots and handed it to the woman with the baby. She promptly stuck it in the baby's mouth.


All their stories were similar to mine. Somehow they were able to escape during the liquidation of their ghettos. All came from towns and villages not too far from my hometown. None of them knew my family; they had not seen my mother, for whom I was searching.

Lost in our thoughts and conversation, we became completely oblivious to the outside surroundings. Suddenly, a group of children appeared, as if out of nowhere, “Jews” they yelled with glee and ran away. Obviously, they went back to call their parents. There was a small monetary reward for reporting a Jew.

Overcome with fear, we knew we had to hide. It was harvest time and there were huge haystacks in the fields. These haystacks were as big as barns. We all ran and hid in one of them. Why we all hid in one haystack, I cannot explain. We ran and made our way as deeply as we could into the haystack. It was difficult to breathe because the hay was full of dust.

Pretty soon we heard voices. It sounded as if the entire village was there. They were singing and joking among themselves. They zeroed in on our haystack and attacked it with great enthusiasm. They screamed every epithet imaginable and urged us to come out. They used pitchforks and were stabbing the haystack again and again. I heard cries around me, but I concentrated on just trying to breathe.

I don’t know how long this lasted—it seemed forever—then all became quiet. The dust and hay were choking me, but I tried with all my might not to cough.

Slowly, I made my way out of the demolished haystack. It was dark and difficult to orient myself. When my eyes got accustomed to the outside darkness, I saw, to my horror, naked bodies lined up in a row. I stood dazed, looking at the bloody, mutilated bodies of my six companions whom I met earlier that afternoon. I didn’t even know their names, except for the baby. His mother called him Buzio. 



Flora Singer

Flora (Mendelowitz) Singer, born August 16, 1930, in Berchem, Belgium, was the oldest of three girls. Flora's Romanian-born parents immigrated to Antwerp, Belgium, in the late 1920s to escape antisemitism. Flora's father owned a furniture workshop. Antwerp had an active Jewish community. There were butcher shops, bakeries, and stores that sold foods that were prepared according to Jewish dietary laws. When Flora arrived for her first day of kindergarten at public school, she was

shocked to learn that there were languages besides Yiddish! Three times a week after school she went to a Yiddish school where she learned about Jewish culture.

In 1937, her father lost his shop. He found work as a ship's carpenter and began to travel the world. In the spring of 1938, Flora's father left again and made it to the United States, hoping that his wife and daughters could join him there.

After the Germans invaded Belgium in May 1940, Flora and her sisters had to wear a yellow star. On the advice of a friend who was in the German army, the Mendelowitz family fled to Brussels. Flora was hidden in many places, including convents in Belgium, and was spared deportation because of the efforts of resistance fighter Georges Ranson, Father Bruno Reynders (a Benedictine monk), and others. In 1946, Flora and her family immigrated to the United States, where she first worked as a dressmaker, then completed her schooling and became a teacher.

THE LIGHT BLUE ENSEMBLE

Flora Singer

Every time Helena, or Heleneke, as she was called by everyone in the family, wore her light blue ensemble, I was filled with envy. I loved the dress and the cape she wore over it. My favorite part of the dress was the skirt, which fluttered up and outward when Heleneke twirled round and round. When she wore the cape she looked regal, like a real princess. Heleneke had many beautiful dresses; I did not.


Heleneke's mom, Aunt Rachel, made many of her dresses. Heleneke was the only daughter in her family. The other child was an older boy, Louis. In our family, we were three daughters, thus Mama did not have the time to make us many dresses, especially not dresses with matching capes. But I was hopeful. I knew that one day I would own that beautiful ensemble, the dress and the cape. I received all of Heleneke's dresses and coats when she outgrew them. Although she was only eight days older than I, she was taller than me.

When we played together, I often asked Heleneke if I could try on her light blue dress and cape. I put on the dress and twirled round and round in front of the mirror in her room, watching the skirt flutter around me. Then I put the cape on over my shoulders and glanced at myself, feeling especially beautiful. After a while I reluctantly took the ensemble off and put my own clothes on to go home, but the thought was always there. The ensemble will be mine. I wished that Heleneke would grow a little faster. I was impatient.

I loved Heleneke. She and her family lived close by on the Lange Kievitstraat, where we lived. On Sundays, when all the family members met in the Antwerp Stadtpark to picnic and play, Heleneke and I, as well as her brother and my younger sisters, ran and played together, or watched the graceful swans in the park lake. Then, when Uncle Alex, Aunt Lea's husband, took out his mandolin and began to play, we joined the other family members to sing together.

Time passed. On May 10, 1940, the German army with its tanks entered Belgium and the horrible years of World War II began. The persecution of the Jewish people started. We all dispersed in different directions, changing our identities, hiding from the enemy, the Gestapo. We lost contact. I lost contact not only with Heleneke, but also with many members of our large family.

After the Liberation by the Allied troops, we waited for the return of family members, either from the many hiding places, or from the concentration camps. Most never returned. Heleneke's father Moisz, who was caught and taken to Auschwitz with Transport XV, on October 24, 1942, never returned. Her mother, Rachel, and her brother, Louis, were caught and taken to Auschwitz with Transport XIX, on January 15, 1943; they never returned. Heleneke, beautiful Heleneke, was also caught by the Gestapo and taken to Auschwitz with Transport XIX. She never returned from Auschwitz either. Just like the other members of the family, she perished in Auschwitz's gas chamber.

I was never caught. I managed to elude the Gestapo and survived. I inherited Heleneke's beautiful light blue ensemble but have never worn it. It is featured in a photograph of my beautiful family member and best friend, Heleneke, wearing it, the cape draped over her slim shoulders. I often look at that photograph and cry. And I ask. Why? 

Flora Singer

Upon our arrival in New York we were met at the harbor by two men. I vaguely recognized one of the men, but the other was a total stranger. After being introduced, I learned that the one I vaguely recognized was my father. Although I recognized his face, something was wrong. I remembered my father as a very tall and strong man. This man was short—I later learned that in American measurements, he was only five feet, six inches tall. He also had a slightly protruding abdomen. The other man, six feet tall, was the uncle we had never met. He was married to my father's sister, Sadie, whom we had never met either. What I didn't realize at that time, was that eight and one-half years is a long time in anyone's life, but more so in the life of a growing child. When father left Belgium, I was not quite eight years old, and now, when I descended from the steamship *Santa Paula* in the harbor of New York, I was a young woman two months shy of 16.

We were hugged by both men. I stiffened. I felt uncomfortable being embraced by strange males. Somehow at that time I had difficulty distinguishing between males who were strangers and those who were family members. Mama's constant drilling to never allow anyone to touch us, especially a male, reinforced during our stays in several convents, had its effect. We were incredibly well trained. Mama was embraced and kissed by father whom we used to call "Papa" before the war. But now we called him the "man." It was difficult for us to say "Papa." We stood shyly by, while the adults exchanged a few words, before picking up our meager luggage and heading toward a car, a Cadillac, I learned later. I also learned that it was a prestigious car to own. The car belonged to our uncle. We sank into the comfortable seats, and as we headed toward the borough of Queens, we took in the awesome sights of New York, the skyline with the tall skyscrapers, the building we later learned was the Empire State Building, the Chrysler Building, and the streets filled with crowds of people and traffic. It was dizzying. It was exhilarating.

Simultaneously, however, what struck me and disappointed me during this first car ride through the city of New York, was the garbage, which I had already noticed as we walked from the harbor to the car. Also the graffiti on buildings and walls. I had dreamed of this arrival, but in my dreams I never saw garbage, I never saw dirt, I never saw graffiti. As the car exited the city and entered the borough of Queens, there were fewer tall buildings and the crowds and traffic thinned out, while the landscape and the streets we passed looked greener and calmer. After a while, the car turned into a street lined with elegant homes, then pulled up to stately brick house, with a meticulously landscaped garden facing the street, and surrounded by beautiful old trees. The front door opened and Aunt Sadie, Papa's sister, came out to greet us, the new immigrants from Europe. Our luggage was taken into the house. We shyly made the acquaintance of our two cousins, Aunt Sadie and Uncle Isidore's daughters, who were slightly younger than I.


Soon thereafter we were seated at a table in the dining room, laden with delicious American food. Although our eyes widened in anticipation, we tried to act nonchalant. We had strict orders from Mama, and we were trained by her never to appear hungry, even when we were. We were taught to turn down one food and accept another, and to eat very slowly, lest someone would think that we were hungry. We were also taught that when offered a second helping we were to, at first, turn it down. Then, while appearing reluctant, accept some, which was of course what we wanted to do in the first place.

Papa spoke very little at the table. Most of the table conversation was between Isidore, whom we learned to call Uncle Izzy, and Mama. Aunt Sadie occasionally chimed in, asking a question or two, but on the whole the meal passed rather quietly. Rhoda and Harriet looked at us, examined us, but no conversation was possible because, although we, the new cousins, spoke more than one language, we spoke no English, the only language they knew. I knew a few sentences in English. Prior to our departure from Brussels, Mama had hired an English-language tutor. She contracted for only five one-hour sessions, which was all we could afford, and I was the pupil. We needed one person to be able to ask a few necessary questions on our voyage like, "Where can we find...? Which way to...?" and so forth. These were not sufficient for a

social conversation. Mama and the three of us were able to speak with Papa, Uncle Izzy, and Aunt Sadie, since we spoke Yiddish, the language spoken by most Europeans of the Jewish faith. But the adults were busy talking to each other and not to us children.

I remember looking at Papa at the table. Was this quiet man the Papa I remember...the man who used to laugh heartily while playing with us when we were little. I learned many years later that Papa, when faced with the four females coming toward him at the harbor, was totally overwhelmed. He had left a woman with three little ones, and now he was faced with this “new” family, after having lived as a single individual, a bachelor, responsible for no one but himself for so many years. For him, I realized much later as I matured, this must have been a very difficult adjustment. Not only were we new immigrants to America who had to adjust to a new culture and life, but we had also just lived through the difficult experiences of a war. In addition to the experiences of a war, as members of the Jewish faith, we were also pursued and had to hide, both our identity and physically, to avoid being caught by the Gestapo. Besides this new family that faced Papa, he was also readjusting to life as a civilian, for he had recently been discharged from the United States Army, which he had joined voluntarily and in which he had served honorably.

The sun went down, evening fell, and everyone began to feel the effects of this exciting day, especially the new arrivals. We were assigned a bedroom, which we expected to share with Mama, as we had in Brussels and on the ship.

However, she was not going to spend the night with us children. This caught us by surprise. Aunt Sadie led the three of us to the room in which we would sleep, and then we watched as Mama, after kissing us goodnight, entered another room with Papa. We waited for her to emerge, but she didn't, and we spent a long time wondering how she would prepare for bed with the “man” in the room. We were not used to having a man with us at bedtime. 



Esther Rosenfeld Starobin

Esther Rosenfeld Starobin was born in Adelsheim, Germany, on April 3, 1937. Her parents, Katie and Adolf Rosenfeld, had four other children—Bertl, Edith, Ruth, and Herman. Esther's father sold feed and other products for cattle, as well as occasionally arranging for the sale of cattle in the area. Her mother often helped him because he had lost a leg in World War I.

After they were no longer allowed to attend the local school, Esther's three older sisters went to live with relatives, first in Heilbronn and then in Aachen. In March 1939, her three sisters went to England on the Kindertransport. Esther herself was sent to England on the Kindertransport in June 1939.

In Thorpe, Norwich, England, Esther lived with Dorothy and Harry Harrison and their son Alan from 1939 until November 1947. She was very much a part of this family. She went to school and had a happy childhood with the Harrisons, despite the effects of the war. Her sisters lived in different areas of England but came to visit whenever possible. Esther's parents and brother had been deported in October 1940 to the Gurs camp in France. Her brother was rescued in 1941 and came to the United States to live with an aunt and uncle. Esther's parents were sent to Auschwitz and murdered in August 1942.

In 1947, Esther's sister Bertl followed the directions of their mother and arranged for Ruth, Esther, and herself to come to the United States. Edith at that point was still in the British army. When they first arrived in the United States, they lived with an aunt and uncle. Edith eventually joined them. She and Bertl moved to an apartment with Esther and took care of her through her junior and senior years of high school. Later, Esther lived with Ruth and her husband while in college at the University of Illinois, where she studied to become a teacher.

RETURN TO ADELSHEIM

Esther Rosenfeld Starobin

It was August 1989. Fred and I were in Adelsheim, my birthplace. There was silence everywhere; no people were visible. We tried to locate the Rathaus, City Hall. Bertl, my sister, had written a letter to the Rathaus. She had explained, in German, that we were coming to visit and would like some assistance in finding places associated with my family. I was sent away from Adelsheim on the Kindertransport at two years of age and had no knowledge of Adelsheim and could not speak German. I had, in my mind, the few stories my older sisters repeated from time to time of their childhood experiences in this place. I also knew this town had more information about my family than I did. I wanted this knowledge to become part of my history, and I hoped this trip would bring me closer to achieving that goal.

Time passed and still no people appeared on the streets. It was so quiet. Like any good tourists we didn't want to waste time, so we drove around the minuscule town taking pictures of sites my sisters had described to me. We easily found the bridge, the waterfall, the park, and then the house where my family had lived. I tried to remember the various stories I had heard about these places. I could imagine Edith, my second-oldest sister, playing on the bridge and dropping the challah dough into the water. This was the dough she was supposed to take to the community oven. The waterfall in the park was just as Ruth, my third sister, had described it. It seemed like a great place to play. The house was exactly where it was supposed to be, though it looked as though it had been through a renovation. It reminded me of the houses in Stratford-on-Avon with its wood beams in the white stucco front.

Since we still had seen no people, we drove to Sennfeld looking for the Jewish cemetery that was supposed to be along the way. We didn't find it after driving the short distance between Adelsheim and Sennfeld twice, so we continued to Korb, where Bertl had been born. Again a small, small place in which it was easy to find the house described by my sister. Every place seemed so small and distant from me.

I found it difficult to think that my family's life so many years ago had been contained in this area. I thought of the stories my sisters told of their childhood in this area, but as I looked around me I couldn't picture living here.

Eventually we drove back to Adelsheim and found the town stirring. The lunch break was over. It was time to locate the mayor and the town hall. It was almost as if this place continued to conspire against me. We found no one who spoke English. When we finally found the Rathaus it had been closed and relocated. Using a series of pantomimes to ask questions, we found the new town hall. Inside, the clerk introduced us to the deputy mayor, who spoke no English. He in turn found a young man who spoke a few words of English. Eventually they found the letter we had sent and told us that tomorrow an English-speaking person and a man who could tell us about my family would show us around. We agreed to meet at ten the next morning. In the meantime we asked about a place to stay for the night. The clerk tried to persuade us to go to Sennfeld, but I wanted to stay in Adelsheim. This time I would not be sent away. A room was arranged for us at the *Gasthaus* on the main street.

The deputy mayor walked us over to the *Gasthaus* and introduced us to the owners, who spoke no English. After we had settled into our room, we went downstairs to eat. We had some difficulty with the menu and were not quite sure what we ate. At a nearby table a group of older people kept giving us knowing looks. I wondered if they knew who we were and remembered my parents. I wished I had understood their conversation.

During the night I had a terrible dream. I thought Nazis were coming up the stairs to find me. I awoke very upset and was glad when daylight appeared.

The next morning we met with our guides. Our guides included Mr. Wetterhahn, the deputy mayor, and the wife of the deputy mayor. The wife spoke English and acted as the translator. They showed us the house our family had owned, the place where my father and uncle played cards, where the synagogue had

been, and pointed out other sites of interest. Mr. Wetterhahn had known my father and the family so he could tell us how the places related to my family. Our guides showed us various sites in Adelsheim, including a lovely museum with information on the history of the area for several hundreds of years. This museum was usually opened once a week, but they opened it especially for us to see the exhibits. Along with all the sightseeing, we had long conversations with the deputy mayor's wife. In her family, as in mine, the subject of the war years and the Holocaust were not discussed. She also felt very strongly that the children needed to learn about this era in their studies. I was a little surprised by the strength of her conviction on this subject since I had no other contact with modern Germans.


We all drove to the Jewish cemetery, which was tucked away from the road between Adelsheim and Sennfeld. No wonder we couldn't find it by ourselves! Inside the cemetery, which was kept in good repair, we found tombstones of many family members—some I had heard of and some I had not. Unfortunately, the writing was in Hebrew so I had difficulty reading it. Even the cemetery was different from the cemeteries I know. Each family had a symbol on its headstones that provided a common thread connecting the families.

From there we went to visit the building that had at one time been the synagogue in Sennfeld. Now it housed artifacts to show life at earlier times. Some of these artifacts showed evidence of the life of the Jews who had been forced to leave the area. Our guides also took us to Korb to see the house where my parents and oldest sister had originally lived. How strange that this German, Mr. Wetterhahn, who had lived through the Nazi era, was the person who was helping me to connect to the life of my parents who were deported and murdered by the Nazis. I couldn't help wondering what his relationship had been with my family in those terrible times.

Our visit to Adelsheim was over. I had seen the places my sisters spoke about; I had seen the graves of my ancestors, but I had no real contact with the people of this place other than our guides. I wondered what they remembered and felt about the events of the past.

Since only Mr. Wetterhahn had actually been in Adelsheim during the Nazi period, he was the one who could have given me real information about my parents' life prior to their deportation. But we couldn't really communicate! It is difficult to do so through a translator: he through the deputy mayor's wife and I through the carefully told tales of my sisters.

While I had seen the physical evidence of my parents' life in Adelsheim, I still really knew nothing about them as people or their struggles to survive during the Nazi regime. I came away knowing that my parents were really never going to be part of my memories. Yet I felt a deep appreciation of the fact that they had been strong enough to part with their five children in order for us to live. I wonder if I could have done the same.

When we left I was glad that I had come to Adelsheim. I still felt no great connection to this place and was very happy to be going to Norwich, England, to my foster home where our family would be meeting us. 

THE CEMETERY


Esther Rosenfeld Starobin

Tombstones in a row
Circles connect the family
I wish I knew them

The strangeness of it
Centuries of family
All are forgotten

Beautiful, peaceful
Untouched by dreadful events
Torn apart from me

The chain broken
A generation murdered
Stories left untold

Start the chain again
Search our memories
To tell each other. 

October 18, 2001

Esther Rosenfeld Starobin

I suppose our home in Adelsheim, Germany, was typical of the homes found in that small town. My parents used part of the house, and the remainder was rented to two ladies. Though I have no memory of it, I have heard my sisters talk of the small parlor that was off-limits to them. My oldest sister, Bertl, mentioned the very fancy doll that was kept there for show. It was not a toy to be played with by the girls. On the very detailed list of articles found in our home that the Germans compiled after our parents were deported in October 1940 there is listed "a doll." Could this be the doll my sister remembers as being so fancy that she was not allowed to play with it?

Our family was permanently separated in 1939 when my three sisters were sent to England on the Kindertransport. They had been living in Aachen with two aunts after Jewish children were forbidden to go to the regular schools. In March 1939 they left for England without the opportunity to say goodbye to their mother and father. Our Aunt Hannah, my mother's sister who lived in England, had found separate homes for them to go to upon their arrival in England. Later that year, in June, I too was sent on a Kindertransport to England. I went to live with the Harrisons in Thorpe. This placement had been arranged through the Quakers, who had worked with the Jewish community to bring the children out of Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia. The Harrisons were a devout Christian family who had hoped for a little boy to be a playmate for their only son, Alan. However, when that didn't work out they agreed to take me.

Soon after I arrived in Thorpe I came down with scarlet fever and had to be kept in quarantine as was the custom at that time. Alan was not allowed in the room where I was but played with me through the window. Once I had recuperated I became a devoted follower of Alan, who was nine at the time. I have been told he quickly accepted me into his life and allowed me to go places with him. While I immediately

accepted Alan, it took me longer to get used to Uncle Harry (Mr. Harrison). I was somewhat uneasy around him. It wasn't clear what previous experiences I had had that led to this behavior.

While Alan was in school, Auntie Dot and I would often go into Norwich to shop and visit. In order to get to the bus stop we had to walk across an empty field. One day we met a woman while we were walking across this field to catch the bus into Norwich. In her hands she held a beautiful china doll. Auntie Dot spoke to her telling her that I had been sent by my parents to England to be safe from the Nazis. Without hesitation this woman handed me the doll.


What a wonderful gift! The doll's eyes opened and closed as I moved her up and down; the painted features made her look so real. The doll, which I immediately named Betsy, had fingers and toes. I found it hard to believe someone just gave this wonderful toy to me. When we arrived home Auntie Dot gave me some leftover baby clothes and I began knitting items to supplement them. Betsy became the joy of my life! Unlike the doll in Germany, this doll was played with.

In 1947 when I hastily left Norwich to meet my sister for the journey to America, Betsy was left behind. I suppose she really would not have fitted into life in America. Also at ten, I was getting a little too old for dolls. Actually, once we were settled into my uncle's house on North Capitol Street in Washington, D.C., someone did buy me a doll. The only thing I remember about that doll was her name, Monica.

Once settled in Washington, my sisters and I lived with an aunt and uncle for a couple of years. After my sister Edith joined us in the United States, we moved to an apartment of our own. Bertl and Edith worked and made enough money to support us. Ruth was in college and worked to obtain room and board. By this time I was finishing junior high and entering high school. I had made one very good friend, Grace, in the first junior high I attended. We were more interested in clothes, boys, and grades than in discussing our families. I don't think I ever really explained to Grace why I lived with my sisters, and she never asked. It was just the way it was. After high school, I was fortunate enough to be able to attend college and become a teacher. I married and had two daughters in the following years.

Of course, Auntie Dot, my foster mother, kept the doll, as she did so many mementos of our time together. When Alan, my foster brother, came over 16 years later as a Fulbright exchange teacher, he brought Betsy with him. I was delighted to have her again but kept her well hidden from the curious fingers of our young daughters.

Years passed, and I occasionally unwrapped Betsy to admire her beauty and remember the kindness of that English woman so many years ago. Eventually, the girls were gone from the house, and I had money to use for frivolous items. My friend Harriet and I went to visit the doll hospital in Ellicott City, Maryland. By now Betsy's eyes had fallen back into her head and some of her fingers and toes were less than perfect. The doll hospital owner with ridiculous solicitousness asked if she might undress Betsy. She did so and began to tell me about her origins. Like me, Betsy came from Germany and was somewhat destroyed. However, the owner said she could be mended. So I left Betsy to be fixed and redressed.

When I picked her up, the doll looked new. She was splendid in her fresh outfit. Only when you looked carefully could you see the scars from the previous years. 

C R E D I T S

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