

E C H O E S

of memory

VOLUME
2

UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM

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STORIES FROM THE MEMORY PROJECT

UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM

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Helena Rubinstein Foundation.**



C O N T E N T S

Echoes of Memory

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LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

Sara J. Bloomfield

Upon entering the Museum, more than 20 million visitors have read Isaiah's challenge engraved on the wall—"You are my witnesses." Through the stories of survivors, and those who helped save and rescue them, our visitors confront humanity and the great questions about what it means to be human in all of its possibilities—from brutality to kindness, from evil to goodness. Millions leave enriched—often transformed—by this legacy.

Survivors symbolize the importance of bearing witness. Their enthusiastic support and involvement have helped make this institution an extraordinary success. But the 60 survivors who volunteer here have made a truly unique contribution. Again and again, visitors tell us that the most meaningful part of their Museum experience was meeting a survivor. Over the years, our survivor volunteers have touched and inspired thousands with their personal accounts of suffering and loss, of hope and renewal. In addition, they give selflessly of their time and expertise, working closely with staff in every part of the institution.

As the Holocaust recedes in time, collecting and preserving survivors' memories—in the form of artifacts, documents, and oral and written testimony—is an institutional priority. As part of this initiative, the Museum's survivor volunteers have been writing for over three years now, recounting life before, during, and after the war.

Our first *Memory Project* publication was a great success, and now it gives me great pleasure to introduce *Echoes of Memory*, Volume 2. In these pages, readers will find tributes to mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, extended family and neighborhood friends.

LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

As Elie Wiesel said at the Museum's Tribute to Holocaust Survivors last fall, "Anyone who listens to a witness becomes a witness." Thanks to survivors, who bear witness so eloquently, we are ensuring there will be "witnesses" to the Holocaust for generations to come. It is our privilege to secure this legacy of the past to help shape a better future.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sara J. Bloomfield". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Sara J. Bloomfield

Director

August 22, 2004

FOREWORD

Elizabeth Anthony

I write this foreword with difficulty. I feel the urge to write that I am “thrilled” we are publishing the second volume of *Echoes of Memory*. I want to say that I am “excited,” “delighted” on this occasion. And I am. But how does one use a word like thrilled to refer to the memories of Holocaust survivors? How can one be excited about memoirs describing mass murder and its consequences? And on a personal level, I find it particularly difficult to write about the memories of the survivors whose writings are included in this volume, since they are my dear friends. How can I express the language of joy when referring to stories about the destruction of my friends’ families?

For the participants of the *Memory Project* workshop, writing is difficult work. It demands grappling with painful memories and wrestling with the unspeakable. These writers work tirelessly to find a way to convey the story of their lives during the Holocaust. Often the exact words must seem out of reach. These dedicated writers keep trying, though, and with much success. How does one find words to describe the emotions associated with not remembering one’s parents? How to convey all they witnessed and experienced in places unimaginable to most readers? How does one share the fears of a small child, hiding from murderers? They have found ways to express these things.

Through the writers of the *Memory Project* and this constant dilemma of language, I more fully understand the words of Primo Levi:

Just as our hunger is not that feeling of missing a meal, so our way of being cold has need of a new word. We say “hunger,” we say tiredness, fear, pain, we say winter and they are different things. They are free words, created and used by free men who lived in comfort and suffering in their homes. If the Lagers had lasted longer, a new, harsh language would have been born.

— Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 1986

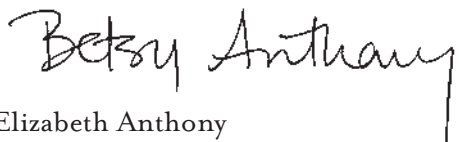
FOREWORD

The Holocaust defies any language we currently use to describe it. I am experiencing a bit of this dilemma while writing this essay. I am overjoyed to be bringing these pieces to the families and friends of our survivor writers, not to mention to my family and friends. I am thrilled to offer this testament to the world. I do experience these feelings, but obviously there is a prevailing pain and sadness. The words to describe the power and meaning of this offering escape me. There is nothing appropriate to describe the mix of emotion and pain, attraction and intrigue, sadness and awe that a reader feels when reading memoirs of Holocaust survivors. There is no single word to describe being both euphoric and sickened to see these words in print.

Perhaps to say that it is an honor to participate in this perpetuation of memory is more appropriate. To feel pride and admiration that the writers have found remarkable ways to share their painful and emotional memories might be more accurate. But yet, there is a joyous aspect in sharing these memories with a friend, with a family member, and with the larger public.

There is a therapeutic effect on these writers, a group of friends all going through the process of preparing these important stories for the world. This collection of their writings is a testament to all they have accomplished together and to their determination to find a way to share what happened to them and to their families. It is a memorial to their struggles. It is also an expression of their bravery in attempting to convey these struggles to the wider world.

Honoring them with an appropriate foreword gives me a small taste of the difficulty they must face in finding words to express feelings about this history. I do hope it somehow highlights the respect and awe I have for them in contributing annually to *Echoes of Memory* and to working tirelessly each month toward that goal.



Elizabeth Anthony

Memory Project Coordinator

INTRODUCTION

Margaret Peterson

There is nothing more triumphant than telling a story, and there is no more fitting way to memorialize the dead than speaking of them in tones that are clear and unafraid. There is nothing that counters hatred more than the brave telling of the tragedy of the Holocaust. I learned all of these things on Thursdays in a conference room at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, surrounded by Holocaust survivors, writers who are my friends. I am taught the meaning of surviving when I sit in that room with these people who quite literally “lived to tell about it.” It makes me proud to be a human being among these brave people who taught me that to speak is an act of protest.

For more than three years now, I have come to the Museum to work with survivors who long to tell the truth of their lives. They hope to learn how to write their stories more effectively. They seek feedback from me and from their fellow writers to polish the specific truths they have decided to tell. They ask for criticism. They write about the atrocities of hatred and ignorance, and then they attempt to improve upon the methods they have used to tell this truth. They are not simply leaving a record of what occurred during the Holocaust—they are proclaiming the terrible specificity of it.

The value of having these first-person accounts in print is their undeniable personal quality. The stories here take the sometimes incomprehensible scale of the Holocaust and make it more real, more individual, and that much more terrifying. These accounts do what history is less able to do. They bring us the names and faces, the details of the lives of the people who were so brutally victimized. That is the necessary work of the *Echoes of Memory* books.

INTRODUCTION

Originally, I conceived of the survivors writing as a way to heal the wounds of the past. I now see that this writing does exactly the opposite. The pieces created in the *Memory Project* are a sharp stick in the eye of those who might turn away or allow history to mellow the events of the Holocaust. That is what makes this work daunting for the survivors who each month work harder to paint a clearer picture of the most terrible events of their lives. It has been the highest privilege of my life to witness this work and to be of service to the people who do it.



Margaret Peterson

Memory Project Instructor

ERIKA'S STORY

Erika Eckstut

ERIKA ECKSTUT, FROM ZNOJMO, CZECHOSLOVAKIA, SURVIVED THE WAR POSING AS A CHRISTIAN WITH FALSE IDENTIFICATION PAPERS.



I remember the time we left Russia and we fled to Poland. We had to leave Kiev in a hurry in 1944. My friend Monika told me that the NKVD secret police were coming to get my sister and the lady we were with, Mrs. Dirnfeld. Monika didn't know that Beatrice was my sister. I never talked about my sister and who she was, or the lady, Mrs. Dirnfeld.

So it was that we left through the forest, Katarinovka. In the forest, we came upon a group of Czech soldiers, one of whom happened to be Mrs. Dirnfeld's son. They tried to take us along but were told it is against the rules to take civilians along. After a while Mrs. Dirnfeld's son returned and said that two of his friends would take the girls, and he would take care of his mother. He planned with his mother where she should go and told her that he would come and pick her up later. Everything went according to the plan and we met up again in Poland with Mrs. Dirnfeld.

When we arrived in Poland, we went to a house and Mrs. Dirnfeld told the lady of the house that she was the wife of an officer and that my sister and I were her daughters. She said that her husband would come to pick us up later. The lady brought us to a room upstairs where we could wait. When we arrived there, it was January 1945. It was very cold, so none of us took our jackets off. All of a sudden, my sister came in and said we have to go out through the window. Mrs. Dirnfeld started to protest and my sister did not listen, she just ran to the window, pushed it open, and told me to just throw Mrs. Dirnfeld out! Mrs. Dirnfeld had been trying to say that she could no longer run and that she would stay with these people. My sister said that she heard the lady say that she has three Jews and if you want to, come and get them. So I asked Mrs. Dirnfeld if she would go out the window and she said no. Then I showed her my fist and asked her if she wanted it in her mouth. She said no, so I pushed her to the window and then



ROBERT KAUDER AND ERIKA NEUMAN KAUDER
(ECKSTUT) ON THE STREETS OF PRAGUE, 1945.

ERIKA NEUMAN KAUDER ECKSTUT

shoved her out. Outside, my sister was already waiting, and with her hands extended, she broke Mrs. Dirnfeld's fall and she was okay. I looked out, but there were no hands held out for me, so I jumped and we all ran.


We found military trucks when we came to Snina, a place in Slovakia. There, we found a whole brigade of Czechs. They were happy to see us. They could see we were hungry so they gave us food and we ate and ate, until there was none left. At that point we were all three very sick. Then it became a problem of what they should do with us. Mrs. Dirnfeld was able to join the army and my sister was ready to join too, but I needed to be 21 and I was only going to turn 16 in June. That was not enough. They thought we should get married. One of the officers came to see us and he looked at my sister and saw how beautiful she was. He said he would marry her and take me along too. My sister did not agree. She said she did not even know him or love him and she did not know how to cook. She did not want to get married. The officer left and when he went to his friend, his friend asked him how the girls were. He said the older one is beautiful and he would like to marry her, but the younger one, me, was not worth a mention. The army left and again we were alone. We were staying in the home of a peasant.

That first night, someone trying to hurt us threw a rock through the window where we were staying. During that night, 16 other Jews were killed. When we woke up, we knew we needed to change our location, so my sister gave the man a four-leaf-clover charm as payment. She used to have the charm on a chain but had already given it away. At this point, she had been holding the charm in her mouth. I also had a charm that I was hiding in my mouth but my sister did not need it for the payment. I was actually able to hold on to mine and now my daughter wears it.

The peasant took us to Humene, where the army was. He left us with a young lady who he said she would help us. She came out with a little baby in her arms. She told us that she had to go to the village to do something for her mother and she needed to have the baby fed and the floor needed to be washed

because the soldiers had slept there the night before. So she left and my sister told me to take care of the baby and she would clean the floor. There were noodles to feed the baby, but I didn't know what to do with them, so I asked my sister. She said to just put them in water and boil them, so I did. I did not know how to get the water hot first. I just put it all in a pot and cooked it. After a while, I looked into the pot and what was there was a big lump, all stuck together. I couldn't feed it to the baby like that, so I took it in bites, chewed it up to make it soft, then put it in the baby's mouth. The baby was very good and did not mind at all. She ate whatever I put in her mouth.

All of a sudden, I heard guns and yelling "You German Nazis!" So I opened the door with the baby in my arms, went in front of my sister, and told her to disappear. The soldiers started yelling "Where is she?" and I told them that she was not away, that she is here but she is not a Nazi but a Jewish girl who is married to a Czech officer. Then I started to make up a story that she was crazy and he did not know it. When I let her wash the floor she did not know who was who and they were yelling we are brothers. I said I know that, but she does not.

At that moment, a Czech soldier came in and I could not understand what he was doing there. I started to tell him that the Russian officers thought my sister was a spy. He took over and made such a tragic story of it that I started to cry and the Russian officers had to leave. They told me not to worry, that they would come back and marry me. When they left, the Czech soldier told me that there were 16 Jewish people there and they were all killed the night before and they were worried that we were there too. So they sent out soldiers and they went to the farmer we stayed with. They asked him what happened to us and he told them that he brought us to the house with the baby during the night. My sister wanted to know where the officer was who wanted to marry her. The soldiers told her that he was fighting somewhere. This was January 1945. My sister found him some weeks later and on March 31, 1945, she married him. And that was very good for us. He took me along with them. 

A MARKER FOR UNCLE PAUL*

Frank Ephraim

FRANK EPHRAIM WAS BORN IN BERLIN, GERMANY, AND EMIGRATED WITH HIS PARENTS IN FEBRUARY 1939 TO THE PHILIPPINE ISLANDS WHERE HE LIVED UNDER JAPANESE OCCUPATION AND LATER IN A REFUGEE CAMP.



I saw before me at my feet a patch of disheveled plants whose long and narrow green leaves drooped as if beaten down by wind and age. Vines of wild ivy had twisted themselves into knots among the plants and dozens of thin, wheat-colored stems, probably lazy and dried verdure, had risen through breathing holes in the ground thatch.

“Ja, the tomb,” Herr Forster said in his quite fluent, but literal German. “One more measurement to be sure, all right?” The question was superfluous. Of course it was all right. The man, wearing a surplus green German Army fatigue shirt—the German flag still sewn on the left sleeve—had been pacing off distances for the past half hour. Once in a while he carefully studied the map in his hand. The paper was fragile, obviously quite old and yellowed, with brown edges and a few tears that had been taped. I wondered why the cemetery administration had not bothered to enclose it in plastic. But, well, that was not my business, certainly not at this moment.

I lifted my eyes and took in the surroundings. There, ten yards away was a gravestone apparently only recently set. The name, in large gold-leaf letters, and a date of death: March 28, 1942. It would be my orientation marker. The staggered rows of gravestones to my right had been worn almost bare by the elements over all the intervening years, the names no longer legible. No, their descendants probably had not survived the Holocaust to care for these final resting places.

Herr Forster was standing beside me once more. “So, now I am quite sure this is the tomb.” Strange how he had not learned the word “grave.” It did not really matter because I had finally found Uncle Paul.

—w—

*Work of fiction

Paul Rossinger lived in the Weissensee district of Berlin. Before the Nazis came to power, the area bustled with activity as its largely working-class residents went about their daily business. The shops and open markets catered to the needs of the people and the lovely lake, the Weissensee, with its swans and adjacent park served as a place for rest and recreation. Uncle Paul, as the whole family called him, lived in four rooms of a small apartment house not far from the largest Jewish cemetery in Berlin. A bachelor, he employed a housekeeper and carried out his chosen vocation of leather-goods dealer. He loved to play cards and weekend evenings saw him with his friends in the neighborhood having a good time accompanied by food and beer. He was not a wealthy man, but tended to be generous when it came to his nephews and nieces at whose homes he was always welcomed. He told wonderful stories.

Uncle Paul had been in the Great War and would reminisce with his four brothers and the husbands of his three sisters, all of whom had served the Kaiser—with honor. The Iron Crosses and other decorations were sometimes shown to the younger generation. In fact, Uncle Paul had been an officer in a cavalry regiment fighting in France and he was slightly wounded during the battle of Verdun. He did not willingly talk about it, but once in a while he came out with a few vignettes like the one about hunting for boar during a time when rations were short and the troops hungered for fresh meat. He would describe how the troops had to soak the boar's carcass in a vat of vinegar to tenderize it—and how, even after days of immersion, it was still too tough to eat.

After the Nazis came to power, the family did not socialize as much as they had done before. Uncle Paul lived in the eastern part of Berlin and the rest mostly in the western districts. Fear of arrest kept everybody on edge and those with young children hoped to emigrate or escape. Whenever a family member went to see Uncle Paul and asked what he would do, his answer was always the same. "I'm an old man now. No children, no one depending on me. And what can they do to me anyway?"



VIEW OF THE DESECRATED JEWISH CEMETERY IN FRANKFURT-AM-MAIN, 1946–48.

USHMM, COURTESY OF HERBERT FRIEDMAN

Compared to their own situations—children, parents, and other close relatives—Uncle Paul seemed so at peace with himself in the ever deteriorating situation. The younger relatives were also preoccupied. They had parents whose age was an additional barrier to immigration into those few countries willing to accept Jews threatened by the Nazis. And then the turmoil of the Holocaust threw the families asunder—some were able to flee; most perished. The surviving family members tried to find out what happened to their immediate relatives—the parents, brothers, and sisters left behind. The news was almost universally bad.

And what happened to Uncle Paul? East Berlin was occupied by the Russian Army. Would he turn up one day with a grin on his face and a story to tell? The surviving family dearly hoped so, but deep inside they knew the odds were stacked against jolly Uncle Paul.

Many years passed, the few that had survived reached their retirement years, and now all of a sudden the need to put closure on the past seemed to take on a new importance. They knew what had happened to their immediate relatives. The lists of transports to Theresienstadt, Riga, Auschwitz, and Dachau had become available. But the name of Paul Rossinger was never among them. What had happened to him? The remaining few, and aging, relatives wanted now desperately to know.

That is how the search for Uncle Paul became my, for want of a better word, “assignment.” I was in the process of exploring the return of family property in East Berlin after the Wall had come down. On a trip to Prague, I stopped off in Berlin to discuss matters with a lawyer the family had retained and to look at the property which according to the records had survived the war. It was duly listed as having been managed by the Berlin housing authority under the East German Communist regime. The “property” was the apartment house where Uncle Paul had lived.

The three-story building must have survived the bombing in World War II or been repaired because, while somewhat dilapidated, it was in good enough shape for people to live in. I did not know which

apartment had been Uncle Paul's and neither did the concierge, as most tenants were immigrants from Turkey. Nobody had heard of Paul Rossinger. I was disappointed.

The Weissensee cemetery was only a few blocks away and I wanted to visit my paternal grandfather's grave, not certain if I could find it. An inquiry at the administration office brought forth an old card catalog and the clerk pulled a record out and showed it to me. Hand-lettered in black ink was the full record of my grandfather's burial plot and the clerk directed me to the site.

The cemetery was almost fully restored, a forested park with large and small monuments which was maintained by gardeners who could be seen pushing wheelbarrows of turf and plants. I found my grandfather's grave with a small headstone that must have been put there by my uncle and grandmother, both of whom later perished in the Łódź ghetto.



In 1993 I became a volunteer at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and one day chanced upon a set of memorial books in the library. They listed German Jews who had perished, and I found the names of my relatives, whose final destinies the family had long known. Then on an impulse I turned the pages to the names beginning with *R*.

I could hardly believe it as the name, Rossinger, Paul, appeared on one of the lines. Was it Uncle Paul or someone else with the same name? I copied everything down and checked the date of birth. Yes, it was Uncle Paul. There was no place of death, only the German word for "suicide," and a date—January 14, 1942. Where would he have committed suicide, I wondered, or was that only a cover for his murder?

The next day, on a hunch, I telephoned the Weissensee cemetery. The clerk there asked that I hold the phone for a moment. He soon came back and read from the file card. Yes, Uncle Paul was buried at Weissensee. A fax of the card would be on its way in a few minutes.

Once I had that information I telephoned the Weissensee district registry office and they too had a record of his death and the arrangements that followed. They would send copies.

Uncle Paul had indeed committed suicide—by hanging—to avoid being taken alive to a concentration camp. One of his sisters and her husband had made burial arrangements, but by the time a gravestone could be set, the couple had been deported to Theresienstadt. Both perished.



“So, ja, maybe I leave you here at the tomb, alone for a while...,” Herr Forster said in a voice that tried to convey sympathy but that did not quite make it. “We can talk about the stone later, OK?”

I just nodded, still staring down at the tumble of wild vegetation near my feet. I had finally found Uncle Paul.

I silently pledged that a gravestone would stand here in this quiet forested Jewish cemetery to honor this man who in his own way had sacrificed his life in an act of resistance. He would remain on German soil forever, for all the world to see that he had stood his ground against the Nazi onslaught.

In the year 2001, a gravestone for Uncle Paul was set in Weissensee Cemetery. 

NOW YOU LIVE IN PARIS*

Frank Ephraim

Now you live in Paris. Yes, the city of light and romance. The broad avenues, the gentle river Seine, the bookstalls, the little bistros on the Left Bank, the Louvre, and the hordes of tourists.

You can walk the boulevards and the old narrow streets with their smells—garlic, flowers, and fresh bread. Gone now are the foul odors of the sidewalk urinals. Even the pervasive aroma of Gauloises, the ubiquitous French cigarettes, has subsided since the 1950s.

Your thoughts, however, are far from all these things. You have walked from your two rooms in Clichy, along streets with names not known by tourists. Another two kilometers on these old feet. Down to a shuffle now, and who knows how much longer you will be able to do even that. There is no choice but to walk. You've got to eat—and pay the rent.

There it is, finally, the Gare du Nord. The blackened gray stone of the railroad station is somber at this early hour. You mingle with the hurried masses as they enter the bustling station—up from the Metro, from buses and taxis. Each has his or her own thoughts, eyes fixed on a destination.

You carry the small black suitcase, packed as always by Marta. Marta is your wife. A white shirt, cuffs and collar beginning to fray, black socks, a handkerchief, and the toiletries. And in your small satchel, smoked whitefish fillets thinly sliced, and white bread. Enough for the train ride to Antwerp. There will be nothing for the return the next evening, Friday, the Sabbath, until you get home again.

The train. Yes, still on the same track all these years. Such routine, such regularity, as you begin the weekly journey. Well, not to Antwerp each time, of course. You would have long exhausted your chances. No, you have varied your appearances. Once a month to Amsterdam, Brussels, and a visit to other cities from time to time.

*Work of fiction

Perhaps you will be lucky. Sometimes the French housewives on a trip to visit relatives can be engaged in conversation. They tend to be shy, but an old man speaking French with a heavy Polish accent? Well, he cannot be threatening. You try to fill the time and they giggle merrily as your arm reaches around their shoulders.

You will disengage, swing back to your seat by the window and reach for your satchel from the rack above. The bread and the fish, all wrapped in wax paper, will come out. A necessary repast and then back to the women.

Antwerp. A young man will help with your suitcase. The women will laugh and wave. Careful, the railway coach's steps will be slippery as you descend onto the platform.

The hat. Black with a raised crown. You will wear it square and slightly tipped back. You will have to fit in. But first a stop at the synagogue—a stranger in town will need a place to sleep. Someone will help and the family home for the night will surely provide a meal. Tomorrow is Friday, and generosity before the Sabbath is a tradition.

By now you know the streets very well in the religious section of Antwerp. Almost as well as you once knew the distant streets of Warsaw. It is no use to think of that anymore. Yet you have never forgotten the horrors, even if the images are blurred now. Oh, but your pride! It suffered almost complete annihilation just like everything else there. But you had determination after you survived it. You thought that there would be a kind of life, when you returned to the old country. You were wrong. The Poles hated you and you were too old, with no useful skill, so you had to eke out an existence somewhere else.

In Paris you became more brazen. You call it enterprising. And tomorrow morning you will approach each bearded man on the street asking for help—to buy a meal, to buy a pair of shoes, and to buy a train ticket home. Because now, you live in Paris. ✨

IMAGES ETCHED INTO MY MIND

Manya Friedman

MANYA FRIEDMAN, FROM CHMIELNIK, POLAND, SURVIVED THE GOGOLIN TRANSIT CAMP, RAVENSBRÜCK CONCENTRATION CAMP, AND A DEATH MARCH.



He was only nine years old when Germany invaded Poland. The youngest of three children, my brother was a skinny little boy on spindly legs with an agile body and a small, pale face. The only outstanding features were his two large brown eyes, mischievous and alert. Since Jewish children no longer were allowed to attend school, he became restless and was constantly on the move. He often kicked around a ball or pebbles in the backyard or rode the bike he had to share with his older brother and me. It was amusing to watch him navigate with that bike. Too short to sit on the seat and reach the pedals, he would stand up and shift his hind end from side to side, the bike leaning in one direction and he in the other to maintain balance.

Before the war, a tall building was being erected next to us, but the construction was interrupted when the war started. He used to roam around in that unfinished building looking for a place where we could hide and often seriously discussed the possibilities with father, convinced that we could make a hiding place there. Of course, he did not take into consideration the necessities we would need to survive.

He was also outgoing and streetwise, had the last word in any dispute, and was in complete contrast to the rest of us. His mind was always working on how “to organize” something (an expression used during the war). Somehow, he always knew where a line was forming to distribute something edible. By the time we got in line he was already a mile ahead of us with his inseparable school satchel, either by himself or attached to someone, pretending to be their child. We often came home empty-handed because they ran out of provisions, but he usually managed to bring “something” home. He took his job very seriously, which often caused our parents much anguish. Sometimes he sneaked out of the house while the curfew was still on, and our parents spent many anxious hours looking for him. But among our parents’ friends, he became a celebrity, a hero. They admired and praised him.

This made his brother two years older somewhat jealous. There was such a contrast between the two of them, both in looks and personality. The older brother was blond, blue-eyed, with a light complexion and angelic face. He looked like a well-fed, protected child. Some said he had an aristocratic look. He was quiet, serious, and reserved. When into mischief, he did not need to defend himself; grandmother acted as his advocate. He was her favorite, probably because he was named after her husband, who died very young. By then he was 12 years old, already employed by a German company. His employment ID card (*Sonderkarte*) had great value, not only for himself but also for the entire family. The more employed members in the family, the better chance of not being deported, at least for the time being. Those cards were called “a way to life.” But the older brother still wanted to prove that he too could contribute.

Beside the miserly few things allotted on the ration cards, Jews were not allowed to have any other staples in the house. But the allotment was very meager, hardly enough to survive on. So whoever could, at great risk, bought things on the side (on the black market). Some unscrupulous Poles took advantage of the situation and cheated the Jews.

One day my older brother, on his way home from work, was approached by a young Pole with an offer to sell him some margarine for a price. He came home very excited and told mother about the prospect of getting some margarine. Mother gave him the money and the next day he brought home a package wrapped in a piece of cloth, which he excitedly produced from under his coat. The margarine in those days came in cubes about three inches across. When mother unwrapped the package, there was only a thin, outside layer of margarine; the rest was a nicely sculptured turnip square. We all felt sorry for him. No one said a word because this was a common occurrence. One exchanged money for “merchandise” in some dark alley or hallway, at great risk, making sure that there was nobody around, and ran.





MANYA MOSZKOWICZ (FRIEDMAN), AT LOWER RIGHT, AND HER YOUNGER BROTHER POSE WITH THEIR PARENTS, IN THE 1930s, BEFORE THE WAR.

MANYA FRIEDMAN

In 1943, the SS men surrounded the shop where I was working making uniforms for the German Army, and we were all taken for deportation to Germany. My parents and my two brothers were still at home. They all came to the deportation point and brought me a suitcase with my personal belongings. We could not communicate much, we were on the second floor and everybody was trying to talk—too much commotion. They stayed until it was time to leave. As I was watching them, I could see them age right in front of my eyes. Each one of us probably had the same thought: would we ever see each other again?

That was the last time I saw either of them.

Their images are etched into my mind. ✨

MEMORIES OF A REMARKABLE WOMAN

Manya Friedman

That quaint small town in central Poland, my hometown, Chmielnik, once teemed with Jewish life. There were houses of worship, including the “big synagogue,” and houses of learning. The orthodox young men studied the Torah; others, after attending public school in the morning, attended Hebrew schools. Most belonged to Zionist and socialist organizations. There were sport clubs and cultural clubs (intelligentsia), every one actively dedicated to its cause. Jewish youth dreamed of going to the land of Israel and of a better future.

Being a small town, everybody knew everybody and what took place in everyone’s household. There were no secrets, and there was plenty of gossip and jealousy. There were rich and poor families—Jewish professionals, craftsmen, and businessmen. And there were even beggars. There was romance and betrayal, squabbles and reconciliation, even among the two presiding rabbis in town. It all added to the charm and character of that small town.

In this small town I spent my happy childhood among a loving family, relatives, and friends. Here I got my first kiss, a peck on the cheek by a boy who ran away like a thief who had stolen something.

All this is no longer. Hitler’s aim to exterminate all European Jews reached even this small town. Now, only memories are left.

After viewing a recent videotape of the town, brought back by relatives who visited Poland, my heart grieves. The town is void of any Jewish existence. The worship houses are destroyed, the “big synagogue” unrecognizable, standing in disrepair, with gaping holes where windows used to be. There is horse manure in front of the entrance, and the place is used for grain storage. And a short distance away, the Jewish cemetery is gone as well.

A place once considered sacred, an eternal resting place for our dear ones, the ones that were “fortunate” to die in peace, in their own beds, and be buried in marked graves, attended by family and friends, is now a soccer field. I watched with disbelief a group of young boys kicking around a ball where the Jewish cemetery once was, completely oblivious that they were trampling over human bodies. The sight of that bare cemetery stirred memories from way back of a woman, my grandmother, who was put to rest there a long time ago.

When father brought grandmother home from the hospital in Kraków, the best hospital in the country at the time, and announced that the operation was unsuccessful, everyone in the family was devastated. Over 70 years ago a simple cataract operation was very risky, and she had become blind.


My parents worried what would become of her now after she had had such an active life in business through her adulthood. Her husband had died very young and left her with several small children and no means of support. She was too proud to be on welfare, so she had contacted some local farmers to deliver milk every morning and she sold it to neighbors. From the leftover milk she also made cheese and butter and in this way had supported her family.

The grandchildren were concerned how their friends would react, since grandmother would now be living with them and she was blind. Their fears were pointless. At first their friends started to come in out of curiosity but later were drawn by grandmother’s inexhaustible supply of stories, many taken from the Bible, each ending with a moral. And the folds of her long, wide skirt seemed to hold a variety of pockets each containing hidden treasures. Like magic she could pull out some candies or other goodies, and when the need arose to mend a scraped knee or wipe a running nose, there were also clean pieces of white linen torn off of an old bedsheet and hidden in those pockets.

What most amazed the youngsters was the fact that grandmother could tell who was approaching or who had just gotten a haircut. Sometimes they hesitated to believe that grandmother could not see. By now the children were competing for a place to sit next to her or who would lend her a hand while crossing the street.

On Saturdays we used to walk her to the synagogue. She was very devout, and the path to the synagogue was very familiar to her. All we needed to do was help her cross the streets and when we reached the synagogue put her hand on the railing of the stairs leading up to the women's section. In those days, the text of the prayer books was only in Hebrew, not translated, nor did the leader tell what page to turn to, but as soon as grandmother heard the flipping of pages, she knew that some of the women had lost their places, so she would tell them what page to turn to. She knew the prayers by heart. That made us very proud of her.

This remarkable woman was my paternal grandmother. She died at a ripe old age before the war, the last in our family laid to rest in the Jewish cemetery in my hometown. While in the camps, I used to dream about her, that she brought me food. During the war whenever I thought of her, I was at ease that she died in her own bed with her family around her. She even blessed each one of us before she died. I still recall how she held my hands in hers and said how much good those little hands had done. She had a decent funeral and was buried in a marked grave.

Seeing that desecrated Jewish cemetery on tape, the uprooted headstones probably used to pave the streets and people trampling in their boots over them, is a painful reminder of Hitler and his Nazi party who not only executed millions of people but would not even let the deceased rest in peace. 

THEIR DESTINATION WAS AUSCHWITZ

Manya Friedman

In 1970, on one of my visits to Israel, I attended, with my Israeli cousins, a meeting of members from my hometown. As on previous occasions, I was warmly greeted, both as an old acquaintance and as a visitor from America expected to make a donation.

It was a pleasant get-together, though as at every gathering of Holocaust survivors, the camps and the names of the perished came up in conversation. I met some who had known my parents and some schoolmates, though no close friends. We were reminiscing about the “good old times” and I even received “a left-handed compliment”: “That is you, that beautiful girl, what happened to you?” One of the men recalled that the boys were too bashful to approach me because I was walking around with my nose in the air.

“Gee,” I thought, “was I really so inapproachable?”

While we were joking around and talking about our childhood in that small town where everybody knew everybody, which seemed like centuries ago, an elderly man approached. I recognized him at once; he had been a very good friend of my parents. Seeing him, the image of his beautiful wife and young adorable son flashed through my mind. They had not survived. He had remarried. We clung to each other for a long time while scenes from the past flew in front of my eyes. I recalled the many Saturday evenings when he and his family and many others of my parents’ friends had gathered in our home. The men played cards or chess, talked about business or politics. The women chit-chatted while sipping mother’s homemade cherry wine, accompanied by mother’s famous sponge cake.

After my parents’ friend and I finally separated from our embrace, he started telling his present wife about many “antics” from my childhood. Most of them silly, some embarrassing. He told her that they used to call me the *alte Kopf* (old head), because I always listened in on every conversation, pretending not

to be there, but then I would say something that gave me away. He also remembered when I had a big argument with my parents because they agreed for the young man who was employed by my father to take me ice-skating. I told them that I would die if my friends would see me with that old guy. He was maybe 17 or 18 years old, but I was only 12. There were many more similar stories which to the reader may seem silly, but I became very emotional.

Here was someone who knew that I once was a part of a family, to which I had once belonged.

Then he took me aside and asked me if I would like to meet someone who was with my family on the same transport when the Germans liquidated the ghetto in our city. I think I did not respond at once. I was either shocked with disbelief, or maybe afraid to hear the truth for fear that it might be worse than my own imagination. What could have been worse?

We agreed to meet the next day and travel to see the person he spoke of. We met early in the morning and boarded a bus to Beersheba, the town where this man resided. He and his wife greeted us kindly. I could not recall if I had ever met him before. We spent some time just exchanging frivolities while I was anxious to hear about my family. He was telling us about life in the ghetto the last few months that he was there. He told how the people built bunkers under each house. He told how one day, while most parents were at work outside the ghetto, the Gestapo raided the ghetto and took all the children and whoever was around for deportation. He told of the despair of the parents when they returned home. And finally he told about the transport he and my family were on. He had worked with my father, therefore he knew the family.

When they arrived at Auschwitz, the segregation began. Father and my older brother were sent to one line, while mother and my younger brother were sent to the other line. Apparently father did not want to be separated from mother, so he and my brother crossed over to the line where mother was. It was easy to cross over to that line. That line was destined for the gas chamber.




THE PARENTS OF MANYA MOSZKOWICZ (FRIEDMAN), SOMETIME BEFORE THE WAR.

MANYA FRIEDMAN

At the moment I heard this I was very sad and very angry at my father and brother. My emotions were confused. Why? When they would have had a chance to survive? I was furious. Though it did not take long for me to come up with an answer.

My parents had married for love after several years of courtship, and I had always loved to hear the stories they used to tell about their endearment. As a young girl I thought it was so romantic, especially that they had come from different backgrounds, and the many obstacles they had had to overcome. I no longer had to ask “Why?”

They had married for love, and they had chosen never to be separated. 



FABRIK AKTION (FACTORY ACTION)

Fritz Gluckstein

FRITZ GLUCKSTEIN, FROM BERLIN, GERMANY, MANAGED DESPITE SEVERAL ARRESTS TO SURVIVE IN BERLIN THROUGHOUT THE WAR BECAUSE HIS MOTHER WAS NOT JEWISH.



On the morning of February 27, 1943, a Saturday, we wearily stood at our workbenches turning out parts for some air-force equipment, my high school classmate and close friend, Gert, working not far from me. Suddenly the door opened and an SS officer stepped into the room. “Pay attention,” he called out. “Drop whatever you are doing and leave by the main entrance.” We were stunned. “What’s going on?” we asked each other. We quickly grabbed our coats and rushed outside, where we assembled under the hostile gaze of some rifle-toting SS men.

The officer reappeared and said to one SS man, “Tell the driver to drive up.” Gert and I clearly remember this moment because he used the pretentious officialese term *Kraftfahrer*, literally meaning “power driver.” The canvas-covered military truck arrived, and we helped each other to scramble aboard. Two SS men took their places at the truck’s rear. The tailgate closed, and off we went. We remained quiet except for some women voicing their fear for their children. Since it was a Saturday, when work hours usually were shortened, many children were not in daycare but at home alone or in the care of friends or neighbors.

After a 20-minute ride into the center of Berlin, we arrived at the Clou, a huge nightclub, and were herded inside, joining others who had been brought there from their factory workplaces. The club, aside from some tables and chairs for registration purposes, had been cleared of all furnishings. It was remarkably quiet, no loud lamenting or complaining, just subdued, anguished conversation. After a while, registration began and at about eight o’clock in the evening—I do not recall whether by then we had had anything to eat—it was Gert’s and my turn. Plainclothes police officers, who were quite friendly, asked about our parents and personal history. A short time later, we were told that we could leave. “Good luck, and I don’t want to see you here again,” one officer said. Gert and I did not hesitate. Glad to be out in the pitch-dark street, we

decided to walk home. Actually, by being outside past eight o'clock, we were breaking the nightly curfew for Jews. Later we learned that had we been transported to another collection center rather than the nightclub, we would not have been released but would have been sent to the Rosenstrasse, a collection point for those who were *arisch versippt*—those who had Aryan relatives.

Arriving at home, I hoped to find my father, but he had been taken from a factory in East Berlin to a military barracks, a place far worse than the Clou. My mother was away on a visit to an aunt in Silesia, but another aunt had come to take care of my father and me. Next day, Sunday, I sent a telegram to my mother saying, "I believe it would be advantageous if you came home as soon as possible." On Monday, I was deliberating whether to go back to the factory, but before I could make up my mind, events overtook me. It was the beginning of the month; the ration cards had to be picked up, and I was the only one in the family who could do it. So I set out for the ration and distribution office but never got inside. Right in front of the building stood a moving van, and everyone wearing the yellow star, including me, was directed to get into it. Nearly filled, the van departed to the Levetzow Street Synagogue, where I had a bar mitzvah three years earlier. The synagogue had been converted into a collection center. All seats on the main floor had been removed; only those in the gallery remained. My stay at the synagogue was very short. Soon after arriving I was put into another moving van along with others who had non-Jewish relatives. We were driven to the Rosenstrasse collection center, located in an administration building that belonged to the Jewish Community.

In the Rosenstrasse, I was quartered with about 15 men in an office on an upper floor. The office had been cleared of furniture and was just large enough to permit all of us to lie down during the night. We spent the days speculating what would happen to us, and above all standing in line to use the toilet. The building, of course, did not have enough facilities to accommodate hundreds of people. About the food, I only remember that it was brought to the room at unusual hours and that we had a breakfast of turnips at five o'clock in the morning. On the seventh day, we were told that we would be released and



FRITZ GLUCKSTEIN'S RELEASE PAPERS FROM THE ROSENSTRASSE COLLECTION CENTER.

USHMM, COURTESY OF FRITZ GLUCKSTEIN

were instructed to go to the main floor where, to my surprise, I found my father. Together we lined up for release processing. After an hour or so, a typist from the Jewish Community took our personal data and prepared the release papers, including the release certificate. As a final step, the papers had to be presented to SS Sergeant Schneider. Schneider looked at my father's papers and while signing the release certificate sneered, "A judge you have been! Then you surely have ruined the lives of many people." My father just answered, "I hope not," and we walked out. As part of the release process, my father and I were instructed not to return to our factory jobs but to report the next day to the labor exchange. There we were assigned to work for a demolition company engaged in cleaning up after air raids.

While we were held at the Rosenstrasse, several hundred non-Jewish women demonstrated outside for the release of their husbands and children, defying the Gestapo and the SS. It was the only public challenge of authority that took place during the Third Reich. On the basis of his diary entries, it has been established that Joseph Goebbels, the Minister of Propaganda and Public Enlightenment, effected our release on the grounds that the matter of what to do with those in mixed marriages or of mixed blood could be dealt with better at a future date. He very likely did not want any public unrest just a month after the Stalingrad debacle. At the site of the Rosenstrasse building there now stands a moving memorial to the women who so bravely stood up for their loved ones. 🦋

THE FINAL DAYS

Fritz Gluckstein

In April 1945, the demolition crew to which my father and I belonged was working near an SS facility when a line of military trucks moved slowly down the street, pushed—we hardly could believe our eyes—by a group of SS men. It was an exhilarating sight, pure unalloyed *schadenfreude*. Surely, if even the SS no longer had gasoline, the demise of the Third Reich could not be far off. “Look at this,” a fellow worker said, “It’s getting on toward *Ne’ilah*,” referring to the final prayer service of the Day of Atonement.

Soon the sound of artillery fire could be heard, first in the eastern part of the city and then in all of Berlin. Public transportation ceased to function, keeping people from going to work, and artillery shells were hitting buildings or were exploding in the streets. But Joseph Goebbels, the Minister of Propaganda and Public Enlightenment, did not give up. He managed to distribute a tabloid-size sheet of greenish paper called the *Panzer Baer*—alluding to the bear in Berlin’s coat of arms—which proclaimed in large letters: “At the gates of Berlin the enemy will meet his doom, just as Napoleon at the gates of Moscow. Be assured the inferior Russian soldiers are no match for our heroic fighting force.”

My parents and I were living in the western part of Berlin, sharing an apartment with two intermarried couples. We slept fully dressed on blanket-covered beds. Whenever the shelling became too intense, we went down to the cellar, often four or five times during 24 hours. Once, we had to leave the house for several hours until an unexploded shell in the building next to ours could be defused. However, we were fortunate indeed, because there was no street fighting close to us.

There was, of course, no electricity, gas, or running water. Since Berlin still had a sizable number of horse-drawn vehicles, many hand-operated water pumps continued to function in the streets. To get water from these pumps was now a risky undertaking. One waited for a lull in the shelling and then ran full speed with a pair of buckets towards the pump, hoping that not too many people would already be



RED ARMY SOLDIERS STAND IN
THE ENTRANCE HALL OF THE
BOMBED-OUT REICHSTAG IN
BERLIN, JULY 1945.

USHMM, COURTESY OF NATIONAL ARCHIVES

there. At times, because of incoming shells, one had to hit the ground. When this happened on the way to the house, all or most of the hard-gotten water would be spilled, meaning a return trip to the pump. On one of my water forays, I observed a group of Asian soldiers in German uniforms moving along pressed against the housing fronts. They truly looked scared, not perhaps so much because of the shelling but because they realized their fate should the Russians get hold of them.

One day, a neighbor and I were hovering in the doorway ready to rush to the pump at the next break in the bombardment when a shell burst in the street. Once again, luck was with me; I remained unhurt, but my neighbor was next to me on the ground, fatally injured.

Food had become very scarce, but shopkeepers began to give away whatever they had left without asking for ration coupons or money. It all happened in an orderly fashion; I recall no one pushing ahead or trying to get more than anyone else.

We had no more bread, and so I cautiously made my way to a baker two blocks down the street. Of course, I had taken off my yellow star. No Jew was wearing the star anymore. When I returned with a small loaf, Russian soldiers from Marshal Koniev's army (as we later learned) had entered the house. We immediately tried to make it clear to them that we were Jews, and above all that I was not a German soldier. At first, they were skeptical, drawing a finger across their throats indicating that they believed all Jews had been killed. We showed them our stars and our identification papers with the large imprinted *J*, and fortunately, one of the men sharing our apartment knew enough Russian to explain our situation. It took some days for the reality to sink in before we could give in to our feeling of relief.

For us, it was over; we had survived. We had outlasted Hitler's Third Reich. 🦋

Fritz Gluckstein

In the spring of 1943, three high school classmates and I became part of a work crew that, after air raids, tore down ruined buildings and cleaned the rubble from damaged structures. The members of the crew, Jewish husbands and sons of mixed marriages, came from all walks of life—a truly motley crew. They gave me an early course in human nature. Some of them I remember vividly.

Georg, a chemist, told me about his work at one of Germany's major industrial plants. He also explained the vulgar words and expressions that were being bandied about. That stood me in good stead later on when I worked in a refrigerator factory in St. Paul, Minnesota. There, some fellows tried to trick me into using four-letter words, but without success. These words are of Anglo-Saxon origin and are very similar in German!

Arthur, tall and reserved, was a railroad engineer and had a major part in the electrification of the German railroads. I was already a railroad buff and asked him many questions about locomotives, trains, signals, and roadbed construction. I truly enjoyed working next to him.

Albert, who had been in the furniture business, was a rumormonger. Most mornings he went around asking, "Have you heard this? Did you know about that?" Nobody took him seriously. He also liked to regale everyone with silly, mildly off-color little rhymes.

Ludwig had been in the building trade. He was a perfectionist; everything had to be just so. When, for example, we had to clear rubble from a hallway, he spent extra time sweeping each corner and even tried to get the dust off the walls. During the night, bombs falling nearby again damaged the building, undoing all of Ludwig's efforts.

Karl, who had owned a major clothing store, had a truly remarkable skill. He could stand for hours next to a heap of rubble, looking very busy but actually not doing a thing. However, he never did this at the expense of fellow workers; when working in a group, he always carried his weight.

Kurt, a salesman, liked to ask personal questions. When, for example, some men mentioned that their wives and children spent each night and frequently some daylight hours in a public air-raid shelter, he inquired in a loud voice when they had the opportunity for marital relations!

Edmund, a barely literate laborer who often had big holes in the heels of his socks, tried unsuccessfully to sidle up to the supervisor. He claimed that others interfered with his work, preventing him from doing his best. He was not popular. He, like most of us, took home wood from broken beams, doors, or window frames, since firewood and coal were scarce. One day, some of us removed part of the wood from his rucksack, replacing it with bricks. He did not notice the switch until he reached home. Occasionally when no one was looking, we made firewood out of salvaged, completely sound crossbeams. This was not without risk; had we been caught, we could have been accused of sabotage.

Konrad, a businessman, had just one goal—not to be recognized as a Jew away from work. Since his daughter had not been raised Jewish, he did not have to wear the yellow star. He left home in the morning wearing coat, tie, and hat, and changed to appropriate clothing at the worksite. At night, he changed back to business attire. Some of us wanted to pay him a visit with our stars prominently displayed, but of course we never did.

Robert had been a driver for a linen rental company. He is best characterized by a brief dialogue I had with my friend and former classmate, Gert, when we were reminiscing about our time with the gang:

Fritz: "And then there was Robert."

Gert: "Yes, he was in the linen business."

Fritz: "But he only handled dirty linen."

Gert: "And even that, only on a rental basis."

Oskar, whose previous job I do not recall, somehow was put in charge of the tools. He took this job seriously, very seriously. Each time we changed locations, he found a room with a door that could be locked and appropriated it as a toolshed. Night after night, after many of the gang had already left, he cleaned, counted, and put in its place each shovel, pickax, crowbar, and hammer. He then carefully locked the door and went home with an air of accomplishment. One night he went through his usual routine of cleaning, counting, and putting the tools in place and was ready to lock up. But there was no door. Someone had taken it off its hinges and hidden it! I still can hear Oskar's howl of outrage. The gang members who were still around, including me, almost injured ourselves laughing.

Joseph, a journalist from Vienna, told me about his hometown and about Austria. He made me aware of the differences between the Austrian and German languages and cultures, and he always had a funny little story to share.

Aside from my former classmates, I lost all contact with the members of the gang after the war, but I hope they all did well. Each of them taught me something, and for that I am grateful. 🦋

MASQUERADE*

Pete Philipps



PETE PHILIPPS WAS BORN IN ESSEN, GERMANY. IN 1936 HE AND HIS PARENTS FLED TO PRAGUE, CZECHOSLOVAKIA, THEN TO GENOA, ITALY, AND IN 1939 TO QUITO, ECUADOR. THE FAMILY ARRIVED IN THE UNITED STATES IN MAY 1941.

Lieutenant Block had never been to a party like it. The gothic, high-ceilinged hall, more than the length of a football field, was full to overflowing with people in costumes and masks, some humorous, others hideous. There were the usual clowns and animals, a Salome with her seven veils, and two ballerinas, one of whom turned out to be male. The air was vibrant with laughter and overhung with cigarette smoke. Black, red, and yellow balloons floated above the narrow wooden tables, each decorated with bouquets of fresh-cut spring flowers. Garlands of colored lanterns provided the only illumination. Hilarity seemed to be the order of the day. And there was the music; he had only to close his eyes to imagine himself back at his high school prom.

One of the first to arrive, he had taken a seat at the head of an empty table near the bandstand. By now all 20 chairs were taken. No one had acknowledged his presence with more than a perfunctory nod, except a vivacious blonde who seated herself to his left and gave her name as Alma. "Roger," he said and shook her hand. "Raja" is how she pronounced it. Dressed in a revealing, black strapless evening gown and a double strand of pearls, she looked out of place. Was she a student? he wondered aloud. "Ja, of course," she said. "We are all here from the university."

"What is your field of study?" he asked, recovering quickly.

"Economy."

"Then we have something in common," he said and went on by telling her that he planned to pursue a Ph.D. in economics when his Army service was over.

*Work of fiction

“Das ist ja toll!” she said. Then, seeing he looked puzzled, she explained this was an exclamation of wonder.

He proposed they converse in German, since he needed the practice. But the effort proved too much for him, his vocabulary too meager. He said he expected to go into teaching. She had not yet made up her mind but thought she might go into banking. Presently they were exchanging family and personal histories and discovered that they were both avid watercolorists. Several of her landscapes would be on exhibit in the university library in April, she told him. He promised to come. She asked if he had been to the *Spielbank* (casino) in Wiesbaden. “I am very lucky in roulette.” He shook his head, and so they agreed that she would take him the following Saturday.

He was reminded of a girl he had dated in his junior year at Columbia. A freshman at Sarah Lawrence, she also had a perfectly symmetrical face and luminous, dark blue eyes, laughed easily, and seemed to light up the space around her. He almost forgot the swelling crowd until Alma spilled a few drops of wine on his sleeve in the process of refilling both of their glasses. She giggled and dabbed at the stain with her napkin. All eyes seemed to be on him. “Macht nichts,” he assured her and raised his glass in a toast. “Prost, meine Freunde.” Three or four male students jumped to their feet and held their glasses aloft. “Bitte sitzen,” he said, blushing.

“The lieutenant speaks German?” asked a bucktoothed student.

“Ein bisschen,” Block replied, holding his thumb and forefinger an inch apart. “I’m amazed how well most young Germans speak English.”

“Ja, we learn it in school,” said the bucktoothed student. “It is required.”

Block explained that American high schools generally require students to take a foreign language, too, but that they do so grudgingly and rarely acquire the skill to speak it fluently.

“Soon perhaps it will not be necessary,” said a young woman at the far end of the table, the upper-half of her face hidden by a black mask. “You will require us all to speak only English, no?” Block smiled politely and waved the presumption away. Another student wanted to know if he had studied German. Block shook his head. The little he knew, he said, he had picked up at his former post in Kaiserslautern. “Enough of this lieutenant stuff. Please, all of you, call me Roger. And also tell me your names.”

“This is very difficult for us,” said the student with the protruding teeth, who introduced himself as Klaus.

“I understand,” said Block, “but if Alma and I can be on a first-name basis, the rest of you can too.”

Alma leaned her head against his and laughed with girlish glee. He had a sudden impulse to kiss her but held himself in check. Yet something had already passed between them. All that week he had overheard Germans employed on the base talk about *Fasching*, so when he walked past a placard advertising a Fasching ball at the university he decided to find out what it was all about. He hoped to meet young people, maybe get to know one or two. It was his first Saturday night in town and he went in uniform because the trunk with his civilian clothes and books had not caught up with him. That may have accounted for his table filling up so quickly; more likely, he decided, it was because he was buying wine for everyone. The first time he ordered three bottles, but they went quickly and the next time the waiter came around he raised five fingers. Several students threw him appreciative glances. What the hell, he thought, the exchange rate was four marks to the dollar, and he was celebrating his new assignment, which came with first lieutenant bars.

“Does the lieutenant have any idea how much longer the Occupation will last?” The questioner was a muscular youth with pale, unblinking blue eyes and a ragged goatee who gave his name as Karl-Heinz. “It is now ten years, almost half of my life.”

The “Ami Go Home!” slogans plastered everywhere one looked flashed before his mind’s eye. Before he could answer, Alma asked if he liked to dance.

"I do," he said, "but not just now."

"Ach, perhaps you are a little tipsy?"

"Ein bisschen." A few of the students laughed. She kissed him lightly on the cheek and got up to fix him a plate. "That's very kind," he said, "but please no meat." As soon as she left the table a man with pomaded blond hair and wire-rimmed glasses the thickness of magnifying lenses left his place and took Alma's seat. "My name is Stefan," he began, "and I would like to ask the Herr Leutnant where he is coming from."

The formality, as always, bothered him. "San Francisco," he said.

"I hear this is a very beautiful city. You Americans are such lucky people."

"How do you mean?"

"Because your cities were not bombed. As you can see, here everything has been damaged and destroyed, even some of our most beautiful buildings. We suffered terribly."

In the short time since his arrival, Block had driven through whole neighborhoods ravaged by bombs, inhaled the stench of charred beams and other detritus, crossed paths with rats scampering amid the ruins. All along he had hoped for a stateside assignment, had expected his college degree to lead to a desk job. Instead, he had been assigned to an infantry battalion in Germany, which his parents had fled before he was born. But he said none of this; Occupation forces were under orders to avoid altercations with the locals.

"You killed thousands of innocent people, women and children," Stefan pursued.

Block looked around for the waiter. "What are you studying?" he asked, hoping to fend off an argument.

Stefan helped himself to another glass of wine. “Physics,” he said. “If the Herr Leutnant will permit, I have family in Dresden, and for this reason I would like to know why you firebombed this beautiful city. Many of my relatives were horribly burned and could not be identified. It was terrible.”

“If *you* will permit,” Block said, “it so happens that the RAF bombed Dresden. But I’d rather not talk about the war.” He hesitated. “Not on such a festive occasion.”

“Perhaps you are ashamed.”

“Ashamed?” Block looked around and considered finding another table—or leaving altogether. But Alma reappeared at that moment with a heaping plate in each hand. “You must not talk about serious things,” she said brightly. “Tonight you must be happy.”

Block nodded grimly and threw her a mock salute. The tension in his neck lessened. Stefan made no move to give Alma back her seat. After some shuffling of chairs, room was made for her on Block’s right. “On Fasching we forget all our difficulties,” she said. “Tonight—how do you say—you must let down your hair.”

“You mean, anything goes?” Block poured himself another glass of Piesporter Michelsberg, the fourth, by his count.

“Anything goes? What means this expression?”

“I’ll explain later,” he said, his eyes on the plate in front of him. It was heaped high with potato salad and sauerkraut, pickles, slices of dark bread, and two plump, steaming sausages. Had she not heard him? He cut the sausages into chunks and pushed them piecemeal under the bread. The students dug into their food as though they had not eaten in days—except Stefan; his head wobbling from side to side, he watched Block like a starving beggar.

After a while Alma asked Stefan why he was not eating.

“I am still waiting for the Herr Leutnant to explain why the Allies firebombed Dresden.” Some of the others looked uncomfortable. “It was willful destruction,” Stefan went on, throwing back the remains of his glass and immediately pouring himself another. “It was completely unnecessary and an inexcusable atrocity.”

A tall, spindly woman in a witch’s costume rose before Block could say anything. “My name is Ilse Wittig,” she said, “and if the lieutenant will excuse me, I must agree with Stefan. Dresden was like Florence, a city with magnificent architecture. It had not one military target. The bombing was especially tragic because, as the lieutenant knows, the war was almost over.”

Block studied the faces of those around him. The students weren’t much younger than he. He harbored no enmity, did not believe in indicting a whole nation, could not work up a hate. The still-smoldering past was not of their making. But for the sins of their fathers and grandfathers, he would be in their shoes now, studying economics at a German university. But what he said surprised him. “Please spare me a lecture about atrocities. When Dresden was bombed, millions of people were already dead because of the war Germany started, including six million who were exterminated because the Nazis considered them racially inferior.”

“If you are talking about the concentration camps,” said Karl-Heinz, “they were a fabrication of American Jews.”

Block’s eyes swept the table. “Do all of you think Auschwitz was a hoax?” Everyone stopped eating and looked at him fixedly. No one said anything until a man too old to be a student and wearing a Viking costume got to his feet. “Hitler did not approve of killing Jews,” he declared. “Auschwitz was a labor camp. Many people died from illness and old age. But war is war.”

Alma reached for Block's hand and placed it in her lap. "That is Herr Professor Doctor Zeitzler of the history department," she whispered.

For the second time Block repressed an urge to leave. It had been a mistake to come in uniform. The orchestra was playing "All the Things You Are." He lit a Camel; this time he did not pass the pack around. What were they being taught in school? Were they expressing their own opinions or parroting their parents' prejudices and contorted memories? He would deal with one falsehood and distortion at a time. "Are you suggesting that Rotterdam, London, and Coventry were military targets?" he asked, pointing his cigarette straight at Stefan.

"Of course," said Stefan. "We had to retaliate."

"Retaliate? The London Blitz and the destruction of Warsaw happened long before the bombing of Dresden."

"Ach, Schatz, don't spoil the evening," Alma pleaded. "It's not a good idea to talk about politics."

"I understand how some of you feel," Block went on. "Both sides in any war commit excesses, even atrocities. But the Nazis committed acts of wanton savagery on a scale never before seen in human history." His mouth dry, he marveled at his self-restraint. "For example, I'm sure you've all heard the name Lidice, the city in Czechoslovakia that the Nazis simply eradicated. Every man over 16 was killed. The women and children were sent to concentration camps and the buildings were all burned to the ground." He paused to look around. "I ask you all, why?"

"They were criminals!" Klaus exploded. "My father told me so. They deserved to be punished."

Block clenched his right hand into a fist. Army orders be damned. "Tell me, Klaus, what did your father do in the war?"

“He was in the army and lost a leg on the eastern front.”

“Where on the eastern front?”

“Stalingrad.”

The whole time he had been in Germany, Block had yet to meet the first civilian who admitted to having fought against the Americans and British. “Did any of you have a father or older brother who fought on the western front?” he asked.

There was no answer and Alma tugged at his sleeve. “Come Schatz. Let us dance.”

He pulled his arm away and loosened his tie. “Does everyone at this table deny the existence of the concentration camps and the mass killings in gas chambers? Do you deny Hitler wanted to eliminate every Jewish man, woman, and child and eventually dominate the world?”

He was about to go on when Zeitzler, still standing, his face turned purple, cut him off.

“There is no proof, no proof whatsoever, that Jews were systematically exterminated.”

“Surely the Herr Professor knows that there is ample and incontrovertible proof, from documents, survivors, and even the SS’s own testimony, of the crematoria and the use of Zyklon-B at Auschwitz.”

“Den Quatsch kann ich nicht mehr anhören,” said Zeitzler, executing a smart about-face as he left the table.

“I can’t listen to any more of this rubbish,” Alma translated. He considered following Zeitzler, who was already at the far end of the hall looking for a place to sit, but thought better of it.

“Tonight is not a good time to talk about the war,” said Alma, tugging at his sleeve. “Anyway, it was long ago.”



PETE PHILIPPS POSING WITH A BEAR AT A
CARNIVAL IN MAINZ, GERMANY, 1955.

PETE PHILIPPS

“Hitler did not wish for war,” said Stefan before Block could respond. “It was forced on him.”

“This is also my opinion,” said Ilse Wittig, who stood whenever she had anything to say. “I think the death of six million is exaggerated. Yes, many people died, but they died of natural causes. You know, of course, that Anne Frank died of typhus.”

A student in a bear costume, silent until now, said, “My parents told me the Jews had too much power before the war.” Next to him a girl in a dirndl dress nodded vigorously.

The waiter ambled past with an inquiring look, but Block waved him on. Turning to Alma, he said, “Okay, let’s dance before I do something violent. Then we’ll get out of here.”

She took his hand and led him to the makeshift dance floor. Even the females could not take their eyes off her. “Don’t take it so serious,” she said, nuzzling his ear. The girl from Sarah Lawrence flashed through his mind. Her father had served time in jail for war profiteering. He had not yet asked Alma about her father. Better not to know; her charm and beauty might force him to suspend moral judgment again. After three numbers, perspiration was showing through his uniform and he led the way back to the table. Alma, now sitting on his lap, her voice grown husky, said, “You are an excellent dancer. Are you enjoying yourself?”

He nodded. “Funny thing is, I still don’t quite know what Fasching is all about.”

She tilted her head and threw him a curious glance. “It is the celebration before Lent. I think it is the same as your Mardi Gras.”

“That much I pretty much guessed,” he said. “But what exactly do you do on Lent?”

“Ach, Raja, you are so funny. I personally don’t do anything. But my parents, they are very religious. They go to church and fast and pray for forgiveness of their sins. And they avoid many pleasures for the entire 40 days.”

"Forty days? Why so long?"

"Ja, because that is how many days our Savior spent in the desert fasting." She freed her hand from his. "How come this is unknown to you?"

"Excuse my ignorance," he said, pulling out his handkerchief and using it to wipe his forehead. "I'm Jewish."

"You are a Jew?" She jumped to her feet, her face flushed. "I had no idea. But *you* of all people should know."

"Why is that?"

"Why? Because you killed Him!" She snatched up her evening bag and took a step backward. "Auf Wiedersehen, Lieutenant." He grabbed her by the wrist, but she managed to break loose.

"Is something the matter, Lieutenant?" asked Klaus.

"You're damn right, something is wrong," he said, reaching for a nearly full bottle and hurling it against the wall. "This party is over!" He collected his Zippo and cigarettes, stuffed them into his pockets, and left by the same door Alma had used, knotting his tie as he went. 🦋

Pete Philipps

He had looked forward to this day all week, but a minute or so after he arrived it was already evident that something had gone wrong. He was to have greeted members of the diplomatic corps and escorted them to their seats—a plum assignment. Now he looked on helplessly as one limousine after another pulled up and discharged its passengers at the opposite end of the field from where he stood waiting.

The peak of the morning rush was over, but the streetlights were still lit, casting an eerie glow on the wet sidewalks. The field, already filling up with spectators, was mottled with puddles left by an all-night downpour. Fog shrouded the upper half of the Washington Monument, and the cherry trees around the Tidal Basin were barely visible. It would be a late spring, he decided, buttoning his Burberry all the way up to the collar and pulling the belt tight. It was a shabby affair, barely water-repellent, but it had been his father's coat and he'd never had the heart to give it away.

There was now nothing for him to do except try to find a seat with a good view. Survivors already occupied most of the section in front of the dais. Huddled under blankets and umbrellas, some looked as if they'd been waiting all night. One of the survivors spotted him and pointed to a nearby seat, but just then a Park Police bus entered the gate and coasted to a stop. An officer jumped out and quickly disappeared in the crowd. A few minutes passed; then one, then two, and then more people with ID tags identical to his clambered aboard, presumably to warm themselves. Why not, he thought, and followed, taking a seat near the front next to a young woman with a shock of frizzy, honey-blond hair. She looked up smiling. "The driver says we need to get off when the lieutenant returns."

"I just want to thaw out," he said.

"Me too," she said and showed him her hands. She was delicately beautiful, with large, porcelain blue eyes and a radiant smile. "I was giving out programs until my fingers got so numb I couldn't move them."

*Work of fiction

His hands also had turned blue, and when he held them out to her their fingertips came within a millimeter of touching. “I’m Meredith McNeal,” she said as they laughed at each other, “but everyone calls me Merry.”

“And *are* you?”

“Most of the time,” she said, nodding. “Are you a volunteer?”

“I guess the gray hair gives me away,” he said and introduced himself.

“Benno,” she repeated. “Are you a survivor?”

“No, not exactly.”

“I didn’t think so. You don’t look old enough.”

“You mean not *that* old. But thank you. I think of myself as a refugee from Nazi Germany. Luckily, I wasn’t in a camp.” She turned in her seat to face him more directly and her green and black plaid skirt slid several inches above her knees. “That’s why I hesitate to call myself a survivor.”

“Is your wife also German?”

“No. Rachel was from Boston.”

“Was?”

“Yes,” he said and hesitated. “She died of MS. It’s nearly four years now.”

“I’m sorry,” she said and seemed lost in thought. “Do you have any children?”

“Two boys. Both in college.”

She started to say something but was interrupted by a voice from the back of the bus announcing the lieutenant's return. Benno suggested that they look for seats together. "That would be nice," she said, accepting his hand as she alighted from the bus. By the time they found two adjoining seats the Army Band had already begun the opening medley. "Chivalry is alive and well," Merry said as he spread the coat across the two chairs, "but I'm afraid of what this will do to your coat."

"It's seen better days," he said with a shrug and then went on to tell her about the night his father came home carrying the coat in a Macy's box. "He was so proud. It was his first big purchase in America."

"How lovely that you've kept it all this time."

A fleeting memory: A spring night outside a restaurant on the rue Balzac, his arm draped around Rachel's shoulders, waiting for the fire department to arrive. He had surprised her with a pair of airline tickets to Paris for their anniversary. They had barely finished their soup when the chef ran from the kitchen yelling "Fuite de gaz!" Rachel, who had majored in French, grabbed his arm and pulled him into the street. There was no explosion, but the police did not let him back inside. In the morning he took a taxi to the restaurant and found the coat where he had left it.

The next thing he knew Merry's cool hand was resting on the back of his. "Are you all right?"

"Sorry," he said. "Lost in thought. By the way, I haven't asked you yet what brings you here."

"My reason is a lot more mundane than yours," she said and told him that after getting a master's in art history she had come to Washington to look for a job. When nothing turned up, she applied to the Holocaust Museum, then in the final stages of construction, in the hope that it might be a stepping-stone. But by the time she had completed the training program she was so fascinated with the Holocaust that she put her former plans on hold.

“So this may not be a temporary job.”

“It’s too early to tell, but I believe very strongly in the museum’s mission.”

“In other words, you don’t have to be Jewish to feel a commitment.”

“In the little town of Mississippi where I grew up there were no Jews,” she said. “I don’t remember hearing anything about the Holocaust. I’ve acquired a whole new perspective.”

“How so?”

“What happened then affected all of us—and it does to this day.”

Somewhere behind them a group of protesters had begun to chant, “We don’t buy the Holocaust lie.”

He looked at her—professor to student—then said, “The most that can be said is that they’re exercising their First Amendment rights.”

At various times during the ceremony she asked him about his immigrant experience, but when Elie Wiesel rose to speak they fell silent. The instant Wiesel approached the lectern, the sun, as though on cue, broke through the overcast sky and bathed the dais in an ethereal light. “How is it that man’s silence was matched by God’s?” Wiesel asked at one point. The moment he sat down the clouds closed in again, almost as if someone had pulled a curtain across the sky.

“He has such a haunted expression,” Merry whispered. Finding himself near tears, he merely nodded.

Then it was President Clinton’s turn to speak. His hair flattened by the wet wind, the President noted that the dedication coincided with the 50th anniversary of the Warsaw ghetto uprising. He prophesied that the new museum would bind one of the darkest lessons in history to the hopeful soul of America.




PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON (CENTER),
ELIE WIESEL (RIGHT) AND HARVEY
MEYERHOFF (LEFT) LIGHT THE ETERNAL
FLAME ON THE EISENHOWER PLAZA
DURING THE DEDICATION CEREMONY
OF THE UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST
MEMORIAL MUSEUM, APRIL 22, 1993.

USHMM

“This day is a dream come true,” Benno said when Jessye Norman brought the ceremony to a close singing “America the Beautiful.” He turned to see Merry’s reaction; she too had been crying. How would his mother react when he told her about this young colleague? What! A shiksa working in the Holocaust Museum? How can she understand? How can she feel anything of what we went through? He pushed the image away; the time to change his mother’s narrow horizon was long past.

A light drizzle had set in, but there was no rush for the exits. As though reluctant to go their different ways, most of the survivors stayed on and gathered in small groups. “Let’s hope for better weather on opening day,” Merry said as they left through one of the gates in the temporary chain-link fence. He thought of going for coffee, but something held him back from suggesting it. He said instead that he hoped their schedules would occasionally coincide and that they would run into each other.

She nodded cheerfully, said the chances were good, and apologized for rushing off to a staff meeting. “Very nice to meet you, Benny. I enjoyed talking to you.” Funny. He had not been called Benny since high school. Was it his imagination, or had she held his hand a fraction of a second longer than necessary?

He waited until he could no longer see her and headed for the Metro. It wasn’t until he stepped off the escalator at the Smithsonian station that he remembered the coat. As sometimes happened to him in dreams, his legs refused to budge. A minute passed, then another. There was no use in going back, he thought, oblivious of the people hurrying past, certain that by now someone had walked off with his old coat. At that moment a train roared into the station. With an almost imperceptible rise of the shoulder, he sprinted down the platform and just managed to thrust himself into the last car before the doors slid shut behind him. 



A LESSON IN GEOGRAPHY

Charlene Schiff

CHARLENE SCHIFF, FROM HOROCHOW, POLAND, SURVIVED BY HIDING ALONE IN THE FORESTS NEAR HER HOME.



On my fourth birthday, it was cold, and snow covered the ground, beautiful, pristine snow. I had a small birthday party because the Hanukkah holiday would be celebrated soon. A birthday party was called *imieniny*, which actually means “name day.” I received many gifts—puzzles, books, and from my parents, a wool outfit.

I could not wait to put on my new outfit and go outside. Papa agreed to take me for a walk. The outfit was pink and gorgeous—a hat with a pom-pom on top and earflaps that tied under my chin; mittens that Mama immediately attached to the sleeves of my winter coat so I would not lose them; a cardigan sweater with shiny, pink buttons; tights that fitted snugly over my legs up to my waist; and a luscious scarf with long fringes. Mama helped me put on the outfit. It was warm and toasty, and I felt oh so beautiful. I was admiring my reflection in the long mirror and Mama said with a smile, “You look so lovely in pink, my sweet child.” I wondered where I could show off my beautiful outfit.

Many of the family’s conversations had been about our immigration to America. Papa’s entire family already lived there. Mama, Papa, Tia, and I made numerous trips to the consulate where we were all asked questions and I had to be on my best behavior. We all looked forward to this journey that supposedly was going to take place in the near future. “Well,” I thought, “I will wear my lovely outfit the next time we go to visit the consulate.” I asked Mama if that would be OK, and she nodded her approval. Papa brought out my winter coat and helped me with the buttons. Mama hugged me and finally we left the house for a walk.


It had stopped snowing; it was quiet and peaceful. My father and I ended up on the path along the river, which was not yet completely frozen. I looked across and saw a gold, onion-shaped dome of a church, bathed and glistening in the weak rays of an early winter sunset—it was an exquisite sight. “Papa,



CHARLENE SCHIFF'S MOTHER, FATHER, AND SISTER BEFORE THE WAR.

CHARLENE SCHIFF

is that America on the other side of the river?" I asked. He looked surprised by my question. His answer was a short "No," and with a smile he added, "I wish it were America."

When we arrived home after the wonderful walk in my new pink outfit, Papa took me into his study and showed me on the huge globe, which rested on a small table next to his desk, how far away America really was. 

NAUGHTY, NAUGHTY

Charlene Schiff

The annual spring cleaning was in full swing. The windows were open; the carpets were airing on lines outside. People were coming and going, each one busy with a specific chore. The mattresses were being turned over, feather beds aired and stored for next winter, closets emptied and cleaned and the contents replaced or discarded. Mama and her helpers had decided that two rooms were in need of a fresh coat of paint. All of these activities were exciting, and I would have enjoyed staying home to watch, but it was a school day and too late for me to fake a tummy ache.

It was an ordinary day at school. Nothing exceptional took place. I did not have any lunch as I had lost the money that Mama gave me, and so I was quite hungry upon returning home. Mama scolded me for being so careless and went to the kitchen to prepare something more substantial than the milk and cookies we always had upon returning from school.

I was looking around the house—most of the furnishings had been moved from their permanent places. The piano, which had taken up most of one wall in the salon, was moved so that it blocked the entrance to the next room. In front of the piano, on the floor, covered with newspapers, rested a container with paint. It was so tempting, I impulsively reached for the brush and started painting the keyboard. The paint would not stick to the ivory keys, so I smeared several layers to be sure. Mama called from the kitchen to tell me my snack was ready. I went around another door in order to reach the kitchen. Mama noticed the paint on my hands and asked suspiciously, “What were you doing with the paint?”

“Oh, nothing, Mama,” I answered. I washed my hands, but the paint would not come off. Mama applied something with a cloth—it had a strong odor, and after scrubbing vigorously, the paint finally came off. Right then and there I realized what I had done was more than just a childish prank.

On the kitchen table there were cookies and milk and an open butter and jam sandwich, but I was not hungry anymore. I worried about the consequences of the impulsive “paint job.” Mama sensed my discomfort. She sat down opposite me at the table and took my hands into hers. “What’s wrong, my sweet child?” she inquired. I was close to tears as I tried to explain. She went with me to the salon, and upon seeing the piano, she uttered the words: “Oh my goodness.”

She did not yell at me. Instead, she tried to explain how difficult it would be to repair the piano. She wanted to know what motivated me to do this mean-spirited deed. I really did not know how to answer—it was an impulsive act. I accepted my culpability, but Mama wanted to know the underlying, deep reason for my action. “I did it to spite Tia,” I said. Tia was beautiful and everything she did was perfect. She was a musical child prodigy and always received accolades when performing. I could never compete with her accomplishments.

When Tia came home and saw what I had done, she was furious. She told me I always insisted how grown up I was. Well, it turned out I was still a baby. “Naughty, naughty,” she added condescendingly. Her words hurt me terribly. I adored my sister and admired her and wanted so desperately to be like her. Obviously, I could never measure up. Calling me a baby when I thought I was so grown up was like a slap in the face. What I had done was stupid and thoughtless. Certainly I deserved her rebuke, but it was difficult to admit that Tia was right.

Papa took me into his study and tried to explain that one must never destroy any kind of property. Jealousy was an ugly trait, and I was talented in different ways than Tia. I had to be punished for this, but he took under consideration the fact that I realized shortly after how serious my transgression was. I had a lot of growing up to do, and I was punished severely—the most important treat, a trip to Lvov with Papa, was taken away.

It took a long time and a lot of money to repair the piano. Papa had to bring a specialist from Lvov who spent days at our house working at undoing the damage a foolish little girl had done on a whim. The paint had not stuck to the keyboard, but it had clogged up the works inside.

Papa and Mama never yelled at me. They treated me with dignity but meted out the punishment as expected and deserved.

Tia was more verbal and angry, and rightly so. She had to go to her teacher's to practice. She could not play at home and my parents were denied the pleasure her music provided.

I learned a hard lesson. It was a painful experience for the entire family.

More than sixty years later, my heart still beats faster at the sight of a piano. Remorse and guilt have never left me. My parents and sister perished in the Holocaust. There is no one left to hear me say, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." 🦋

IF RIVERS COULD SPEAK

Charlene Schiff

I was in the water up to my neck. The water was cold. We were hiding in the bulrushes and I knew we could not move. It was very quiet and any sound would give us away. Mama gave me some soggy bread. It tasted awful, but she insisted I had to eat it to keep strong. I was tired and wet. The night was dark and dawn came suddenly. In the light of day we saw that many other people from the ghetto had made their way to the river. Shots, which had been sporadic during the night, became more regular now. The Ukrainian guards kept yelling "Come out Jew, I can see you," and most of the people were doing just that.

Mama kept whispering to me to stay put and not to make any sound. Days passed in confusion. Shots kept coming, seemingly from every direction. It was hard to remain quiet while listening to screams and cries and watching fire and smoke coming from the ghetto.

"When are we going to cross the river, Mama?" I wanted to know.

Mama tried to keep me calm and assured me that we could cross the river as soon as the Ukrainians and Germans left.

"When will that be?" I asked rather impatiently. After all I was only 11 years old.

"Soon, my sweet child, soon," Mama replied.

"At that time we will make our way to the farm of the K. family," Mama explained.

Farmer K. had promised to hide Mama and me. We knew his family. We used to buy dairy products from them before the war.

It was very tiring to stand in the river and at times I dozed off leaning on the bulrushes. One horrible moment I woke up and Mama was nowhere in sight. I was terrified, all alone, lost. I felt betrayed and

guilty for falling asleep. I felt like screaming and crying for Mama, but could do neither. By evening, all had become quiet.

I thought Mama had not been able to wake me and had made her way to the farm where she would be waiting for me. I crossed the river and walked until I reached the farmer's place. He greeted me in the barn like a stranger who was not welcome at all. He would not even let me in the house. I noticed Papa's gold pocket watch and chain dangling from his dirty coveralls. He told me my Mama was not there.

I never saw my mother again. ❧

A FISH OUT OF WATER

Flora M. Singer

FLORA SINGER, FROM BERCHEM, BELGIUM, SURVIVED THE WAR BY HIDING WITH HER TWO SISTERS IN CATHOLIC CONVENTS.



My husband Jackie and I were invited for a reunion of his former Seward Park High School friends from New York City. These were the young people with whom Jackie had grown up. They and their families had lived and some still were living in the neighborhood where Jackie was born, played, and attended both secular and religious school. I had met some of them after Jackie and I became engaged to be married. Jackie had also invited a few of them to our wedding. After that, Jackie and I moved away from his old neighborhood to settle in a suburb of New York. Since Jackie was a member of the United States Armed Forces at the time we got married, he had to return soon to his base, while I stayed at home in Flushing.

I commuted to work on a daily basis by bus and subway, from Flushing in Queens where we occupied a small street-level, basement apartment in my parent's home to downtown New York City where I worked at M. Lowenstein & Sons, Inc. as a bilingual secretary. Whenever Jackie could, he would come home to spend the weekend with me and then return to his base. On the surface, I lived the American dream, except for one thing. I worked and interacted with my fellow employees, but our conversations were mostly work related. When I was free, my time was spent with Jackie when he was home and with members of my family, mostly my parents. My sisters, who were younger than me, attended school and had already made friends with whom they spent much of their free time.

At the reunion, which took place in the home of one of Jackie's former schoolmates, people mingled, nibbled on snacks, and talked. Most of their talking revolved around reminiscences of their early youth, the games they played on the street in front of their apartment houses on the Lower East Side of New York City, their sleepovers at each other's homes, their activities and outings from their Cub and Boy Scout days, and their years at Seward Park High School. They also talked about their graduation from

high school, the prom, and so forth. I listened and smiled occasionally, as required by good manners. However, I had nothing to contribute to their conversation. I felt like a stranger, an intruder. Even Jackie, my husband, standing at my side, who was actively engaged in the conversation with his friends and laughing heartily when warranted, did not realize that although I stood with him, I did not feel a part of the group or their life.

As I stood listening, one of Jackie's friends turned to me and said, "Flora, with whom did you attend the prom? Did you go with Jackie? I do not remember." I did not know what to reply. I hesitated, then finally I said, "Uh, no...well...I did not go to the...a...prom. I did not even attend any high school..."

"What do you mean, you did not...?"

"Well you see..." As I began trying to explain why I had not attended any high school, the young person had already turned away from me and became actively engaged in a conversation with the others in the group, and I...I was lost...I suddenly felt more acutely than I had prior to the reunion that I did not belong here, that I was a stranger, an outsider.

It was a strange and lonely feeling. These were my husband's friends, the people he had grown up with, and with whom he shared so many experiences and memories. I was not a part of this world. At this point I realized that not even Jackie and I, although married, had ever talked about anything which did not relate to "today," his world, his friends, who now supposedly were also my friends. I also realized that they did not know me and neither did Jackie. I mean really know me, the me who was not the person I portrayed.

I concentrated and tried so hard to quickly become the perfect American. I concentrated on learning the English language. I did not attend regular school because I had to work. As I continued to politely listen and smile when required, I was drawn back into my own world, the world about which no one ever asked me—the World War II world of the Shoah, which I survived and which shaped me. ✨

I DID IT!

Flora M. Singer

In May 1995, my husband Jack and I traveled to Brussels, Belgium, on a mission to attend a ceremony to be held at the Université Libre de Bruxelles. I was very excited. At the ceremony during that month, Yad Vashem, the memorial in Jerusalem for the Jews and others murdered during the frightful years of World War II and the Holocaust, was going to honor several “Just of the Nations,” the term for those who dared to risk their lives to save others condemned to death by the Nazis.

We arrived in Brussels, checked into our hotel, unpacked our luggage, and made a few telephone calls to tell those of my rescuers invited to the ceremony that we had arrived and were looking forward to seeing them at the Université Libre de Bruxelles the next day.

I was happy because I would see some of the nuns who cared for my sisters and me during the time we had to hide from the Gestapo for the crime of having been born Jewish. But I was also sad, because some were being honored posthumously. Three of those wonderful people, to whom my sisters Charlotte and Betty and I owed our lives, had already died. They were Sister Odonia, a Franciscan nun; the Reverend Mother M. Chrysostome, of the convent of Our Lady of Seven Sorrows; and George Ranson, a member of the Belgian Resistance, who had sheltered me and had made false documents for my mother.

Two nuns, Sister Marie Consolata and Sister Jeanne-Marie, would accept the certificate and medal offered to the Reverend Mother. Sister Roberta of the Franciscan Order could not attend to receive the award, either for Sister Odonia or for herself, due to her age, 93 at the time. The daughter of George Ranson could not attend the ceremony either, but my husband and I, having received the certificate and medal for him, made arrangements to meet his daughter, Georgette Pierseaux-Ranson, for breakfast the following day to offer these gifts to her.


As for Sister Roberta of the Franciscan Order, the Secretary of the Embassy of Israel, Zvi Tal, agreed to accompany my husband Jack and me the following morning to the Franciscan convent for elderly nuns in Vinderhoute. Immediately after our breakfast with George Ranson's daughter, at precisely 10 a.m., we met the car from the embassy and Zvi Tal in front of the hotel for the trek to Vinderhoute.

When we arrived at the convent, we rang the bell. A nun opened the door, led us into a parlor where guests were received, and went to fetch Sister Roberta. Within minutes, Sister Roberta entered the parlor bearing a wide smile, which illuminated her wrinkled face. We embraced each other, our eyes filled with tears of joy at seeing each other again. I then introduced her to my husband as well as to Zvi Tal and his assistant. The room was decorated, and tables set with lace tablecloths and vases filled with flowers had been prepared for a festive luncheon. Several important local guests, the mayor and priest of the town, and several other luminaries and guests had been invited to the convent for the anticipated ceremony.

Everyone, after greeting each other, sat down in anticipation of the ceremony. Zvi Tal said a few words about the reason we were there on that particular day. He spoke about Yad Vashem and about the reasons for which we had come to Vinderhoute. He described the award to be offered to Sister Roberta and also talked about Sister Odonia, whose award was presented posthumously. Then I spoke, describing how these wonderful nuns had sheltered us to keep us from being found and slaughtered by the Nazis. I was very emotional.

After the presentation of the certificate and medal to Sister Roberta, luncheon was served. I sat between Sister Roberta and a journalist from the local newspaper *Het Volk* (The People). The journalist interviewed me while we were eating. Suddenly, as we were talking, Sister Roberta turned to me, wagged her forefinger at me, and said: "Just like when you were a little girl; talk, talk, talk.... You have not changed at all. You still talk, talk, talk...." At that, I replied, "But Sister Roberta, I am telling him about you and Sister Odonia. I'm telling him how wonderful you were, how you hid us..."

“He can wait. First you eat, and then you’ll talk.... Eat!” So, I obeyed—I forgot for a moment that I was an adult, a married grandmother, and a professional—and ate, first looking at the journalist while making a face and thus quietly indicating that I would speak with him again after we were finished eating.

The time came for us to part. While the others were waiting for me in the car in front of the convent, I said goodbye and hugged Sister Roberta, who held me tightly against her. Even when I was already in the car, she and I were still waving to each other. I kept looking out the window to see her standing at the gate, waving until we were out of each other’s sight. I never saw Sister Roberta again. She died shortly after this visit. I am at peace because while she was still alive, she was recognized and honored for her heroism. 

I WAS BUT A CHILD

Flora M. Singer

I have a photograph of a garden I look at often and longingly. It shows several family members sitting and standing around a small garden waterfall, topped by a sculpture of a little girl holding an umbrella. The year was 1938.

The individuals depicted in the photograph were Tante Leah, Mama's youngest sister; her husband, Alex; his brother, Adolf, and his wife Estera; and their sister Chany, with her husband Mendel at her side. Chany was pregnant with her second child. Two children sit in the foreground on the stone edge of the waterfall. One of the children, the girl, is me, and the other is Jackie, my cousin.

The only one of the individuals depicted in this photograph who remained alive after the Shoah is me. Neither Jackie, four years older than I whom I loved and admired, nor any of the other family members made it—none, with the exception of Chany's child, Henry, who was born a few months after the gathering in the garden. Henry, or Harreke, as we called him, survived the war. I often imagine him in the photo, invisible, hiding within his mother's body, as he did later at the tender age of four when he was sheltered and hidden from the Nazis in a monastery by the Benedictine monk, Father Bruno Reynders.

Months after the liberation by the Allies from the German occupation, I learned from Father Bruno, who had also hidden my sisters and me, where Harreke was located. I contacted the abbot at the monastery where Harreke was still housed because his parents had not returned from the concentration camps. Through Father Bruno's intervention, I was allowed to visit him, then later was allowed to take him out for weekend visits with me, my sisters, and Mama. However, I had to return him to the monastery by Sunday evening. This became an excruciating ordeal. Every Sunday, upon our return to the monastery, Harreke, now almost seven years old, was distressed—he cried, he screamed, "Flora, don't leave me, please, Flora, I don't want to stay here, I want to go home with you ..." My return home without

Harreke was always difficult. I could not understand why we could not keep him with us until his parents and brother returned—a return which unfortunately never materialized.

I asked Mama why we could not keep Harreke with us, since no one was coming back from the camps. She said it was against the law because he was our cousin by marriage and was not related to us by blood. “Mama, we can hide him, after all, we were hidden and no one found us.... I’ll find a good hiding place for him in case the gendarmes come looking for him—he’ll be safe.” “You don’t understand, Mamele. Things are different now,” she replied. “The Gestapo are gone and now we must do things according to the law. Now we must obey all the laws.”


I was not happy about that because Harreke had become very attached to me, the big adult of 15 years of age. I began to dread the weekly returns of Harreke to the monastery. The repeated screaming and crying “Flora, Flora don’t leave me...” left me with incredible feelings of guilt. I thought there must be a way. But there was no way. At the time, Jewish children who were sheltered from the Nazis in religious or secular institutions or by individual families remained legally in their custody until their biological parents who had entrusted them to those institutions or families returned to claim them.

Days, weeks, and months passed. While waiting for family members’ return, not having heard of or grasped as yet the enormity of the massacre of our fellow Jews, we tried to settle into a semblance of a normal life. Mama went to the Joint Distribution Committee, which had opened an office in Brussels, and after it had helped us with a few basic pieces of secondhand furniture, it managed to find a sewing machine for Mama, with which we were able to start earning a few francs to feed ourselves. I say “we” because we all helped Mama with the work, my two sisters after classes at the local elementary school—the same one we had attended for a short while before going into complete hiding—and I full time.



MEMBERS OF FLORA SINGER'S EXTENDED FAMILY IN A PUBLIC GARDEN IN ANTWERP, BELGIUM, 1938.

USHMM, COURTESY OF FLORA MENDELOWICZ SINGER

In May 1946, we were scheduled to leave Brussels for the United States as guests of the U.S. Army, but without Harreke. We appealed to the U.S. Army Commander at the Military Headquarters in Brussels. We begged him to allow us to take Harreke with us. His reply was sad, but simple, “Madame Mendelovicz, Henry is not yours or your husband’s child.... According to regulations, I cannot let him immigrate with you. Later, if you wish, you can obtain custody according to Belgian law. If his parents do not return, you can apply for a visa for the child.” 



A LETTER TO MY MOTHER

Esther R. Starobin

ESTHER STAROBIN WAS BORN IN ADELSHEIM, GERMANY, AND SURVIVED THE WAR IN ENGLAND WHERE SHE WAS SENT BY HER PARENTS ON THE KINDERTRANSPORT IN JUNE 1939.



When you handed me over did you hug me, kiss me, give directions to my caretaker, was it someone you or I knew? Could you picture me as an adult? The years have passed, and I am now many years older than the age you were when you died. As a parent I often looked at my daughters, your granddaughters, and speculated on what kind of adults they would become. I wondered if they would marry, if they would be friendly, trusting people or mean, bitter, angry people. Did you wonder the same things about me? Deborah and Judy marvel at your love and ability to consider what was best for your daughters that allowed you to send them to unknown people. Later, you were able to do the same for your only son who was so dear and special to you. When my daughters and grandsons reached 26 months, I looked at them and wondered if I would have had the strength to do the same. I like to believe that you passed on to me the ability to put children's welfare above my own needs.

In leaving Germany, our lives took on experiences unknown to our family in Adelsheim. I lived with a family who were kind, loving, caring, and devoutly Christian. This deep faith made the Harrisons willing to take care of me. Was this belief so different from the belief that you had in God when you sent me to an unknown country and unknown people? In spite of the events swirling around you, your letter to Auntie Dot thanking her for taking me in and then describing me was written from one mother to another. You took time to tell her that I clung to you so very much though I was not spoiled at all. "Conditions are here such that she couldn't go to anyone else," you continued in your letter of August 10, 1939. "Esther is a merry child, loves playing with other children . . . I am so glad that Esther likes your son, and by God's help, she will soon become accustomed to you." The Harrisons, in turn, were willing to accept me and to let me adjust in my own time to becoming part of their family. From the

stories I have been told, I was afraid of Uncle Harry, one of the mildest men on earth, and also of loud noises. Instead of getting angry and forcing me to relate to him, I was allowed to hang on to Alan and Auntie Dot. I wish you could tell me what had happened to me to make me afraid of grown men and loud noises. Surely, I wasn't afraid of my father, so from where did this fear arise? After living with the Harrisons for eight years, I was very much part of their family. My family extended to Bertl, Edith, Ruth, and Aunt Hannah who were welcomed whenever they could arrange a visit to Norwich.

When Bertl was able to arrange for us to travel to the United States, I found it very difficult to leave the security and love of the Harrisons' home. I wonder how different this was from the time when I left the security and love of your home. Now many years later, I am in frequent contact with Alan. The Harrisons became part of our extended family. We frequently telephoned and visited them when they were alive. In fact, after Auntie Dot died, Uncle Harry would spend several weeks in the spring with us in Maryland. I wonder if you would have liked to visit and would have enjoyed the time spent with my family as much as Uncle Harry did.

In your letters from the camps in southern France that you wrote to Bertl, who was a teenager, you continued your parental role. In a letter you sent Bertl and Aunt Hanna from Rivesaltes sometime between September 1941 and March 1942, you said, "We are only glad that you, my dear children, are well, that you are dressed, and that you have good nutrition. We thank the good people who in these hard times replace your parents. My dear children, be very grateful, therefore, and good and industrious. Perhaps there will be sunshine for us again and we may be together in peaceful days. We long very much therefore." I can only assume the qualities mentioned in your letter were ones you believed in strongly in Germany and would have taught me if we had continued to live together in Adelsheim. I also gather from this and other letters that you had a very strong belief in the importance of family. You reminded Bertl over and over again about the importance of us children remaining in contact and eventually being together as a family. I think you would be proud of her because, even now, Bertl takes on that role.

She is the one who makes sure that we have family get-togethers and help each other out as the need arises. When you wrote the letters from Gurs and Rivesaltes, could you imagine your children grown, married with children of their own? I wonder if you really thought it possible that we would survive and live normal lives.

The strength of family has been transmitted to the next generation, which exists only because of your great concern for your children's welfare and your belief in God. The cousins, your grandchildren, stay in contact. While they have developed into very different adults, there is a bond between them that is very strong. In fact, whenever one of the out-of-town cousins comes to visit, some kind of get-together is planned. I wonder if you could imagine the talking, laughing, and eating that occur when they are together along with their children. Is their conversation very different than the conversations you had when you visited the relatives on Shabbat or during holidays?

In this letter I am trying to respond to what I know about you from reading the letters you wrote to us from Germany and conversations with my sisters. I realize how little I know of your life, your likes and dislikes, your hopes and fears. I wonder what you would think of me and my family. Would you approve of how I live or would you be upset with me? Not even Bertl who is the oldest of us really knew you as an adult knows her parents. Sometimes when Bertl hears something that I have done she will say our parents would be proud. How does she know this? I feel as though I am the result of many people's influence on my life. Yet, if you had not had the courage to send me away, I would have no life. Your decision and strength is what gives me life today. ✎

C R E D I T S

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