

E C H O E S

of memory

VOLUME
5

UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM

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5

STORIES FROM THE MEMORY PROJECT

UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM



C O N T E N T S

Echoes of Memory

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Echoes of Memory

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LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

Sara J. Bloomfield

Five years ago when the Museum published the first volume of *Echoes of Memory* featuring the stories of Holocaust survivors who volunteer at the Museum, many—including some of the survivors themselves—thought it would be a one-time publication. Now in the 15th year of the Museum we are proudly presenting the fifth volume of *Echoes*.

Over the years, the survivors have taught us much about the Holocaust, about their lives and, in the process, about ourselves. They are, after all, our personal link to that awful history.

How often have I seen survivors surrounded by young people in the Museum's Hall of Witness? These children, teenagers for the most part, form an immediate bond with the survivors and understand from that encounter that there is much to be learned from these extraordinary individuals. For the survivors, these connections are essential as it is the young people who will safeguard their memories and transmit them from one generation to the next. That is central to the Museum's mission as well.

This year also marks the 70th anniversary of *Kristallnacht*, the "Night of Broken Glass," a wave of destruction against Jewish communities throughout Germany and Austria. It served as a warning

LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

of the horrors that were to come. The survivors whose memories fill these pages remind us of our obligation to heed the warning signs in our world today. For as history has shown, genocide did not end with the Holocaust.

The survivors express compassion, hope, and gratitude. Their devotion to the Museum and its mission is uncompromising. We can never thank them enough, but what we can do is share their memories collected here with our families and friends, and promise to serve as their witnesses.

Sincerely,



Sara J. Bloomfield

Director

October 19, 2008

INTRODUCTION

Margaret Polyzos Peterson

During the nearly seven years since I began my work with Holocaust survivors in the Museum's Memory Project, I have become engaged, gotten married, and given birth to a son and then a daughter. Becoming a wife and mother has changed how the events described by the survivor writers affect me. I am particularly disturbed by descriptions of survivors being separated from parents or accounts of parents who saved their children's lives by having them placed on the *Kindertransport*.

My reaction, I think, speaks to the nature of what writing and literature must do. I have often said that though I did not originate the idea, good writing is meant to evoke the universal through description of the particular. I cannot listen to Fred Traum reading the narrative of his father looking out the window of his house as his mother takes him and his sister to a *Kindertransport* train without imagining what I would or would not do for my own children and their safety.

While history tells us what happened, these writers intend to make the account personal. What could be more important to the mission of an institution of education such as the Museum than bringing a reader inside the lives of those who lived through the ineffable? What could be more important for us all?

INTRODUCTION

Elie Wiesel wrote, “Without memory there is no culture.” When the writers of the Memory Project describe life before the events of the Holocaust swept them up, they seek to pass on a culture that was nearly destroyed. They also pass on culture in another way. They create a culture that knows the truth of the brutality of their experiences, readers who empathize the way I do when hearing these stories and who apply their empathy to their own actions. This is the desire I have, at least, for the lives of these pieces—for them to be taken to heart, so to speak.

Elie Wiesel also writes, “Granted our task is to inform. But information must be transformed into knowledge, knowledge into sensitivity, and sensitivity into commitment.” This is more than the most fervent hope the writers of the Memory Project have for their work; it is the reason they continue to do it.

For seven years many of these writers have been, as I wrote in the first volume of *Echoes of Memory*, “tuning their voices and bearing witness to their lives” in order to to elicit the very commitment Elie Wiesel wrote of. They have subjected their writing to scrutiny and critique in order to strengthen the

power of their message. They have remembered and recounted indescribable suffering, all for the sake of passing on stories of the past that might be able to change the story of the future.

In reading the fifth volume of *Echoes of Memory*, I think you cannot fail to feel the writers' dedication to telling the truth of their experiences. I believe you will not fail to be moved by that dedication, to be changed, as I have been, irrevocably.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Margaret Polizos Peterson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Margaret Polizos Peterson
Memory Project Instructor



MY REASON FOR WRITING MY STORY

Erika Eckstut

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



My family came to Romania in 1931 from Znojmo in the Czech Republic when I was about three years old. My parents moved us to Stanesti, a town in the Romanian province of Bukovina where my paternal grandparents lived. My father told my grandfather that he wanted to take the whole family to Palestine and my grandfather said that it was a good idea but he would have to find someone who would take the cow, the horse, and the chickens. Father, unfortunately, could not find anyone. My family consisted of my mother, my father, and my older sister. A lawyer by profession, my father became the chief civil official of the town and we lived in the house assigned to him in that position.

In Stanesti, I attended public school as well as the Hebrew school, which my father helped to found. I enjoyed playing with the children in the town and in the school and I very much liked to be with my grandfather. In school I had very good grades. In the first grade I got all A's with a star and then one day when I came home I saw the principal of the school coming to my father's office. When I saw him, I told the girl who took care of us that I was going to go to my aunt's and she said to be sure I was back for dinner and I said I would be. At dinnertime all seemed well and when dinner was over my father asked if I would bring the book we were reading. I brought the book and my father opened it and said that I should read it. I did a beautiful job. He closed the book and opened to a different page and I read it perfectly. These books had pictures at the tops of the pages. He turned to my mother and said that he could not understand what the principal was talking about. My father opened the book again and put his hand on a picture and then I could not read at all. What he had not realized before was that I had a photographic memory and had memorized the pages according to the pictures. My father wanted to know why I got all A's on my report card and I told him I loved the teacher and the teacher loved me too. Then my father hired a teacher who taught me how to read and now I can read very well.

In the Hebrew school I also had a little problem. At the end of each year we put on a show. One year I had a long poem to memorize. My father was the one who quizzed me until I knew it by heart. At that time I went to see my grandfather and he wanted to know what took me so long to come and I said I had to learn the poem first.

My grandfather was very self-sufficient and did everything himself, from taking care of horses to making cherry wine. He would give me the cherries from the wine. He wanted to know when I had to recite the poem and he told me to come to him first and he would give me some cherries since I loved them so much. I did come and he gave me a little bowl and I ate them all.

When I recited the poem at the show I said the first few lines and then the last few lines. Then I started again from the beginning and everything went well. I could tell because the applause was outstanding. When I came down from the podium my father was standing there and he told me to breathe on him. Before I could breathe, my grandfather said that if my father had any questions he should come to him. They did not speak to each other for a whole week. Then all was well. I used to get a lot of lectures from my father as he did not agree with my grandfather a lot of the time.

My childhood was filled with hopes and dreams. In 1937 members of the Iron Guard tried to remove my father from his official position. Eventually a court cleared him of the charges and he was restored to his post.

In 1940 the Russians occupied Stanesti. At that time, Russian became the official language and we had to learn everything in Russian. I had difficulty learning but we were afraid of the Russians and we tried very hard to learn the language. The Russians were there for one year.

After they left, our life changed in a terrible way as that was when the pogroms began. Three men came to our house and asked us to go with them. When my father asked where we were going, they

replied that he would see. We were taken to a large park outside the town and we saw that all the Jewish residents were there and in the middle was the rabbi and his two sons. They shot the rabbi and his sons and then killed almost all the other men. The last man to be killed was my uncle and as they had run out of ammunition they killed him by hand. I asked my father if I would also be killed and he said, "Please don't cry." All the children were crying, so how could I not?

Then the man told us that we would go to the courthouse. When we got there my father did not go in but stood outside and smoked. A man my father knew from our neighborhood came and said he would take my father home but my father would not leave without the family so the man said he would also take the family and my father's parents and that is when we went home. When we arrived, the house was not the same as when we left it. The books in my father's library were all torn and my grandmother and I started to cry and I must have cried a lot because I fell asleep and when I woke up it was morning. In the house were two men who wanted to take my father and my sister wanted to go with him. They did not want to take her but finally agreed to let her come along.

As they went, they realized that they were going the same way as the night before. My sister did not feel very well so my father said he wanted to take her back but the men replied that it was too late. When they were almost where they were the night before, a man in a grey suit came and said that my father did not belong there and sent him home.

When he returned home a little while later, the chief of police who held that post before the Russians told my father that he would take him and our family away from Stanesti. My father was told to bring whatever he could carry. My mother made two bundles with about three changes of clothing for each of us and when darkness came we were taken away. It was 15 kilometers from Stanesti to Czernowitz. It was a difficult walk for my father as he was not feeling well and had to walk with a cane, and for my grandmother who was elderly. Suddenly my father stopped walking and sat down on the ground. My

mother and sister went to fetch some water. My grandparents started to cry and I tried to get my father to speak to me by hitting him on the chest. Then he motioned that he was alright. We finally arrived at Czernowitz and about a week later they set up a ghetto and we went there.

The ghetto was one of the worst places on earth. We had no food and we had to sleep on the floor. My grandparents were with us in the ghetto but in a different room. There were many people in the room that my parents, my sister, and I occupied. My father decided that all the children should be schooled, even though teaching was against the law. I was not a good student and paid no attention to my father who was trying to teach us. When he questioned me, I could not answer the first time or the second time. He said that I hurt his feelings because I did not have an answer to his question and I explained that I really did not pay any attention because the only thing on my mind was a piece of bread. I felt badly that I hurt my father because, although I was a tomboy, I adored him and wouldn't purposely hurt him.

I decided to go out and look for food and so I took my ID card and the yellow star and left. I had blonde hair and blue eyes and spoke German so I was not afraid of being stopped. My father had a friend who was a Greek priest. I knew his name so I decided to go to the store where the priest and nuns went to purchase their food. When I came there I picked out what I thought we could use and when I went to pay I gave the priest's name and they wrote down what I took. Then I left. When I returned to the ghetto, my mother fainted and my father wanted to know how I paid. I told him that I gave them the name of the priest and they gave me the food. My father wanted me to go to the priest and tell him what I had done and I went. The priest told me that I could come for food as often as I wanted but not to talk about it to anybody else. I did as he said. After about eight months I went out as usual and I saw a soldier on crutches beating a man. I went over to the soldier and started to give him one of the lectures that my father used to give me, asking him why he was beating a man who was doing nothing to him.

The soldier said the man was nothing but a dirty Jew. I asked him what difference did it make as the man was doing nothing to him. At that time, a policeman took my hand and said that we would go home. I could not take him to the ghetto because I knew my whole family would be killed. I took him to a house where a Christian lady was living. I rang the bell and when she started using the key to open the door, I said, "Mama." When she opened the door, the policeman asked, "Is this your daughter, madam?" She ignored him and said to me, "I told you once, I told you twice: Home and homework." Then she started to hit me right and left in the face and I thought she would knock my head off, it hurt so bad. Like in a dream, I heard the policeman tell her to stop hitting me so that I could go in and do the homework and he left. She very slowly took me in the house. She wanted to know where I came from and I told her the ghetto. She said that I would have to go back there. I thanked her and left. When I came home I told my family what had happened and my father said I would not go out again. 🌸



THE SONDERKARTE

Manya Friedman

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



By the end of 1940, about half of the population from our city of 28,000 Jews, plus the Jews brought in from the neighboring towns, had already been deported. The *Dulag* (transit camp) was always full to capacity with Jews awaiting deportation either to labor or concentration camps. Jews started thinking of ways that they could be useful to the Germans so they could remain in place.

It took a lot of effort to convince the German authorities in our area that the Jews could be useful to them by producing uniforms and boots for their military. When the Germans finally did agree, the first shops were opened in March 1941. The Germans presumably hoped to get big bribes from Jews hoping to get employment and avoid deportation. This of course raised the hopes of some Jews.

The *Sonderkarte*, which we called a “right to life,” came into existence when the first shop was opened. The card was supposed to shield us from deportation.

I got employment in one of the shops after my parents were forced to provide a sewing machine. I did not have much sewing experience, but I was lucky to be seated between two professional seamstresses who probably felt sorry for me. As soon as they produced their quota—which for them was easy—they helped me make my quota of pieces. Later I became proficient enough to do it myself. I was even given the job of sewing in collars and stitching on pockets. During normal times I would probably have been proud of my accomplishment, but our work was done with the pain of hunger and tears.

The work was demanding. Our supervisor, a one-armed Nazi who had been a high-ranking military member but was injured in the war, inspected every piece we handed in. He counted the number

of stitches to the centimeter. We were producing the uniforms for the Nazi soldiers, the mustard-colored shirts for the Hitler Youth, and white coveralls for camouflage for the Nazi soldiers fighting on the Russian front in winter.

We were also making some garments from material that was partially made from wood pulp. The splinters were still imbedded in the cloth, which often caused infections in our fingers.

The pay was minimal. One could not survive on it; often girls fainted at work from lack of nourishment. And the daily long marches to work from the ghetto and back, guided by the Jewish militia, were exhausting. Our ghetto was at a distance from the city, in a poor, undeveloped neighborhood previously occupied by blue-collar laborers.

Our only hope was the *Sonderkarte* that was to save us from deportation. In the beginning, if one was stopped on the street for deportation and could provide that card, they would be let go. Therefore we held on to that thread of hope despite the demands of work and the minimal pay. Maybe a miracle would happen in the meantime, we thought, and someone would stop the murderous Nazis.

We were considered by some Jewish resistance groups as traitors abetting the Nazis, though we hated every stitch we made.

For two years we had been constantly reminded by our shop manager, an elderly German “gentleman” whom we nicknamed *Dziadek* (Grandfather), how lucky we were to be employed at that shop and to be avoiding deportation. Unfortunately, the promise of our “protector” was not worth much when an order from a higher authority was issued to eliminate all the Jews from the area. In March 1943, as our shift was about to end and the workers in the next shift were waiting in the yard to take over, the SS surrounded the building and we were all taken for deportation. There was no sign of our *Dziadek* then to protect us.

We were marched to the gathering place where people for deportation were held. The building was the new Jewish high school—a place meant to prepare promising young people for a bright future had become a holding place for people of all ages whose future was either the concentration camp or the gas chamber.

When my parents found out about my detention, they and my two brothers came to the holding place. They brought me a suitcase with my personal belongings, which they dropped off at the building across the street. We could not communicate because of the crowd and noise, and because I was on the second floor. My brothers somehow managed to squeeze through the crowd. Partially in mime they managed to convey to me to look for something in the padding of my coat. There was some money sewn in.

I have etched the picture of them into my mind, standing there in front of the building. This was the first time we had been separated, even after appearing many times together at selection points for deportation. This would be the last time we would see each other.

The *Sonderkarte*, our right to life, now meant nothing. 🕊



SORROW FOLLOWS LAUGHTER

Agi Geva

AGI GEVA WAS BORN IN BUDAPEST, HUNGARY. SHE AND HER MOTHER AND SISTER TOGETHER SURVIVED AUSCHWITZ, PLASZOW, FORCED LABOR, AND A DEATH MARCH BEFORE BEING LIBERATED BY U.S. TROOPS IN 1945.



Whenever my children were having a good time, laughing their heads off, not responding even to my warnings to stop, I used to tell them, “You will see that in the end there will be tears!”

After a while they stopped laughing, but when they were older they wondered why—why should they stop?

Even my grandchildren would ask me, “Where does this idea come from?” I really could not remember why I had gotten so carried away telling them to stop laughing. It scared me to hear wild, uncontrolled laughter. It was a bad omen for me, but I could not explain it. All I knew was that I myself could not laugh anymore as I used to when I was younger.

During one of the Museum’s writing workshops I was asked to write about any event that happened before the war and my thoughts drifted to a day in March 1944 when I had some friends over to study for upcoming exams. When we were done, we sat around and relaxed, talking, joking, and laughing as only young girls do. We were already starting to get out of control when one of the girls, Marian, lifted her pinky and repeatedly said, “Little finger, pinky!” We laughed so hard. We begged her to stop, but when she kept quiet and just lifted her pinky it made us roll on the floor in hysterical laughter. We were so happy, so carefree. We loved our life, we loved each other, and we loved our studies. We were making our plans for the summer and discussing where to spend our vacation...

Three months later the entire Jewish population of my hometown of Miskolc, Hungary, was deported to Auschwitz. All of my girlfriends whom I had laughed with that day were killed.

When I thought about that laughter-filled day in the writing workshop, it suddenly dawned on me why I could never really laugh since then, why I had told my children to stop laughing, why I had thought that sorrow follows laughter.

It took more than 64 years for me to remember that beautiful day in my room with my friends, to remember being overwhelmed with youthful carefree laughter.

Now I understand the profound impact that the Holocaust has had on me and my family. Now I understand why I repeatedly warned my children, “Do not laugh so hard. You will see that in the end there will be tears.” 🌸

OPERA IN AUSCHWITZ

Agi Gena

There were arias from *La Bohème*, *Tosca*, *Madame Butterfly*, and many more that I had heard one memorable Sunday afternoon in Auschwitz.

They were sung in Hungarian by Lili, a woman from my small hometown of Miskolc. How precious that music was to me. With each note that Lili sang my spirits soared higher and higher over the gates of hell, lifted by the sheer beauty of the music and the sweetness of Lili's voice.

Lili first sang to us on a particularly dismal day when everyone's hope seemed to have run out. We were all sitting outside, numb with despair, when Lili stood up and started to sing a beautiful aria. At first her voice was unsure from lack of use, but as she continued to sing, her voice became more confident and strong. It was hard to believe that such a beautiful and powerful voice could emerge from such a tiny, frail young woman.

Our bodies had been pushed to their limits. We were all starving, our heads were shaved bald, and we were weak from exhaustion, but when Lili sang she seemed powerful, strong, and beautiful. Words cannot describe how her simple act affected me so deeply. I was mesmerized by the music. It replenished my supply of hope, the most precious commodity one could have in Auschwitz.

From that point on, Lili sang every Sunday afternoon. Even the Nazi guards came to listen to her sing. My looking forward to those Sunday afternoons helped me endure the rest of the week. In fact, my having something to look forward to helped make my life in the camp more bearable.

I am not sure what prompted Lili to sing that day; perhaps she sang as a way to feel human again, or perhaps she sang to cheer up all of us. Regardless of her intention, the memory of that voice still makes me shiver.

When I wrote this story I had no clue what had happened to Lili after we were liberated and I returned to Hungary. Everyone went their separate ways and attempted to rebuild their lives. But I thought about Lili often and finally decided to utilize the resources available to me at the Museum to try to find out where she was, if she was still alive. I cannot describe the emotions that overwhelmed me when I discovered that she is not only alive but living here in America, about a five-hour drive away. Surely fate had played a part in bringing us back together again... 🐦

HOW DID I GET FROM THERE TO HERE?

Nesse Godin

NESSE GODIN, FROM SIAULIAI, LITHUANIA, ENDURED A CONCENTRATION CAMP, FOUR LABOR CAMPS, AND A DEATH MARCH. SHE SPENT FIVE YEARS IN A DISPLACED PERSONS CAMP IN FELDAFING, GERMANY, BEFORE IMMIGRATING TO THE UNITED STATES.



My name is Nesse Godin and I am a survivor of the Holocaust.

I grew up in Shauliai, Lithuania, where I had a normal childhood. I was surrounded by a loving family and friends. All that changed when Nazi Germany occupied Lithuania.

Like all the Jewish people of my town, I was forced into a ghetto where I witnessed selections. Many people, young and old, were taken to be killed.

From the ghetto I was deported to the Stutthof concentration camp. There I was separated from my family. Everything I had was taken from me. There my name, Nesa Galperin, became a number: 54015.

Every morning we had to line up and the guards would look us over. People who looked too old, too young, or sick were taken to be killed.

From the concentration camp I was sent to labor camps. Somehow I survived four of them, living in a tent, sleeping on a bundle of straw, starved and beaten up.

When the German army was being defeated by the Allied forces, we were taken out of the last labor camp, called Malken. We were lined up in the morning and were told that we were going to another camp, but this was not true. The truth was that the Nazis were hoping to get us to a concentration camp to be killed. There were no trains or trucks to transport us. We started marching by foot.

We started what is called now a death march. We the prisoners named it so. We were marching day after day, week after week, in the freezing weather. No coat, no hat or gloves, just the blanket wrapped around the little dress. Very small amounts of food every few days.

We saw many prisoners who just could not walk anymore and fell and died or were shot by the guards. After marching about five or six weeks, we stopped near a small town called Chinow. We were put in a barn. Hunger and disease took their toll.

We were freed when the Soviet army took over the area.

As you can see, I lived and survived the most horrible time in the history of humanity, the Holocaust. I witnessed how human beings—the Nazis—can turn into beasts, killing innocent men women and children.

During those dark days I also experienced kindness and compassion by Jewish women who shared a bite of bread with me when I cried of hunger, wrapped my body in straw when I was shivering from the cold, picked me up from the ground when I was beaten severely. These Jewish women, like I, were treated by the Nazi guards like worthless insects that you can step on and kill.

These Jewish women who helped me are my guardian angels. They always gave me hope. They also made me promise that I would remember them and, most of all, what the Nazi murderers and their collaborators did to humanity.

When I was free I was 17 years old. I had a hard time dealing with those hard years under Nazi occupation, years of abuse. Starved, orphaned, and homeless. I was very lucky to find my mother and reunite with her. She was in many other camps and survived. She was 46. She was sure that they had killed me because I was so young and frail and in turn I assumed that they had killed her because she was older.

I was a very angry young girl. I hated the Nazis and their helpers, I was angry about what they did to the Jewish people, my family, and me.

When Mama and I got reunited and she saw how angry and full of hate I was and not even enjoying my freedom, she used to have long talks with me. She said that after all the horrible times we lived in it is no wonder that we were angry.

Mother said hate would destroy my life and would not accomplish anything. She said, "My child, you have the right to be angry after what the Nazi murderers did to you."

She said that my future was in my hands. It was my choice. I could hate and destroy my life, or I could choose to use my experience and teach the world what hatred can do.

Mother reminded me not to forget the women who helped me survive and the promise I made to them to teach the world what the Nazis did to humanity.

I was very lucky to have my mother, Sara Galperin, my mentor. I took her advice. I made a choice to enjoy life but not to forget the promise I made during those horrible years of the Holocaust. I share my memories with schoolchildren and adults of all races and religions with the hope that they will not allow hatred and prejudice in humanity ever again.

Yes, I use my past to make sure that no child like I was has to suffer ever again in the future.

I feel very privileged to be a volunteer for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, which I call the best institution of education for humanity. We tell the history of the Holocaust but, most of all, the Museum teaches our visitors, the young and old, the military and civilians, visitors from every continent, how to make it a better world. 🐦



TATA'S LAST WORD

Estelle Laughlin

ESTELLE LAUGHLIN, HER MOTHER, AND HER SISTER ENDURED THE LIQUIDATION OF THE WARSAW GHETTO, MAJDANEK, AND TWO FORCED LABOR CAMPS. AFTER LIBERATION BY THE RUSSIANS, THEY LIVED IN GERMANY BEFORE IMMIGRATING TO THE UNITED STATES IN 1948.



At dawn, the train jerked to a clanging halt. Those close to the bullet holes and cracks in the walls reported what they saw: “Armed German soldiers and Ukrainian guards, people—our people—behind barbed-wire fences, and chimneys. Oh! *Borze drogi! Gotinew!*” (“Dear God!”) People sighed. Icy fear spread from my chest to every cell in my body. I could not stop trembling. I felt as if it were the world shaking with a ravage force. I clutched my parents, forced myself to sit upright, and tried hard to stay alert. My mind was no longer entirely mine. It was doing things as if in a nightmare. After a short wait and solemn postulations about our future, we heard unbolting bars and rude shouts. “*Raus! Raus! Schnell!*” (“Out! Out! Move!”) And then they were upon us.

The train had brought us to Majdanek, the infamous extermination camp located among rolling wheat fields in Lublin. In no time our tormentors rushed us into a fenced-in field jammed with bedraggled people. We had had nothing to drink since they had chased us out of our bunker. We pleaded for water. The soldiers playfully picked up garden hoses, aimed streams of water above our heads, and let the water arch to the ground. Unable to withstand our thirst, we bent to the ground, dipped our hands into the muddy puddles that formed around us, and scooped out droplets of water to moisten our lips.

In this field of annihilation, I saw a faintly familiar figure of a young woman clutching a motionless child. I looked again and called out, “Mama, look! Piotrek’s mother!”

In her vomit-stained arms lay our beloved Piotrusz, the last hidden toddler we had known in the last days of the ghetto. He lay as motionless as a clay doll with a tousel of black curls. Piotrek’s mother

turned her ravaged face to us, pale as death. She moaned like a wounded animal and stammered, “I killed him. I killed him. I swallowed the cyanide too. I did not want him to die alone. God, why did I have to vomit? I want to die with him.”

“*Achtung! Aufstehen!*” (“Attention! Rise!”) A band of guards began to shove us into groups, separating men, women, and children from each other. “*Manner hier! Hunde! Frauen dort!*” (“Men here! Dogs! Women there!”) They ripped screaming children out of the arms of hysterical parents. “*Kinder da!! Los! Schnell!*” (“Children here! Move!”) Wham! Kick! Shove! And my father was torn away from us.

Unable to hold onto him, we called, “Tata! Tata!”

Mama screamed, “Samek! Samek!”

Tata called back our names, “Mania! Fredziuchna! Estusiuchna!”

We shouted encouragements: “Hold on! Endure! Stay alive! I love you! I love you!” We craned our necks not to lose sight of Tata. With guns pointing at us—I could hear the click of the weapons’ safety catches—we were ordered to sit on the ground and wait for fate to roll over us. Gusts of biting wind lashed across the open terrain. Tata pushed himself to the front row and sat cross-legged on the muddy ground with the group of exhausted and grief-stricken men. We three sat with the group of women directly across from Tata, locking eyes with him. A short distance from us, children remained confined behind a wire fence in a muddy enclosure resembling a pigsty. I could not bear to look in their direction. I feared that I too might be taken away from Mama and Fredka and thrown in with them. The children clung to the fence, pleading and yammering, “Mama! Tata! Where are you?” Their cries horrified me. They milled around in their isolated space desperately, frantically.

Tata was ill. He had a high fever and shivered with a chill. He took off his jacket and wound it

around his head to quell the chill. I could not stand the look of suffering I saw in his worn face. I was accustomed to looking into his eyes to find comfort—they always held kindness, steadiness, and reassurance. How filled with pain they were now!

I broke loose from the group of women and dashed across the field that separated us from Tata. He motioned me back, his face contorted with fear for my safety. I reached him and knelt down on the ground in front of him. “Please, Tata,” I said. “You need not worry about me. They will not get me.” I flipped the lapel of my coat and showed him the tiny vial of cyanide sewn to the lining. We all had it to use as a last resort. “They will never get me, Tata. Remember I have cyanide?” I meant to reassure him.

He shuddered, his eyes burning with anguish and love. He pleaded, “No, no! Don’t do that! You must live!”

All life was coming to an end for me, crushed under the boots of barbarians. All lessons of nobility and sanctity of life were piled on a pyre. From these ashes came Tata’s message to me: “Live!”

Tata vanished like a dream, sheathed in the radiant light of virtue and unyielding values. He remained my archangel of humanism, calm and gentle as a whisper, dignified as the Masada site. He remained an immortal voice, a mantra as eternal as the current in a stream. “Yes, yes, there is a separating line between the worst and the noblest in men; neither purges the other.” He vanished during a Walpurgis Night, leaving a pulse of goodness when the wrath of evil danced like Satan, setting my world in flames. 🕊



THE TABLE

Louise Lawrence-Israëls

LOUISE LAWRENCE-ISRAËLS WAS BORN IN HAARLEM, NETHERLANDS, AND SURVIVED THE WAR BY HIDING ON THE FOURTH FLOOR OF A ROWHOUSE IN AMSTERDAM.



The old family table now stands in the dining area of our house in Bethesda. The table was made in 1907 when my grandparents got married. It was made of solid mahogany wood in Holland. It was our custom to gather around it for big meals at birthdays, holidays, and any other excuse to be with family and friends. The table was made to seat 24. When it is closed, it seats eight, but you can pull it open and for each board you insert, another set of legs pops out from the bottom.

My grandmother loved to cook and bake and made many dinners. Her cooking tasted so good—her recipes call for pounds of butter, many eggs, and always cream instead of milk. There were not many Friday nights when the table was not surrounded by people who had a very good time at Shabbat dinner.

This routine was abruptly halted when the Nazis invaded Holland. German officers confiscated the house and my grandparents went into hiding.

What happened to the table? I wish the table could tell the story.

The house was pretty comfortable and had many rooms filled with beautiful furnishings. Did these Nazi officers have nice banquets? Did they enjoy sitting at such a beautiful table? What did they discuss? Did they talk there about strategies to murder Jews? Did they realize that many Shabbat dinners were enjoyed at the same table they were using for meetings to plot the removal of all Jews in Holland?

They must have had very good food, while we were always hungry in hiding.

After we were liberated, it took a while before my grandparents went back to their home—they were afraid of what they would find. They were very surprised. The house seemed cared for and it seemed that most of their furnishings were still there, including the table that could seat 24.

Of course, a lot of the artifacts were missing. Before they had gone into hiding, they had tried to safeguard many beautiful things.

My grandmother was so happy to see her table still standing. She realized though that a lot of her friends and family members would not enjoy her cooking anymore, would not be singing Shabbat songs, would not help her celebrate birthdays. They were no more; they had been put on transports and were brutally murdered. My grandmother was a strong person and she made up her mind to continue with her gatherings. It was not easy. For many years, food was rationed and it was difficult to get the right ingredients for her recipes.

The first party that I remember was my grandfather's 70th birthday in 1949. The table was so pretty. There were flowers and everything was shining. I think we were about 14 people. Dinner was delicious.

My grandmother passed away eight years later, and the table remained in her house but it got no use for the next two years while my grandfather lived alone there.

Then my dad needed a table in his office, and the table was moved to Amsterdam after my grandfather passed away. My father used it as a desk and for meetings for the next 14 years.

When my dad retired, we had one more gathering in his office. We celebrated my dad's retirement seated at the table with wine and cheese. I was living in Italy but I did not want to miss the event. I did not tell my parents that I would try to come. At the time the party was supposed to start, I rang the doorbell at the office. It was dusk and when my father opened the door he did not recognize me for an instant. Then a big smile appeared on his face.

The table remained for a few more years in the same building. In the meantime my family moved to Belgium. One day my parents asked us if we had an interest in the table. We immediately said yes. A few weeks later we borrowed a friend's van and went to Holland to pick it up, including all the leaves to extend it.

When my grandmother had the table made, she also had beautiful linens made for it. My mom gave me the largest tablecloths and napkins, and the smaller ones she gave to my sister. We made a promise to each other that we would lend the tablecloths to one another, since some of them were matching.

We did a lot of entertaining while we lived in Belgium; the table was used a lot. Our eldest daughter had her bat mitzvah in 1980 and many of our relatives came to celebrate with us. I went to France to buy special croissants, and my mother-in-law brought many pounds of smoked salmon from the States. The day after the bat mitzvah we had a family breakfast. We opened the table with all the extensions and had a breakfast for 24. I borrowed the extra tablecloth from my sister.

The table was extended again to all its glory. We did the same for our other daughters. After our assignment in Belgium was over we moved back to the United States. The military sent movers who packed the table carefully and the table arrived at our new house.

The next big event was our eldest daughter's wedding in 1989. The table was used for dinners with family and friends and sometimes we had to add another table so we could seat everybody. This time my sister brought her tablecloth and napkins all the way from Holland.

Cooking and setting the table always kept me busy. All the holidays and birthdays were celebrated at the table. When my husband retired from the Army, we brought the table to our house in Maryland. Now we sit for dinner at the table with our own children and grandchildren. There are 14 of us. Our youngest granddaughter danced on the table, it is as strong as ever. 🐣

THE WICKER CHAIR

Louise Lawrence-Israëls

The first three years of my life, which I spent in hiding from 1942 until 1945, seemed very normal to me. Three adults—my mom, my dad, and our friend Selma—as well as my brother were around all the time. They paid attention to me, played with me, and taught me the things you teach a little girl. Of course, I did not realize that our life was only indoors and that going outside to play or for a walk were not part of our daily routine. The adults kept their fears from the children.

In 1944, when I turned two, my parents wanted to have a birthday party for me. It took planning since they could not go to a toy store to buy gifts and they needed time to prepare for the big day. My mom made me a beautiful little dress; she used a cotton blouse of her own and the fabric was blue with little elephants on it. The dress was all handmade, with embroidery on the top part.

Selma made a doll from odd pieces of fabric. The face was made out of an old silk stocking. She even made extra clothes so I could change her if I wanted. The doll was also handmade. A few days before my actual birthday, a friend of my Dad brought a doll's wicker chair to our place.

On my birthday, my mom dressed me in my new dress and brought me to the living room. Then my family sang "*Lang zal ze leven*" (the Dutch version of "Happy Birthday," although the translation literally means "She will live a long life") to me and it was time for presents. My brother had a pull-horse made out of wood, and he told me I could play with it for the day. Selma gave me the doll and I pressed it to my heart right away, and then my parents gave me the doll chair. The chair was big enough for me to sit in it, and that is just what I did.

Somebody took a photograph and you have never seen a happier girl. I loved the doll, until it fell apart many years later. The dress still exists; it is very fragile now. Our eldest daughter wore it on her second birthday, and then she put it on one of her dolls.

The chair had a heavy life. I sat on it until I became too big, I stood on it when I wanted to reach for something, and I threw it at my brother—or he threw it at me—when we were angry at each other. The chair moved with us to many places and our children played with it. My mom had the chair restored in 1949 by a local basket-weaver who lived in our little town. She knew how important the chair was to our family and me. Replacing the chair with a new one was not an option.

About a year ago I asked our children if they would agree to my donating the chair to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. They had no objections.

A few months ago, I participated in the Museum's *First Person* program. Susan Snyder, one of the Museum's curators, interviewed me and as a surprise she had the doll's chair brought out onto the stage to illustrate my story. How strange to see the chair wheeled onto the stage and handled with white cotton gloves! The chair has had a rough past—we were not careful with it at all—but now it is being handled with extra care and professionally repaired and conserved. Other children will be able to see how special my second birthday in hiding was because my parents and Selma wanted it to be special. 🐦

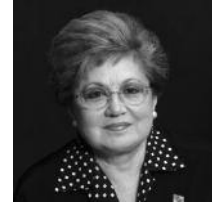
Postscript: The restoration of the chair is now finished. It is once again a beautiful chair with a colorful history, and sometime in the near future it will be added to the Museum's Permanent Exhibition.



THE GIRL FROM THE FOREST

Charlene Schiff

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



When I woke, I was in a real bed with clean sheets, a blanket, and a pillow. The last thing I remembered was being in my pit in the forest and getting sick. I wondered now if I was a prisoner. I wondered if I should try to escape. It was still dark, but soon dawn would come and it would be too late to try to run. Where could I go? I thought. I didn't even know where I was. When daybreak arrived I realized I was in a hospital, but under whose jurisdiction I wondered. The attendants moved quietly, their muffled voices not clear enough for me to distinguish the language they spoke. If it was German I knew only that I would need to hide.

A very loud and jolly woman entered, bidding everyone a good morning—in Russian. She stopped at each bed. When she came to my bed, she exclaimed, "*Dieвушка iz lesa!*" ("The girl from the forest!") She extended her arms for a hug, but I fell back dizzy and light-headed. "*Niczewo, niczewo*" ("Nothing, nothing"), she said, meaning it was ok. She said it was ok.

I was safe. I could relax and I fell asleep. They woke me for breakfast, which I was too weak to eat by myself. It was a drink that tasted like chicory and a piece of dark bread with some marmalade. An attendant told me the head nurse wanted to speak to me when I was finished.

The same woman who had greeted me that morning came in. She pulled a chair up next to my bed, drew curtains for privacy, and started to tell me a story I could hardly believe.

"Remember when you were in the forest hiding?" she began. Apparently I had become very ill. The Soviet soldiers had been pushing the Germans back through my forest. Several Soviet soldiers

stepped on the camouflaged cover of the pit where I was hidden and they realized something suspicious was under there. Upon investigation, they discovered me, sick, surrounded by my own filth. They cleaned me up and took me along to their field hospital, which was actually a tent. They kept me with them until they reached the city of Luck. There they located a regular functioning hospital and left me with a note pinned to my shirt. The nurse quoted the contents of the note. It said: "This is a child of the forest. Treat her gently, with great care." 🌿

A SPECIAL DIET

Charlene Schiff

There are experiences in my life that are difficult to describe, experiences that were painful and repulsive, and this is one of them. I remember exactly when and how it happened. It was late autumn 1942 and my most recent search for food had ended badly. Nearing a village, I had managed to wake up seemingly every dog. A barrage of rifle shots accompanied the dogs for good measure. There was nowhere to hide. I escaped detection by running as if I had wings. Near the road, I spotted a well and jumped in. It took a full day for me to claw my way out. Having no choice, I returned to the forest where I had started.

It was a large dense forest. It stretched a long way and it would have taken at least a week to go back east. The west had shown me great hostility. I could go south or north. From my vantage point after climbing a tall tree, it looked as if it would take days to reach a village. I could just barely see some outlines of buildings if I looked north. Looking to the south, I couldn't see any buildings at all. This made my decision easy: I had to go north.

I tried to think logically, but overwhelming hunger clouded my mind and weakened my body. There are no words in any language I know to accurately describe real hunger. Today I hear people say they are starved because it is time for lunch or dinner. What do they know about real hunger, I wonder.

I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was cold, and I became very angry. I wanted to lie down and die, but anger and rage would not allow me to give up. I didn't have enough energy to dig the usual little pit for hiding, so I spent the night in the dense underbrush.

When dawn arrived, I started to lick leaves moist from the morning dew. Suddenly I felt a tickling sensation on my tongue. It was a worm. Without thinking, I swallowed it and started looking for more.

All sorts of small creatures found their way into my mouth. My stomach accepted this new food and the pain and cramps became less severe.

In a couple of days I gained enough energy to dig a little hole and camouflage it well. There I rested for a few days, filling my stomach with assorted little creatures and getting ready for the journey north.

It took a long time before I reached the edge of the forest. By that time my new diet didn't seem so strange to me. Anger toward everyone and everything had disappeared. A strong resolve to survive took its place.

For many years after I started speaking about the Holocaust, I was reluctant to share this experience with my audiences. In 2003, my firstborn grandson, Perry Tyler Schiff, invited me to speak at his school in Rhode Island. I decided to mention my "special diet" in a one-sentence statement.

The group reaction to my presentation was fantastic. Perry's peers thought that his grandmother was "awesome" and "cool." A remark my grandson made casually after he asked me for details about my life during the Holocaust gave me a different perspective on this painful memory. In a matter-of-fact manner, Perry said, "You know, Nana, worms are very nutritious, they are all protein." He'll never know how comforting his words were for me. 🐛

MY BOOTS

Esther Rosenfeld Starobin

ESTHER ROSENFELD 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.



I love to look at the boots that are so stylish these days. There are so many different types but they all remind me of the little boots that are tucked away in a safe place in my home. My boots are brown and lace up the front. It is obvious that they have been worn a lot and patched again and again.

The boots traveled with me from Germany as I left my home and parents when I was just two years old to start a new life in England. I was part of the *Kindertransport* that rescued Jewish children and sent them to live in England. I suppose I wore them on the train, the ship, and then another train as I traveled to a new family. In Thorpe I must have worn those boots for a long time. My foster father, who worked in a shoe factory, repaired them many times, as is evident when I look at them. Like all children, I outgrew the boots and cared nothing more about them.

Many, many years later, in 1964, Alan Harrison, my foster brother, came to the United States as a Fulbright exchange teacher. He brought me a gift from my foster mother of these boots, which she had kept safe all these years.

I find it strange to think that these ordinary boots can represent such caring and love to me. My parents bought the shoes for me in Germany. My foster father repaired them for me in England. My foster mother saved them for me and sent them to me in the United States when I was an adult and could appreciate the significance of a little pair of brown boots. 🐦

S U M M E R O F ' 4 2

Esther Rosenfeld Starobin

For many baby boomers out there, the movie was a defining moment of adolescence. This new musical version is funny, wistful, and entertaining from start to end. I hope you'll join us to relive your youth, or to experience for the first time this portrait of a young man growing up just a bit too fast.

—Round House Theatre advertisement

Fred and I ate a quick dinner after he returned from his regular Wednesday volunteering stint at the Smithsonian. The musical we were going to see that night had gotten a good review and we both looked forward to seeing it. Since we had changed our tickets, we had to stop at the box office before proceeding to our balcony seats. While we waited for the show to begin we scanned the program and read a synopsis of it. It sounded as though it would be lighthearted even though there was a serious side to it.

The musical began with the characters planning an evening on the beach and how they would meet girls. It seemed like typical teenage angst with a good setting, nice voices, and period costumes—very entertaining. But as I watched, it did not hold my attention and I started to think about the summer of 1942. I withdrew further from the show and began to think about how different life was in Europe at that time. In 1942 I was living in Thorpe, England, with my foster family. Norwich, the large city of which Thorpe was a suburb, had been heavily bombed by the Germans in 1941 and again in 1942. There was severe rationing of food and clothing. We carefully considered our excursions into Norwich on Saturday afternoons before leaving Thorpe.

My mind really began to focus on my parents, who were interned in the Rivesaltes transit camp in France. The last letter we have that my parents sent to us children and our aunt is dated May 11, 1942.

Our mother, Kathe Rosenfeld, wrote to her beloved children and sister thanking us for the money we sent. She also mentions that she has not heard from our relatives in the United States and asks if Bertl has written to an uncle about the need for help to emigrate and for money. In the remainder of the letter, my mother talks about her and my father's life and work in the camp, news from other relatives and neighbors, and a wish to hear how Herman, my brother, is doing in the United States. My mother continues to talk about what might be possible in the future.

Our father wrote a short note at the bottom, telling us they were healthy, "though the rest leaves a lot to be desired." He also states that they would like to know more about what each of us children and his sister-in-law are doing. Our father, Adolf Rosenfeld, continued to admonish us to be very good and obey our aunt. The final postscript tells us our father's replacement leg is finished and it will be picked up tomorrow.

My attention returned to the play when the main character picked up a telegram to the woman of his fantasies. The telegram tells of the death of her husband in combat in Europe. In the summer of 1942 our parents were two of 1,015 deportees on Convoy 19. On August 14 their convoy was sent to Auschwitz. Our parents were gassed upon arrival. Death was everywhere the summer of '42. 🍷



KEEP OFF THE GRASS

Alfred Traum

ALFRED (FREDDIE) TRAUM WAS BORN IN VIENNA, AUSTRIA, IN 1929. IN JUNE 1939, HE AND HIS OLDER SISTER WERE SENT TO ENGLAND ON THE *KINDERTRANSPORT*. THEIR PARENTS WERE MURDERED IN THE HOLOCAUST.



The moon glistened on the river Weser as our long column of Centurion tanks made its way back to our barracks at Luneberg. We were passing through Hamlin, the very same town that gained fame through the stories of the Pied Piper who rid it of a rat infestation many centuries ago. The street was lined with neat houses and manicured lawns to our right and the river to our left. We rumbled along, the tank tracks clattering on the cobble streets and shattering the still of the evening. Here and there lights flickered on as homeowners drew back curtains to see what the noise was all about. We were not welcome guests there. It was late in the summer of 1952 and the conclusion of a month-long Rhine army maneuver.

My thoughts of the Pied Piper were abruptly interrupted by Dinger Bell, our driver. “Fred, what’s that sign down there on the lawn?” he asked me. “What does it say?” Knowing that I knew some German, he was always asking me to translate something for him. I don’t think it was his thirst for knowledge that led him to ask but more likely the boredom of being stuck in the driver’s compartment.

I took a look. The sign read “*Betreten Verboten.*” “Oh, it just means keep off the grass,” I answered.

“Thanks,” he laughed.

As I took a further look at the neat oval cast-iron sign with its raised letters, it triggered a memory I had long thought dead. Like an odor or a familiar sound, the sight of something stored in your memory bank has the power to transport you through time to recapture a moment. That was the effect that sign had on me.

I could feel the frustration and rage rising within me. I was again that nine year-old-boy in Vienna returning home from school. As usual, I took the short-cut through the park. What used to be fun—coming home with my classmates—had turned into a daily nightmare. These were the same kids with whom I grew up and with whom I had played all the time. But since the *Anschluss* they had all been enlisted into various Nazi groups. The poison spread within them. At first they just distanced themselves from me, shunning me; later they turned to name-calling, taunting, pushing, and shoving. On the particular occasion the sign had triggered the memory of, the taunting became more physical. One of the boys ripped my school satchel off my back and threw it on the grass. They all laughed as they ran away. As I stepped over the small railing surrounding the grassy area to retrieve my satchel, a policeman suddenly materialized, seemingly out of nowhere. He must have been there and witnessed the whole scene and probably enjoyed it, too. Now it was time for him to have some fun. He caught me by the scruff of my neck, dragged me on to the pathway, and gave me a harsh dressing-down.

“Don’t they teach Jew boys how to read?” he said, pointing to the sign. He then took down my name and address. Several days later, my mother received a letter ordering her to come to school. She came to our classroom. As was the custom, students were to stand up when an adult entered the classroom out of respect for our elders. We all stood up as my mother entered.

“Sit down at once,” the teacher barked at us. “You don’t need to stand up for her.” He then went into a lengthy diatribe about the lack of respect Jews seem to have for the beauty of Vienna’s parks. My mother and I stood in silence, having to listen to one insult after another before we were dismissed.

Shortly after that incident, but probably not because of it, I was expelled from the school and transferred to a school for Jews. This is not to be confused with a Jewish school, which generally provides a Jewish education. No, this was a school where Jews were herded together so they would not be able to

infect Aryan children. This school was much farther from my home and I had to take a streetcar past several stops to get there. But aside from that, it was a far happier place to be, to sit once again among friends. Our teacher, Professor Schwartzbard, was excellent and wonderful. He had taught at the university level until he was fired because he was Jewish, and now he was relegated to teaching fourth-graders. The university's loss was our gain. We all liked him.

Frequently a bunch of bullies hung around in front of the school when we left to go home. Since I didn't live in a Jewish neighborhood, I had to make my way home alone. On more than one occasion I was chased. I never slowed down to find out what would happen. I outran them all. I was fast.

Streetcars traveled in the center of the road and motor traffic had to stop when the streetcars came to a halt. By each streetcar stop was a small island for people to stand while waiting for their ride. On one occasion, I was waiting along with others but before I could climb aboard, the door closed and I was left standing on the island. I was small and the driver probably hadn't noticed me. Traffic began to move. I was so amazed at what was happening that I took a step backward and suddenly I was hit by the fender of an oncoming vehicle and knocked to the ground. The next thing I remember was a man standing over me saying, "Are you hurt?"

"No," I answered.

"Where are you going?"

"To school," I said, somewhat hesitantly.

"Jump in, I'll take you to your school."

I thanked him and climbed into the passenger seat of the car. It was a brown staff car of the dreaded SA, complete with a small Nazi flag attached to the fender. The man driving the car was an SA officer. Generally, when a car of this type pulled up in front of a school like ours, it spelled trouble. It wouldn't be a social call. This time, however, you should have seen the look of some of my school friends when I stepped out of the car. It was the talk of the day.

To top it off, I bought an ice cream with my fare money.

But all days didn't always finish off in that satisfying way. One day when I was being chased by a bunch of bullies I quickly turned onto a side street and ducked into the first building entrance. These buildings were old and had massive doorways that could accommodate a fully laden horse and cart. Two doors swung inward to the side of the entrance. There was just enough room for me to squeeze behind the door. I had often played hide-and-seek and used the shelter of these large doors. I could hear the boys talking as they came to the corner of the street, looking around and wondering where I had disappeared to. I stayed there for what seemed to me an interminably long while. I thought that the beating of my heart would give me away. It sounded like an anvil being pounded at a blacksmith's shop. Outside the sound of the boys had stopped; they had given up their chase. I continued to stay there a while longer and then with the relief of being safe I felt a sudden warmth around my shorts and legs. I had wet myself. I was so ashamed, I was unable to move. I lingered a while longer and then finally made my way home. Not long after that experience, I left with my sister for England on the *Kindertransport*.

Twelve years later, I was back in former Nazi territory. Although I was too young to have fought in the war, nevertheless I was there in Germany—not as a victim but as a tank commander with the Royal Scot Greys, the British army of the Rhine occupying forces. The weight and power of the Centurion tank, with all its armament, felt good beneath me. Perhaps there is some justice in the world after all. 🐦

BELONGING

Susan Warsinger

SUSAN WARSINGER WAS BORN IN BAD KREUZNACH, GERMANY. SHE ESCAPED WITH HER BROTHER AND WAS SMUGGLED INTO FRANCE BEFORE LEAVING FOR AMERICA IN 1941.



My biggest dream upon coming to the United States from France was to become an American citizen because I thought that if I was a citizen, all of my memories of the Holocaust would disappear.

I went to the public schools in Washington, D.C., and I did not get a sense of belonging because I felt the other students were secretly making fun of me because I was an immigrant and could not speak English properly. Much later I went to the University of Maryland and I did not get a sense of belonging there because I thought my peers were superior to me. I had boyfriends who provided me with no sense of belonging because many of them were also refugees from Europe. When I met my future husband, a third-generation American, I started to feel safe. I married this tall and handsome American man who had been in the United States Army but I still remembered my experiences in Europe, even though I tried to put them in the back of my mind.

I became pregnant with my first child while I was working in the Executive Office of the President on Pennsylvania Avenue located next to the White House. The office was situated where the State Department had been during the Holocaust. The Bureau of the Budget, my place of employment, occupied the first and second floors of this grand old building which had marble staircases and small elevators located throughout. The Joint Committee of Economic Advisors and the conference rooms were on the third and fourth floors. I was in the ninth month of my pregnancy when it was necessary for me to ascend to the third floor on some errand. Since I was not in shape to climb the marble staircase, I went to the small elevator next to my office which was not used very often, pushed the *up* button, and when the doors opened, there was our president, Harry S. Truman, with one of his security guards!

All three of us were shocked upon seeing each other. The security guard probably thought that he needed to adjust the elevator so that when he was escorting the President, the doors of the elevator would not open upon request of the public. I thought President Truman, who was a very folksy politician and who had a lot of charming ways about him, wanted to tell me that it was okay to have interrupted his journey up to the fourth floor. For me, that instant was a major turning point in how I felt about myself. Even though I had been a citizen of the United States for some time, I wondered how a child who had been in the Holocaust could come face-to-face with the President of the United States. There must be some order and perfection in the world after all. The incident took only a moment. The guard asked me to please wait for the elevator to return, but before the doors closed President Truman wished me good luck with my baby.

I knew then that my child and my future children, my husband, and I would be safe and live in a society where we belonged. 🐦

THE INTERPRETER

Susan Warsinger

It looked like the Fourth of July from our attic window in a small village in France. Only it was not fireworks that were exploding in midair; it was bombs being dropped from German airplanes on our beloved city of Paris. We watched in awe at the spectacle that was being displayed in front of us. We were young children, and we could not imagine what was to come.

After the German army marched into Paris, it seemed to us that much of the population, including our caretakers, was extremely afraid and wanted to escape the environs. Since Versailles is just a little southwest of Paris, it must have seemed logical to flee to that town in order to postpone confrontation with the *boches*, the name that the French gave to the Germans.

I do not remember how we got to the Château de Versailles. Some people went on the train but I think that we walked along with many French people because it is only about 15 miles from Paris. The palace that Louis XIV built there was unbelievably beautiful in our eyes. We had never seen such a grand building before. We knew that it was our destination and that we were going to be housed in it until we could find refuge somewhere else.

Since so many people had to have a place to sleep, it was decided to put us into the Hall of Mirrors, which is the largest room in the palace. Our beds were made of burlap and filled with straw and made such noise every time someone turned around. The straw was rough and it scratched our backs as we lay on our mattresses next to each other. It seemed so strange sleeping on the floor and looking at those elegant mirrors which reached all the way to the ceiling.

This well-designed sleeping arrangement did not last long. The next morning we saw the German army come marching into our sanctuary. There were many soldiers and they were led by a German official in a military car. This official demanded to talk to the highest representative in Versailles. The Nazi

officer did not know how to speak French and our representative did not know how to speak German. Therefore, they needed an interpreter. Where were they going to find one? Someone pointed to me. They knew that I spoke German, that I was born in Bad Kreuznach, that I was Jewish, and that I had fled from Germany after Kristallnacht. However, no one was able to tell this to the Nazi officer. They pushed me in front of him and he began asking me questions that pertained to the town of Versailles, which I was supposed to translate into French for our representative. It was not too difficult for me because I had spent my entire life in Germany and my vocabulary was as extensive as any German nine-year-old's. My French had also improved because I was diligently studying and speaking it.

I do not remember all the questions and answers that I interpreted for those gentlemen but I do remember that both seemed to be satisfied with their conversation. When it was all over, the German officer asked me how I knew German so well and I remembered, even as young as I was, that I must not tell him that I was Jewish and had fled from Germany illegally. I told him with great confidence, "*Die Französisch Privatschulen sind sehr gut und ich habe da Deutsche gelernt*"—the French public school system was very good and that I had learned my German there. He bowed down to me while shaking my hand and thanked me.



GOING HOME : LIBERATION , MAY 5 , 1945

Martin Weiss

MARTIN WEISS WAS BORN IN POLANA, CZECHOSLOVAKIA, AND SURVIVED AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU AND MAUTHAUSEN. HE WAS LIBERATED BY U.S. TROOPS AT THE GUNSKIRCHEN CAMP IN AUSTRIA IN 1945.



We couldn't believe that the Nazi soldiers hadn't killed us. We never thought that we'd be free again. After we discovered that we were liberated from the Gunskirchen concentration camp in Austria, we found out that there had been orders to shoot us all, but the captain in charge had decided not to carry them out.

There we were, the five of us: Moshe, my cousin Jack, two of his friends, and me. They ended up in Gunskirchen from Hungary where they had been in slave labor battalions. As the Russians kept pushing forward, the Hungarians kept on retreating into Austria. As a result, the others ended up in Gunskirchen just as I had after a forced march from Mauthausen. One of the other fellows also had his Uncle Hershel with him; he was older, about 55. At the time that was considered very old to still be living.

When we finally walked out of the camp the following morning, the first thing on our minds was to find food. We decided to explore the countryside. Soon we found a German army truck locked and abandoned in the field and we saw a tub of lard on the front seat. One of the guys hit the window of the truck with his fist and the glass fell into the lard. Carefully we scooped out the glass with the palms of our hands. Then we climbed into the back of the truck and found leather hides ready for use. We got very excited. All of us took as many hides as we could, figuring we could take them to a shoemaker and he could make us shoes. As we continued walking, we saw a farmhouse. We decided to stop there, hoping to find some food. When we got to the house, we knocked on the door and a lady opened the door just a little. Politely we asked her for some flour, eggs, and water, and she obliged. There was a barn in the back

yard with a big primitive kettle. We mixed all the ingredients with the lard and made dumplings and cooked in this kettle. They were delicious. That was our first meal after we were freed.

After our meal, someone suggested that each one of us should contribute and give some hides to the lady of the house. For years I never thought about this incident or what it meant. What is amazing to me even now is that we didn't feel like human beings. We were angry and so full of hate. To us, every German was a Nazi, and justifiably so. In spite of our bad experiences, we behaved civilly and it puzzles me even today. To understand our behavior, I have to give credit to our parents, who instilled in us the ethics and morals of our ancestors.

After spending the night in the barn, we walked in the morning to a main road and soon we heard that the American army had set up a gathering camp to feed and delouse us. When we came in contact with the American soldiers, we were overjoyed—to us they were true heroes. The first thing they did was delouse us and give us fresh clothes. These turned out to be German army uniforms and boots. Of course, we were apprehensive to wear them because we were afraid someone would mistake us for German soldiers, especially when we came in contact with Russian troops.

We were billeted in a stable with clay floors, but we had straw to sleep on and they also gave us clean blankets. As soon as we got there I got very sick. I had a high fever and my throat closed completely. I couldn't swallow and couldn't even stand up; I didn't know what was wrong with me. My cousin Jack had to stand in line for hours in the hot sun just to get an aspirin and a jelly sandwich, but all I could do was lick the jelly because my throat was closed.

In about ten days I started feeling better. Then all we could think of was going home. When I got better I found out that Hershel had died because he couldn't tolerate the food given to him. The tragedy was that the same thing happened to many thousands more.

After three weeks in this American camp we felt stronger. We decided to go home and find out who had survived. We figured everyone would do the same no matter where they were. As we were walking around the area, we noticed that people were getting on an open truck. We found out the truck was going to Plzen in the Czech Republic. We didn't waste any time and got right on. When we reached Plzen the truck stopped in the city square. We were very happy to be on Czech soil again. Some men had made up a sign saying that we had been in Mauthausen. It made a big impression on the locals as they were very well acquainted with that camp because thousands of Czech citizens were tortured and killed there.

The proprietor of a fancy restaurant came out and invited us into his restaurant. He had the tables covered with fine tablecloths and fancy silverware. We could not believe our eyes. He fed us all. What made this even more remarkable was that there was still a food shortage. To me this man was proof that goodness exists even in the worst times.

So here we were in Plzen with no money or agency to help us and we were anxious to get home. Somehow we got to the railroad station and got on the train going homeward. After a short distance we came to a bombed-out bridge so we had to disembark and walk into a ravine and cross over to the other side to continue our journey. This happened several times.

Eventually we met up with some Russian troops and immediately we found differences between them and the American troops. At night, when we slept in the bombed out stations, the Russian soldiers would steal our boots. As a matter of fact, they stole two right-foot boots from two different individuals and ended up without a pair.

I recall one humorous incident. We came to a bombed-out train station where only the walls were standing. The place was packed to capacity so you couldn't move. As we pushed our way in, we found a group of men from our hometown. We found ourselves all the way in back of all those people and we

knew that most of us would not be able to get on the train. This one guy from our vicinity who was known to be a prankster said to us very simply, "When I start moving, hold on to me and ignore everything around you and we'll get on the train."

As the doors opened he very nonchalantly started to gesture as though he was picking lice off his clothes and tossing them to both sides. Seeing this, many people parted and we advanced towards the front exit to the platform. We got on the train but there was no space anywhere. People were hanging on to the sides, holding on to the handles. A few of us got on the roof of the train, where we just stretched out and sometimes even dozed off. When the train turned around a bend, we would awake with a jolt.

When we arrived outside Bratislava, Slovakia, we found out we had to pass through a tunnel. I remember being very scared so we lay very flat and still until we passed under it. From Bratislava we made our way to Budapest, Hungary. When we got there, there was nothing standing. The whole city was in ruins. The Russians didn't spare anything and didn't treat the Hungarians very kindly. After all, they were the Nazis, and I remember saying, "Good, let them suffer."

Without wasting too much time, we continued our trip home by train. When the conductor asked for our tickets, we started cursing in Russian and after that he didn't bother us. The Hungarians were fearful of the Russians. While on the train the Russian soldiers were constantly walking from car to car, looking for loot. One of them stopped when he saw a man with a watch. He approached him and said, "Give me your watch. I'll trade you for all these." Then he rolled up his sleeve and he had six or eight good watches on his arm. He gave them all to him in exchange for one watch that had been wound. The Russian soldier didn't know that you had to wind watches.

A man told us of another similar incident that took place in Budapest. This Russian soldier took away an alarm clock from a Hungarian family, and as he was crossing the street, the alarm went off so he put the clock on the curb and shot it with his Kalashnikov rifle, thinking it was a bomb.

As we continued our trip we reached the border of Hungary and Karpatska Rus (now Ukraine). We had to change trains to continue to our destination and the only thing available was a freight train so we hopped on it. All of a sudden we realized we were going back to Hungary and the train was moving fast. We were still in the station area with the tracks crossing in all directions. All at once, we made a decision to jump off the moving train. I don't know how we didn't get hurt.

Our destination was Mukachevo (or Munkach, in Hungarian). We arrived at this big city railroad station and I ran into someone I knew and he informed me that my oldest brother, Mendl, was back and living in a town by the name of Bilka. His wife's family had a house there so he had settled there. After hearing this news I separated from the others and went off in the direction of Bilka. The train didn't go all the way there. I must have walked the rest of the way to Bilka, about five miles or so. Somehow I got there. I don't remember how. I didn't have any money, I was 16 years old, and I didn't know the area. To this day, I can't explain how I did it. 🐦



A STUDENT IN A NAZI SCHOOL

Rabbi Jacob G. Wiener, Ph.D.

RABBI JACOB G. WIENER WAS BORN AND RAISED IN BREMEN, GERMANY, WHERE HE SURVIVED KRISTALLNACHT AND NEGOTIATED WITH THE GESTAPO TO SET UP A SCHOOL FOR JEWISH CHILDREN BEFORE HE IMMIGRATED TO CANADA IN 1939.



I was born a few years before Hitler and his Nazi Party took control of Germany. At first, Jewish youngsters were still allowed to attend German public and high schools. But with Hitler assuming power in 1933, everything changed suddenly, immediately, unannounced.

Even though I had already noticed subtle antisemitism some time before, now it hit us daily. We had never expected this would happen in Germany, such a “highly cultivated” country which German Jews loved and served loyally. There were a few teachers who had already become Nazis before 1933 and had sported their uniforms publicly. But after the *Umschwung*, as Hitler’s ascendancy to power was called, every teacher wanted to show that he was going along with the new regime. I say “he” because women teachers were a minority and mainly employed only in kindergartens or early childhood schools. *Umschwung* literally means “to swing around,” to change, and that was the trend of that time.

Now all teachers had to join the Nazi Party, in which they were brainwashed to follow the party’s antisemitic policy. They were also forced to refute their former political beliefs. If they did not, they were “retired” from their jobs. Henceforth, many teachers would come in dressed in Nazi uniform. My class teacher called me over and tried to explain this new situation, as it affected his relationship with me. “I will have to teach Hitler’s book, *Mein Kampf*, but be assured I will not let the class express the *Judenhass* [hatred of Jews] against you.”

A new course of study was introduced in school in the early 1930s called *Rassenkunde* (race knowledge). The teacher wanted to spare me from being in class when he would teach this subject. Therefore, he taught it on Saturdays when I did not attend school.

One day, another teacher explained in class, “I want to show you how a Jew looks.” Of course, I, the only Jew present, was to be his sample.

“You can recognize a Jew simply by his features,” he said. “A German, a Nordic, is tall, has blond hair, blue eyes, a straight nose, and detached ear lobes. A Jew is short and stocky, has dark eyes, a crooked nose, and his earlobes are tied to the skin.”

“Oh, no, sir,” I replied. “You are wrong. I also have blue eyes and detached earlobes.”

That did not stop him from making further statements about Jews. “Every person on earth belongs to a race. The Jews are no religion, no ethnic or cultural group; they are a race like everyone else. Now, there are superior and inferior races. We, the Nordic, the Aryan, are the superiors. The Poles, the Gypsies, and the lowest, the Jews, are all inferiors.”

Having the courage to stand up, I countered, “You are wrong, sir, there is not such a thing, as you say, as superior or inferior. I would rather say that we humans are all different. And thank G-d for that. We need each other. I will give you an example: A baker knows his baking job. He is superior in it, more so than someone who has not studied baking in detail—for instance, a mechanic. The latter normally knows more in his profession of mechanics than the baker, and vice versa. Thus, every person has one area in which he is more knowledgeable and another one where he is not as proficient as someone who has studied it in more detail.”

In another subject called Philosophical Propadeutic (history of philosophy), the teacher used the book *The Myth of the Twentieth Century* by Alfred Rosenberg, an Estonian non-Jew with a Jewish name. Man, according to his idea, was a combination of blood and flesh without a spirit. His body was guided by “intuition” which man had the power to evoke. Hitler, he claimed, possessed this intuition, which he was able to implant in all his followers.

There was another change for students attending school during Hitler's time. At the entrance to the building, students had to lift their arms and say, "Heil Hitler!" I was exempt from doing so.

It was a miracle that I was allowed to continue at a German high school and *Oberealschule* (a higher-grade advanced learning school) until I graduated in 1936 and received a degree called *Abitur* (a special diploma which granted immediate entrance to a university). There was already a *numerus clausus*, a quota, for the number of Jews who would be accepted in public institutions in Germany.

At the time of my graduation, a young Jewish Hebrew teacher, Mr. Gustav Rosemann from Bavaria, settled with his family in Bremen. We became very close friends. He persuaded me to join the Jewish Orthodox Aguda Organization. I decided that it was time to stop attending German schools. With the Nazis growing in power and antisemitism on the rise, I felt it was best to study and live with fellow Jews. I remembered that a German schoolteacher had tried to explain why he had joined the Nazi party. "We want to be more German," he said. I told him that I was leaving school because I wanted to be more Jewish. 🕊



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