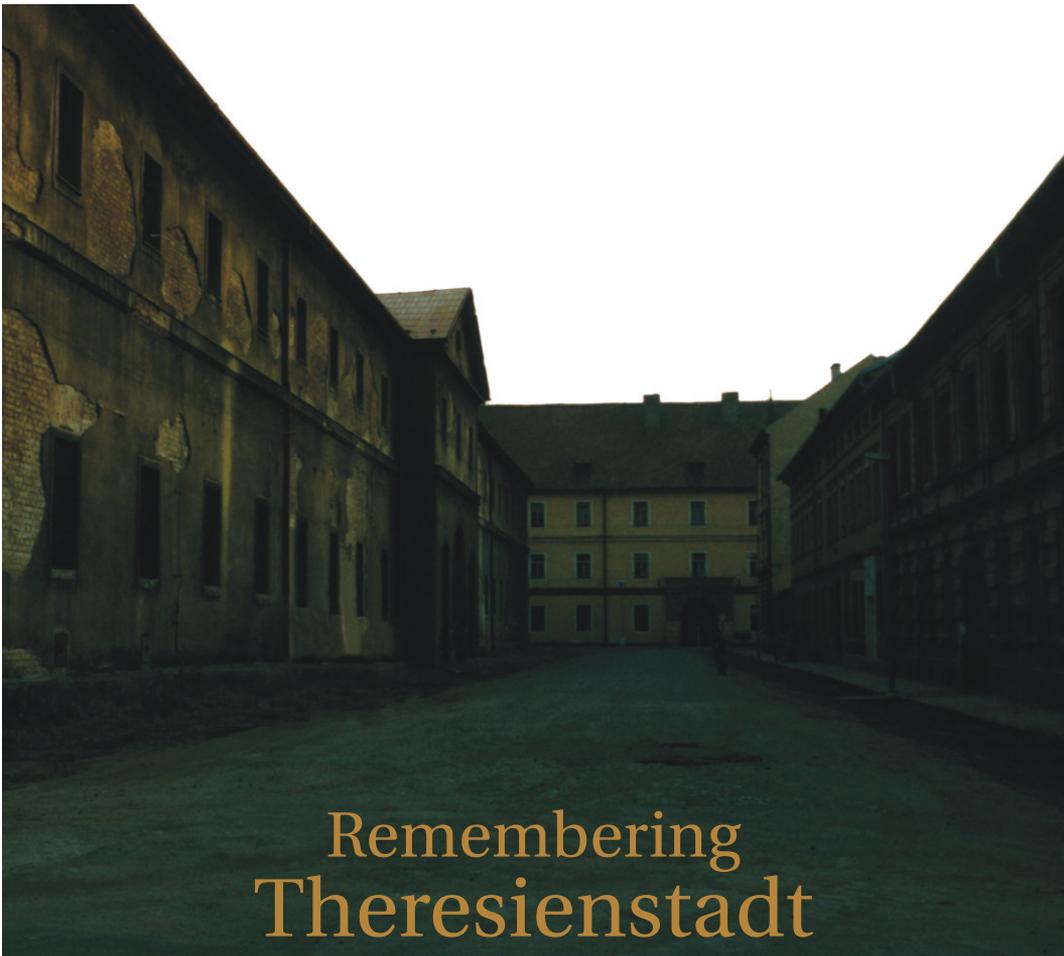


Charlotte, A Holocaust Memoir:



Remembering
Theresienstadt

As shared with
Robert A. Warren

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Santa Fe, NM
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DEDICATION

This memoir is
dedicated with love to
Henny Burckhart, Betreuer ('caregiver') extraordinaire,
and to Sigi Kwasniewski, 'The Two Bobs,' Fredy Hersh,
Lilly and Bobby Fleisher and all the other inmate caregivers,
Czech, Austrian and German, who sacrificed so much to
bring comfort and security to the youthful prisoner-residents
of
Ghetto Youth Barracks L414, KZ-Ghetto Theresienstadt,
January 1941 – May 1945.

The memories recited herein belong as much
to them as they do to me.

Charlotte Guthmann Opfermann
(Inmate No. XII/5-11)

Acknowledgements

This book's origins date to 1995. There are many people who have provided encouragement, assistance and support along the way, far too many to name. Prominent among them, however, are the following: Jolene Cho, Rosalie H. Franks and Victor P. Ehly, each of whom has been with me nearly from the beginning, Rosalie from the actual day of creation; Ralph N. Branski and Hannah Hanani; Michael Rawn who, in the early days perhaps grew to know Charlotte even better than I, or at least to have a more attuned ear for interpreting her story; and Felicitas Steinhoff, my dedicated editorial assistant without whom I'd never have finished this project. My thanks also to Marcia and Franklin Littell of the *Annual Scholars' Conference on the Holocaust and the Churches*, who provided both Charlotte and myself, along with so many others, with a comfortable, congenial, collegial home to discuss our many mutual concerns. Lastly, special thanks to John King and his colleagues at Paper Tiger for their help in the production of this book.

Finally, my gratitude goes with love to my wife, Carol Warren, for her patient, enduring support for me and this project, and for her kind and warm hospitality lavished upon Charlotte during the many times she visited us at our home here in Santa Fe. I especially recognize Carol for the consistent emotional lubricant that she provided during our two trips to Germany and the Czech Republic with Charlotte. Had it not been for her input and organization, those journeys would not have been nearly as valuable as was the case, especially the time the three of us spent together at former KZ-Ghetto Theresienstadt.

A Separate Dedication

To Claudia Opfermann and Diane Opfermann Porter, Charlotte's two daughters, who, as the survivors of a survivor, have had their own burdens to bear throughout their lifetimes. I hope that this book will afford context to their Mother's long life and provide at least some answers to the lingering questions that Charlotte never fully addressed regarding her own antecedents, reaching back into the days of the Third Reich and the costs extracted from her and her fellow German-Jews at the perverse hands of the Nazi Racial State. In their own way, Claudia and Diane were as victimized by the *Sho'ah* as was their mother. R.W.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Prologue	1
Introduction	9
<i>Kristallnacht</i>	17
Chapter One: <i>Crossing the River Styx: Hell in a Very Large Room</i>	37
Chapter Two: <i>Changing Circumstances</i>	53
Chapter Three: <i>Barracks L414, Heaven in a Large Room</i>	69
Chapter Four: <i>Life and Loss in Ghetto Theresienstadt</i>	83
Chapter Five: <i>Betting Our Lives</i>	103
Chapter Six: <i>Ashes in the Stream</i>	113
Chapter Seven: <i>Endgame</i>	127
Aftermath	145
Epilogue	151
<i>A Personal Postscript</i>	157

Prologue

Memoir: “A record of events or history from personal knowledge or from special sources of information; an autobiographical or (occas.) biographical record.” (NSOED)

What follows is the faithful recollection of another’s memory; to that extent it is a true memoir, albeit perhaps one step removed. From early 1995 until her death in late 2004, Charlotte Guthmann Opfermann was a dear friend and colleague. For much of that time, from mid-1995 until mid-1999, we were inseparable, “joined at the hip” as she liked to say (often beginning her late-night e-mails to me, “Dear Hip”), attempting to live inside each other’s head. She was my teacher, I her student as she led me through her lifetime experience of the Holocaust, beginning in early 1933 in Wiesbaden, Germany, finally ending on November 22, 2004 with her death at age 80 in her adopted hometown of Houston, Texas. As we meandered through the bewildering labyrinth of her life, I constantly nudged her towards a confrontation with her past, if not to fully embrace her memories, then at least to try to articulate and share them with those of us who could only imagine them. It was a symbiotic relationship, even if some of our time together was uneasy and occasionally edgy, frequently plagued by frustration, with sporadic enmity flaring on one side or the other.

To the extent that our goal was to produce a publishable book, a full autobiography with special emphasis on her intimate relationship with the *Sho’ah*, it ended in failure. That was not for lack of effort. Both of us worked diligently for over four years to produce the ‘La Book,’ as she liked to call it. There were hundreds of late-night phone calls, several hundred letters, and more than 7,000+ e-mails exchanged between us (I was the lazy one; she would write multiple e-mails, I would phone her back). There were also three trips by her to visit with me at length here at my home in Santa Fe, and two trips to Europe, my wife accompanying us on both occasions, when we visited all the sites from her childhood in and around Wiesbaden, Giessen, and Eich, to KZ-Ghetto Theresienstadt as it stands today (mostly preserved intact and still a working garrison town for the Czech army), and on to Prague.

We wrote two complete drafts. The first was woefully inadequate, but a useful, necessary, indeed invaluable learning ex-

perience for us both. The second, more than 450 typewritten pages, was quite good, but I thought it lacked her voice and was too stiff, a historical narrative not a personal one. We attempted a third draft, revising the second one into what I thought would be more of a 'story.' But after making good progress through the first third of the text, the effort simply collapsed of its own weight. The end of our adventure together in July 1999 is best documented in the slightly abridged letter below:

My Dear Charlotte,

This is written as something of a gentle follow-up to our telephone conversation last Sunday morning. At the end, I expect we were both too emotional to speak well and I don't like leaving things unsaid — better than most, you know how much I hate loose ends.

Although I'd recognized the need to make that telephone call for longer than I care to admit, it was even more difficult and disconcerting than I thought would be the case. We've been together for a long time, you and I — so under the peculiar and close, even intimate circumstances of our relationship, 'endings' are therefore all the more daunting.

As I hope I made clear, I accept full responsibility for the demise of our collaborative writing project. It hasn't been easy for either of us I know, but it was my idea in the first place, and it was I who, in the end, was unable to perform. I don't precisely know what went wrong — I do know that, no matter how hard I tried, and the effort has been considerable since I returned from Poland in mid-May, I simply have not been able to 'get back inside' the material. Not only its tone, but its 'essence' has continued to elude me. It is as if I were a stranger to my own work.

Speaking only for myself, I suspect that in the four years we've pursued 'La Book' my own interests and focus have shifted — these days, I am so preoccupied generally with memory-remembrance-memorialization that I think of little else and have done your personal story an unintended disservice

in the process. Admittedly, we've experienced problems with the material from the beginning, but in the end it was problems with the author, me, that prevailed. I'm sorrier about that than you'll ever know.

As trite as it may sound at this late date, I want to take this opportunity to thank you yet again not only for letting me into your life, but for acting as my Beatrice (actually, gender considerations aside, probably I should say my Virgil) during my introduction to the 'real' Holocaust. One can learn a great deal from media - books, movies, videos, audiotapes, even the host of materials that are now available on-line - but it's simply not the same as 'being present' (even a past-tense 'present') with a participant. The experience remains vicarious to be sure, but it becomes, at least in my case, intensely intimate in a way that just does not attach unless you have a personal connection to and understanding of the events. I don't know where my work with the Sho'ah will take me now, but wherever that may be, I will forever be standing on a platform of understanding built upon what you've taught me over all these years. I'd like to think that I've been an apt student, but only time will tell. When I came to the Holocaust, when I first met you in Provo [at The Annual Scholars' Conference on the Holocaust and the Churches, held in March 1995], I was less than a neophyte - worse, I was dangerously under-educated and didn't know it, the perfect example of a little knowledge being a dangerous thing. More than anything, you've taught me what I don't know, and that is perhaps life's most important perspective. You've also prompted respect, humility even, for the material which I work with, and that too is a very good thing. If I have learned anything in the past four years, it is to appreciate, even cherish my powerlessness to ever fully understand these events and what they may mean for the future - everyone talks about 'who owns the Holocaust' when the answer is really quite removed from that

context, i.e., I think that you and I both know that in fact the Holocaust owns us. Were it not for my relationship with you, I doubt that I ever would have recognized just how vulnerable we all remain to its immense power. You've also taught me that it's not over, that it will never be over, that even when the last survivor, perpetrator, by-stander and rescuer is long gone, IT will still be there, a permanent, un-mended and un-mendable tear in the fabric of humanity.

As for you, you've changed too – a lot. Quite apart from slowly emerging from the bleak darkness of your closet, you've finally found a real place for yourself in the world. It's a tricky business what you're doing these days – you want to be a historian, you are a witness, and you should avoid, by whatever means necessary, ever being a victim. A difficult assignment, to be sure. Be careful, but not at the expense of success.

I do not want this to be a farewell, not even au revoir. You've been much too important a part of my life for far too long to simply let this drift away, to allow friendship to perish from disuse. The fact of the matter is that, at some level, I know you better than anyone else who has walked through my life in the past 60 years. I don't want to sound like a callow schoolboy at the end of an adolescent romance which has soured, but I will miss you so – indeed, I do already.

So take care of yourself. You have so much to offer, and so many people who want to be on the receiving end. Make good use of your resources, of which you have more than you may know. For however long you wish, I will preserve the files and materials that I have accumulated here. Should you want anything, or part of anything, don't hesitate to ask.

* * *

This too is another of those [deeply personal] disappointments - I hate failure, but I hate dishonesty

even more. That's what prompted my call on Sunday – I had simply run out of time and place, and was kidding myself, and you too. The time had come to put it down. I will forever be sorry that it turned out this way - you deserve better. So do I, but we can't always have what we want. . . .

The letter falls short of what really should have been said. Our effort to work together was, in fact, largely successful. She taught me more about the life of the Holocaust, at least as seen from the perspective of a young native-born German Jew, than any amount of scholarly research ever could have produced. I was looking for vicarious experience in aid of learning; over four years she dutifully provided it, sometimes painfully so.

I did her a good turn too. When we began working together, almost no one in America knew that she was a survivor. From 1950 or so, she had lived a life of deception, pretending, with considerable verve and panache, to be a Protestant German war refugee, hiding her Jewish background even from her two children (with the overt complicity of her half-Jewish German then-husband), suppressing with all her might the memories that were always close by to torment her. Then she was invited back to Wiesbaden by a group of Christians in 1987, her expenses paid for by the municipality, a well-intentioned if misplaced attempt to reacquaint her with the city of her youth. Also, to the extent reasonably possible, to make a gesture of amends for what had happened to her and to her family at the hands of the National Socialists from 1933–1945, and for the many difficulties she and her mother encountered when they returned to Wiesbaden from KZ-Ghetto Theresienstadt after the war ended.

But her initial appearance at the Annual Scholars' Conference on the Holocaust and the Churches held in Provo, Utah in March 1995 was her first real step out of the closet of denial within which she had lived for most of her adult life. As we worked together she had no choice but to stop concealing her past, to stand in front of it, rather than hiding behind it. I, or at least our collaborative project, was responsible for much of that, and it was all for the good. Charlotte was a natural spokesperson for the Holocaust, a survivor turned narrator. In the final decade of her life, she became a popular and effective

teacher of students of all ages, in several different countries, including Germany. She never, ever played the role of victim, no matter the damage done to her.

There was, however, one problem that we never solved to our mutual satisfaction. I am a lawyer by training, mostly devoted to litigation and trial work during my professional career, and a stickler for detail, at least in the area of research. When making a statement of fact (or asserting a conclusion relying on that fact) in open court, you'd best be prepared to prove your point or have it turned back against you. So I pressed her for accuracy that went beyond what was necessary. That was fine, because she had a phenomenal capacity for factual recollection. Memory is a fallible and delicate mechanism at best, but hers was consistently superior to that of any witness I ever examined under oath. As I found the opportunity to check and re-check her recollections, I was continuously impressed by her acuity and facility for detail.

With her factual memory, however, came a complete denial of emotional attachment to those facts. She could speak of the most wrenching instances of degradation, embarrassment and loss with the tone of a grocery clerk reciting purchases at a check-out counter. In all the time I spent with her, which was several hundred hours face-to-face and perhaps another thousand connected either by computer or telephone, I do not believe that I ever knew her to cry. As she candidly admitted to me more than once, she had killed her feelings, like they murdered her family and friends, in order to survive. At some level I could accept that, but at another I was foolish and arrogant enough to believe that I could break through her self-erected emotional barriers and get at the real truth. That was silly, stupid, off-putting and self-defeating, not to mention hurtful. I simply should have settled for the facts and relented on everything else. In retrospect, our conundrum was rather simple but with complex consequences. Charlotte refused to bare her feelings to save herself from vulnerability, and I, her friend, colleague, coauthor, demanded that she present me with that vulnerability, make me a good-faith gift of it as it were. But that requires trust, and Charlotte had long since abandoned any pretense of 'trusting,' me or anyone else. Even after she abandoned her protective camouflage, she insisted on maintaining a certain

distance for her own protection. She was right and I was wrong, not to mention insensitive and needlessly unkind.

When we parted, our partnership dissolved, we drifted apart, although we kept sight of one another, writing occasionally, spending a bit of time together at conferences, and hearing about each other from mutual friends and colleagues. When I learned that she had died after a short illness near the end of November 2004, I was deeply saddened. True, she was eighty and had survived the Nazi racial state by six decades. In the last years of her life, she finally had found her calling as a witness, a powerfully authentic and articulate one at that. Occasionally she would feign scholarship, but her real role was that of a gifted storyteller, a first-person narrator.

So, belatedly, I have decided to try to settle my accounts with her, even if posthumously. What follows is her story of her time at KZ-Ghetto Theresienstadt, from deportation on June 10, 1943 until liberation by the Red Army on May 8, 1945. It represents perhaps a third of the material that we envisioned for our co-authored book. In the following Introduction, there is a bit of bare family history that is necessary in order to understand how she came to find herself in KZ-Ghetto Theresienstadt with her father, mother and brother. Appended to the Introduction is a discrete piece, in her voice, recording her vivid recollection of *Kristallnacht*. It provides necessary context for what follows. There is a short Afterward, which in equally brief fashion recounts what happened to her after the War, down to the date of her death. This is nothing like the full autobiography we originally intended. It is in the nature of a selective memoir, with some of the sorting and collecting done by me, not her. The language is mostly mine, but the thoughts, the memories, i.e., the 'voice,' the life once and fully lived, is entirely Charlotte's. I have done my utmost to retain her first-person voice and to reflect on matters only through the prism of her personal experience. I have muted my own biases. She had her own perspective, which was frequently, intriguingly variable and unsettled during her 23 months at Theresienstadt. I have done my utmost to preserve it with precision in all its unrefined complexity.

This is an act of faith on my part, as well as the repayment of a debt. Like an old married couple, Charlotte and I argued constantly and the road we followed was uneven, filled with

potholes. But it was her memory of the Holocaust that we were chasing and these difficulties were to be expected. I now see that I should have done much more to accommodate her iconoclastic approach to memory and remembrance. What follows, then, is my tribute to her memory of herself. She deserves at least this much, perhaps much more, but this is all that I have to offer. I hope that it is adequate to give life to one of the most important people and effective teachers in my own relatively long lifetime. I trust she will approve of my attempt to honor her memory here. If she doesn't, I am sure that I will be hearing from her.

Robert A. Warren

May 2006

Santa Fe, New Mexico

An Introduction and *The Nightmare of Kristallnacht*

Charlotte Guthmann Opfermann was born on April 1, 1925 in Wiesbaden, Germany. She was the second child and only daughter of Berthold and Claire Guthmann. Her brother, Paul, was two years older.

If not born into wealth and privilege, it is fair to say that as a child she enjoyed security and comfort. Her father, Berthold, born in 1893, was a successful, highly regarded lawyer with a thriving practice in Wiesbaden and Mainz. The eldest of four children, he was the son of Jacob Guthmann, a wealthy grain merchant from the tiny Rhine River town of Eich, about 50 miles south of Wiesbaden, near Worms. With university and law degrees, he also was a decorated member of the fledging Luftwaffe, having served as an observer-gunner in a fighter squadron over the Western front in the First World War. Shot down and severely wounded near the end of the war, he was awarded the Iron Cross, Second Class for bravery under fire. One of his younger brothers, Sally, received the same award, posthumously; he was killed in the fierce fighting at Verdun. There remained Berthold's younger brother and sister, Eduard and Anna.

Charlotte's mother, Claire, was from the large agricultural town of Giessen, north of Frankfurt, the only child of Herman and Franziska Michel. *Opa*, as Charlotte invariably referred to her maternal grandfather, was, while perhaps not quite so well situated as *Grossvater* Guthmann, nonetheless a prosperous horse trader with a thriving business, affluent in his own right. Charlotte often stayed with *Opa* and *Oma* during holidays and for a month or so each summer. She was particularly close to them both. They did a thorough job of spoiling her whenever the opportunity presented itself. *Grossvater* Guthmann was made of sterner stuff. In his well-staffed commodious home, children were seldom seen and never heard.

Both families were Jews, although not particularly observant. The Guthmanns and Michels had long, deep roots in Germany. Like so many of the assimilated Jewish community, they instinctively considered themselves Germans first, Jews second.

Charlotte's mother and father courted before the Great War. When Berthold recovered from his serious war injuries, he took

up his law studies at Freiburg University. Claire was attending a nearby finishing school. They resumed their courtship and were married in 1920. It was a case of opposites attracting. Berthold was extroverted and extremely social, with a large group of friends. Claire was shy, inclined to be withdrawn, perhaps even a bit dour and stern. She brought with her a considerable dowry.

Charlotte was every inch her father's daughter: precocious, bright, curious, exuberant, an excellent student with a large group of playmates and friends, who were mostly Christian. She and her brother were two of only a handful of Jews at Wiesbaden's public high school (the others attended a nearby alternative school). She was respectful of her mother, but adored her father, the first of the few great loves of her life. In her teenage years she dreamt of becoming a lawyer too, an unlikely ambition but a real one. She was a diligent student with a quick, inquiring mind. She also was athletically inclined; she played as hard as she studied. More than anything, she loved to swim, especially in the nearby Rhine River.

Situated in Wiesbaden, her father's general law practice equally divided between Christian and Jewish clients, he a leading member and spokesman for the local Social Democratic Party and a prominent member of the most prestigious local synagogue, the Guthmann's were the picture of inter-war, upper middle class, fully assimilated German Jews. The first hint of trouble that Charlotte remembered was on April 1, 1933, a national one-day boycott of all Jewish stores and offices. It also was her eighth birthday. After school, she went by her father's office to play with one of her school chums. Charlotte was the spoiled darling of the office staff. When she arrived, there were two burly Storm Troopers planted in front of the office front door, intimidating arriving clients and make snide anti-Semitic remarks. Not understanding what was happening, and knowing that there would be special treats for her birthday, she innocently asked one of the thugs, "Is Herr Hitler visiting my Daddy? Did he bring me a birthday present?" I doubt that even the SA goons could have kept a straight face as she bounded by them into her father's mostly empty office. Berthold's office manager quickly hustled Charlotte out the back door and escorted her home to her waiting birthday party.

That was only the beginning. While serious Nazi repression was aimed first at competing political parties, labor unions and

above all, the communists, by the end of 1933 the National Socialists had completely co-opted the German political process, leaving themselves the only legitimate political party. Once political opposition collapsed, including the Social Democrats, and the unions were subdued, the next target was the Jews. The steps were incremental, but blatant and obvious. There was nothing subtle about fascist-style anti-Semitism. The process was putatively 'legal,' culminating in the Nuremberg Racial Laws of 1935. Thereafter, Jews were no longer citizens of the Third Reich; they were its subjects, largely without rights and increasingly vulnerable to state sponsored anti-Semitic restrictions of all types.

In the short-term, Berthold's wartime credentials helped preserve his professional status. He was one of only fourteen Jews allowed to practice law in Wiesbaden and environs. Because of her father's professional standing, the family's relative wealth, and good relations with their Christian friends and neighbors, for a time the family was relatively insulated from the mounting anti-Semitic pressures.

The same was true of *Grossvater* Guthmann, who was arguably the leading citizen of Eich. He was protected by his wealth, his standing in the community, his status. But by 1935 Eich, like so many small towns and villages in the area, was enthusiastically embracing the Nazis' state-sponsored anti-Semitism. Local laws and ordinances directly aimed at the Jews began to appear. Thus, on August 12, 1935, Eich's municipal authorities passed the following resolution: "The Community Council has decided that, beginning August 12 the moving-in of Jews will be refused because the number of Jews has long been an unbearable burden for the Eich community." Far worse was coming.

In the fall of 1935, Jacob Guthmann was savagely beaten by a group of local SA thugs, Christian neighbors all, led by the mayor. Most other male Jewish residents of Eich suffered the same fate. Confronted by the obvious, Jacob gathered up the family, which included Charlotte's widowed Aunt Anna and her two children, disposed of his property as best he could (the proceeds ending up in blocked bank accounts) and retreated to Wiesbaden. The Guthmann family was part of the first wave of internal migration to sweep through Germany, as the Jews fled the countryside for the apparent safety of the cities. By the end of 1936, no Jews remained in Eich. The town proudly posted a

sign at the turn-off from the main highway, *Eich ist judenrein* ("Eich is Jew free"). Since 1936, three generations have been born in Eich without ever knowing a Jewish neighbor. It remains *judenrein* today, the former synagogue now a shabby warehouse.

Even with such losses, the elder Guthmann retained considerable wealth. In Wiesbaden, he supported himself in grand style, together with Charlotte's widowed Aunt Anna and her two children, her cousins Hans and Margot. In 1937, he and Berthold contrived to purchase a luxurious home in the heart of Wiesbaden, at Bahnhofstrasse 25. The four-story building, what would be described here as a double-wide brownstone, was then completely and lavishly renovated. The ground floor housed Berthold's law offices; the parlor floor became the family's apartment; the third floor was divided into two apartments, one occupied by Jacob and his housekeeper, the other rented. The fourth floor was further sub-divided into two smaller rental units. The principal residence was light, spacious and beautifully decorated. Jacob and Berthold had not stinted on the renovations. He and his family may have been run out of their ancestral home, but he and his eldest son responded in kind, acquiring an even more lavish residence, not compromising their standard of living, not cowering before the approaching onslaught, let alone fleeing to safer ground. It showed courage and pride, but also a reckless disregard or fatal misunderstanding of the danger they faced. It was hubris that would cost most of the family their lives.

The Guthmanns lived relatively undisturbed until *Kristallnacht*, 'the Night of Broken Glass' as the event came to be known (for the thousands of smashed windows of stores and homes owned by Jews), the nationwide pogrom aimed at every Jew in Germany, and their property. That event marked, to paraphrase Winston Churchill, the 'end of the beginning' of the Holocaust in Germany and the far more dreadful 'beginning of the end.' Throughout 1937 and 1938, more and more Jews had been coerced into leaving the Greater Reich, mostly deserting Austria and Czechoslovakia. These actions reached crisis proportions when, on October 28, 1938, 17,000 non-native born Jews residing in Germany proper, mostly having arrived from

the East, principally Poland and the Baltic states (hence the term, '*Ostjuden*' or 'Jews from the East') were forcibly deported into a kind of no-man's land on the German-Polish border; the Germans refused to keep them, the Poles refused to accept them. Among the refugees were the parents of 17-year-old Herschel Grynszpan. In a fit of rage and frustration, the distraught teenager shot Ernst vom Rath, the third-secretary of the German embassy in Paris. Vom Rath died of his wounds two days later. At that point, Joseph Goebbels incited the SA, the "old fighters" of the Nazi Party, Hitler's original brown-shirted supporters, to take action against the country's Jews, native-born or otherwise. What ensued was a well-coordinated attack, a race riot that blanketed the country. Hundreds of synagogues were destroyed, 7,500 business and private homes plundered, perhaps as many as several hundred Jews killed by the mobs.

It was an event recalled with remarkable precision and clarity by Charlotte fifty years later. Her detailed memories of *Kristallnacht* provide a discrete and detailed conclusion to this brief Introduction to her family. She is amply able to speak for herself; I will leave that to her. After *Kristallnacht*, nothing remained the same. Some 30,000 German male Jews were imprisoned, many at Buchenwald. Further, the national German-Jewish community was assessed one billion *Reichsmark* to recompense the nation for the damage caused by the victims, as well as the cancellation of most insurance coverage due to Jewish property owners for the injuries that they apparently had inflicted on themselves. The remaining details are a matter of well-documented historical record.

Following *Kristallnacht*, Berthold was appointed the sole 'Jew Konsulant' for all of Wiesbaden and environs. Thereafter, any Jew needing legal advice had only him to turn to (he was barred, of course, from any longer providing professional services to Christian clients). As time slipped by, Berthold would provide the sole practical avenue of communication and accommodation between his Jewish clientele and their Nazi persecutors, especially the local Wiesbaden Gestapo office and the Finance Ministry. Until the very end, Berthold remained committed to the notion of *Daseinsrecht*, the political desire and cultural impulse to maintain a Jewish presence in Germany, not only as a legal right but as a moral necessity and religious imperative. Although he

helped many others to flee, including both his sister Anna and brother Eduard who, with their families, immigrated to America thanks to his legal expertise, connections and *Grossvater's* substantial wealth, he simply could not bring himself or his immediate family to escape. He sought accommodation, not confrontation. He once observed to Charlotte that "One could not flee and be a good German at the same time." Like so many, he could not see himself as a Jew first and a German second.

After *Kristallnacht*, the Guthmanns' lives deteriorated rapidly. *Opa* never recovered from his months-long imprisonment at Buchenwald as part of the mass round-up of the victims that followed the Night of Broken Glass (*Grossvater* Guthmann was fortunately spared that particular ordeal). He was not released until late February 1939. By then, his spirit broken and ill with a variety of ailments, he was less than a shadow of his former robust self. He died, as Charlotte used to say, of "unnaturally induced natural causes" in December 1940. In the meantime, his property had been 'Aryanized' for a pittance of its true value. *Oma* was forcibly relocated to a tiny apartment in a nearby village. She received her deportation notice in mid-November 1941. Rather than report, she followed the alternative route adopted by so many elderly German Jews, taking poison the day she was scheduled to leave Germany for 'the East.' She died on November 11, 1941. *Grossvater* Guthmann and most of the remaining elderly Jews of Wiesbaden were deported to Theresienstadt on September 1, 1942. In the preceding month, several dozen fellow designated 'deportees' committed suicide as had *Oma*. Today, the largely untended Jewish cemetery in Wiesbaden is filled with their headstones.

Grossvater Guthmann's deportation was particularly wrenching for Charlotte and her family. Her father was inevitably and inextricably part of the administrative process that assembled that transport. Charlotte, her mother, father and brother saw him for the last time as he and the others were unceremoniously loaded onto a third-class train bound for Theresienstadt early on the rainy morning of September 1, at least spared the indignity of cattle cars. The four remaining Guthmanns were the last Jews left in Wiesbaden as the transport was collected. The Gestapo officer in charge, a man who had dealt with Charlotte's father on a nearly daily basis for two years, purposely circulated

the rumor that Berthold and his immediate family were being spared deportation, that they were being 'exchanged' for some German citizens who were then being held abroad. They would be allowed to leave Germany. The numbing heartbreak this rumor caused the elder Guthmann can only be imagined. Although it took more than a year for his family to discover what ultimately happened to him, he died of accumulated privations in KZ-Ghetto Theresienstadt before the end of September 1942. In less than a year, the remainder of the family would arrive at the same destination, part of a small group of sixteen, all the remaining Jews from the Wiesbaden - Frankfurt area.

Below is Charlotte's description of *Kristallnacht*. This section was written in 1997, while we were still actively collaborating on her autobiography. Except for an occasional correction for purposes of clarity, its text remains faithful to her extraordinarily clear recollection of that event, its immediate aftermath and consequences. I have every reason to believe that it is an accurate recital of those events that marked the beginning of the end of the Jewish presence in Germany under National Socialism.

The seven chapters that follow are Charlotte's memoir of her twenty-three months at KZ-Ghetto Theresienstadt. Its horrors do not match those of the great killing fields of 'the East,' in Poland and beyond, where the bulk of the genocidal process that we now refer to as 'the Holocaust' occurred. But Theresienstadt was a place of its own terrors: incredible overcrowding, continuous malnourishment, amounting to slow starvation for many of the inmates, an inconceivable variety of disease and illness, its tight boundaries marked by continual discomfort and misery, and the bitter and unrelieved cold of the winter of 1944-1945. The numbers are approximate at best, but of the 141,000 inmates who were residents of 'The City Hitler Built for the Jews,' only about 23,000 survived to see the end of the war. Some 33,000 actually died within the confines of the KZ-Ghetto. The rest were lost to the relentless re-deportations East, mostly to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Some survived even that experience, but only a very few, 3,000 or less.

This then is Charlotte's individual memoir and personal testament to survival, *her* survival. It is a remarkable story. While at KZ-Ghetto Theresienstadt Charlotte was not always hopeful; but she was willful and tenacious and determined to survive. Per-

haps her only mistake was her failure to calculate the cost of such gritty resolve. But that is a judgment only she is entitled to make on her own behalf. It belongs to no one else, least of all to me.

Kristallnacht

November 10, 1938, Wiesbaden, Germany. Thursday was a clear, sunny day. My older brother Paul and I left for school as usual, walking out the door with Father, who was hurrying off to a court appearance in nearby Oppenheim. We were still shocked by the abrupt deportation of the city's *Ostjuden* Jews. No one knew where or why they'd gone. Many of the children were my friends, members of the *Sportgruppe Schild*, the local sports organization sponsored by German-Jewish veterans of the Great War. We had played together and competed in gymnastics, soccer and handball. In two days at the end of October they were gone. We never saw them again.

With their strange garb, Semitic features and uncompromising religious orthodoxy, such Jews were pilloried by Julius Streicher's *Der Stürmer* (*The Attacker*) for years. By 1938, its weekly circulation was over half a million. A regional replica of Streicher's rag was exhibited in a special display box near our house, at a busy bus stop. Covertly, I occasionally glanced at it as I hurried by on my way to school. Like *Der Stürmer*, the local edition was filled with cartoons featuring caricatured Jews with huge hooked noses, bulging eyes, swollen lips, ape-like arms and hands, short crooked legs. Once, one of Father's clients had stopped to look at it. One of the Aryan readers, noting his obvious Semitic features, demanded to know what he thought he was doing. "I'm trying to find out what kind of a dreadful person I am," he nonchalantly replied. Terrified by his own brashness, he had rushed to Father's office, fearing arrest for his insolence. Nothing came of it. Then.

Der Stürmer's slogan was *Die Juden sind unser Unglück*, "The Jews are our misfortune." The first to pay the price were our *Ostjuden*, comprising nearly a third of Wiesbaden's Jewish community. It made no sense to me, then only 13. What was so bad about being stateless or Polish or Jewish that warranted being sent away *en masse*? Would they ever come back? As Paul and I walked to school that morning, I wondered what would happen next.

I thought back to my daily schoolgirl struggles to keep the Nazi nightmare at bay. I had only a vague notion of being cautious, of mail censored, people whispering when they were critical of Reich policies. I was cautious and circumspect even with

my best school chums. When the *Ostjuden* disappeared, there was much hushed talk between my parents about it. No attempt was made to explain anything to Paul or me. We were expected to deal with these things on our own. For five years, a steady stream of my friends had quietly disappeared, emigrating to Palestine, America, India, or Holland. But those actions were voluntary, well planned. Not at all like the abrupt, mysterious disappearance of the *Ostjuden*.

Walking to school, I pushed these thoughts aside, pretending nothing was wrong. What did all this have to do with today's math test, or reading Homer's *Iliad*? Boring stuff, those old Greeks. I looked forward to playing cops 'n robbers at recess after the second period. My gang had taken over a corner of the schoolyard near the Marktkirche. We played every chance we got. We ran about, yelling, pushing and pulling, having great fun, returning to class sweaty and hoarse, hair ruffled, clothes askew, huffing and puffing as we picked up our books for the next lesson.

At the end of the second period, an upper-class student rushed into our homeroom, whispering something to one of my classmates. Like a game of Post Office, the news spread: "the Synagogue is burning." No playing in the yard today. My group rushed to the third floor for a better view. Which temple was it? "Over there, yes, that's the Michelsberg, the big one." I did not know that it was an organized *Aktion*, which other synagogues and prayer rooms would soon follow. What a shame that our beautiful temple should burn. Would the firemen get there in time to save it? What a mess to clean up. Blackened walls, the nasty smell of ashes mixed with water. It didn't occur to me that there would be no place to worship the next evening, or on the Sabbath, or ever again. None of my classmates had a clue either, not even Lore Timpe, the only Hitler Youth member in my class.

Lore also lived on the Bahnhofstrasse, just down the way and across the street. We never walked to school together, as I did with other neighborhood classmates. She stayed on her side, I on mine. I did not like her much. She was neither very pretty nor very smart, not my kind of person at all. I had been tickled the year before when she was caught copying notes from my Jewish friend, Hanni Neumann. Doubly embarrassing for Lore: not only cheating, but from a Jew. Now, I failed to connect the Michelsberg fire and her frequent anti-Semitic remarks.

When we returned to class, Professor Rang firmly suggested that Ellen Kahn and I excuse ourselves and return home. I was surprised. So, it was a Jews-only thing. It had something to do with the Michelsberg fire, but what?

Paul and I both reached home around eleven. Mother and *Grossvater* were agitated. We gathered at the kitchen table – *Grossvater*, his Jewish housekeeper, Senny, Mother, Paul and me. Mother had heard that homes were being raided, Jewish men arrested, property destroyed. *Grossvater* headed for the railroad station to intercept Father, to warn him that he was in danger. Mother took charge at home. I went to my room and started some homework, not knowing what else to do, wishing that Father were there. He would know what to do.

Around noon, there was a loud commotion in the street. We rushed to the dining room window. The noise came from the *Weinhandlung Simon*, a large wine wholesaler a few doors away. It was under attack by a mob. Swilling down premium wine, they smashed open the huge storage vats. Soon they were ankle deep in alcohol.

Finished with the Simon warehouse, they reassembled and headed towards us. We bolted upstairs, past *Grossvater's* apartment on the third floor, to our Christian tenants on the fourth. Banging on one door, Mother persuaded the Estonian wife of a local German engineer to let us in. We hid in her bathroom, four of us, perched on the bathtub, on the commode, leaning against the sink, hushed, listening. There was banging on the apartment door, followed by loud, drunken voices speaking the local dialect, cursing, demanding to know the whereabouts of the Jews Guthmann. The woman did not give us away. A few minutes after the mob stumbled downstairs, she opened the door and told us we must leave. In broken German, she explained that her husband would not approve of her giving shelter to his Jew landlords.

For a long time we hid in a little storage unit on the same floor. There were two small rooms, pantries, one for *Grossvater*, one for us. We huddled in a tiny unlit entrance area, three or four meters square, behind an unlocked door leading to the stairwell and landing. We barely had room to stand, none to hide. We did not even whisper, as tears slid silently down my cheeks.

We heard the crash of breaking glass, the crack of splintering wood. The mob was plundering our apartment and Father's first-floor office. Furniture and personal belongings were sailing through the windows onto the street. We waited until long after the last yell, the last crash, the final drunken obscenity before making our way downstairs.

We passed *Grossvater's* apartment and the one across the hallway, both occupied by Jews, and both undisturbed. On the parlor floor, the once ornate entranceway to our flat was smashed to smithereens. Inside, our beautiful apartment was gone. Like the *Ostjuden*, it had disappeared.

Mother had recently pickled beets. I last saw the jars lined up in the kitchen, the vegetables marinating in vinegar. They had been thrown against the walls in several rooms. A hanging tapestry, crisscrossed with a dozen cuts from a sharp kitchen knife, bled beet juice. Each window and light fixture, every bit of glass in the apartment was shattered. Books were everywhere, little carcasses, gutted, open pages smeared with food and beet juice. I had always been cautioned to open books carefully, lest their spines suffer. Not a concern now. Handfuls of pages were ripped out, stuffed into vases with fresh cut flowers, then thrown onto the parquet floors.

Our beds were slashed, down feathers fluttering everywhere. The large framed print of Rembrandt's Man with a Golden Helmet in the *Herrenzimmer* was beet red. Its ornate frame lay in pieces, surrounded by broken glass. The leather sofa and two matching club chairs were mutilated, spilling out stuffing, oozing pungent red liquid.

The telephone was ripped from the wall. My upright piano was transformed into a pile of splintered wood, broken ivory, twisted wires. The inlaid parquet floor was scratched and gouged. Cupboards and book cases were split open, their contents thrown out vacant windows. Our clothes had been yanked from their closets and tossed outside, some of them hanging in the lilac trees out back, others dangling from the evergreens in front, like bizarre holiday ornaments.

In my little bedroom, five or six of my childhood dolls lay on the floor, their heads and arms ripped off. Shelves were torn from the walls. The closet door hung by a single hinge. My clothes were ravished, a thick winter coat split down the back, my underwear lewdly shredded. There had been two large armoires

stuffed into my small room, filled with Mother's formal party dresses from her finishing school days. The chests and their contents lay amid the debris in the back yard. Remnants of my clothing were scattered on the ground with my books and toys, games and puzzles. Dismembered teddy bears and legless dolls lay there too, dead soldiers on a deserted battlefield.

My little wash-up sink in the corner was gone, water dribbling from the damaged pipes. Next door, Mother's pride and joy, the custom-made marble double sink, was split into large pieces, water gushing out, slowly working its way through the ceiling, leaking into Father's office below.

Our big silver tray, the polished tea and coffee pots, creamer and sugar bowl, were gone. None of the kitchen appliances or plumbing survived. The large oak buffet with its imitation Renaissance carving was overturned on an oriental carpet. It lay in a pool of red liquid, wooden carrion left behind after a bloody sacrifice.

The storage closets were empty. The matching linens, neatly tied together with brightly colored satin ribbons to identify various sets of damask patterns, were gone. So were several collections of crystal glasses: a specially carved type for Mosel wine, another pattern with larger bowls for the reds, sturdy Römers for Rhine wine, always standing neatly on their shelves – stemware regiments, routed.

Several of our Venetian lace *Klapperdeckchen* were impaled on the edges of broken glass in the empty windows. These little doilies were used when setting the table with bone china plates, so that the serving dishes would make no sound when replaced during each dinner course. There were no plates left. The heavy oak table was fractured. I had dusted it only a few days earlier, cursing the tricky carved legs. Now it was toppled on its side like a trophy animal, two legs missing.

The mob had urinated on the walls and floors. In the middle of the kitchen was a pile of human excrement. The apartment wept beet juice. The comforting smells of fresh flowers, cooking odors, a hint of tobacco, the tang of leather furniture had all disappeared, permanently displaced by the stench of vinegar, feces, and the sweat and alcohol breath stink of drunken men. We now inhabited a public toilet.

Father's office suffered the same fate, spared only the beet juice, but with several inches of water on the floor, dripping

through the ceiling. Furniture and files lay in the street or backyard. Telephones were torn out, the little switchboard ruined beyond repair. The desks under which Helga and I had played during our after-hours games of hide-and-seek were ruined. Each of the stenographers' typewriters had received a direct blow from a sledgehammer; they were in the back yard, their carriages protruding at odd angles, like broken limbs. Someone had even walked off with the safe. In the space of an hour, our secure, middle-class life in Wiesbaden had ended.

Mother's eyes filled with tears, the first I had ever seen from her. I was frightened and embarrassed by her weeping. But she did not give in to her pain. The clean-up began immediately. We started to move everything that was beyond repair downstairs, out the back door, into the trash bins stationed there. Mie Güllering, Father's Christian office manager, returned from lunch and pitched in. Senny, Grandfather's housekeeper, was reluctant to get her hands dirty, but did her share too. As we gathered up the remnants, the extent of the damage was driven home.

The trash barrels soon were overflowing, and we had not even made a dent in our flat or done anything in Father's office. We abandoned the front yard. We could not venture out and risk further confrontation with the crowd of gawkers and thieves, busily picking their way through the piles of trash.

The next morning we struck a deal with a man who did odd jobs for Father. A middle-aged, pot-bellied Christian, he had a horse and cart. For three weeks he appeared daily to haul away the unending heaps of debris piled up in back.

Father and *Grossvater* arrived home by late afternoon, unharmed. Mother gave them a silent tour through the carnage. We still did not fully understand what had happened. At first my parents blamed the vandalism on disgruntled workmen who had renovated the house, then on someone with a professional grudge against Father. But by the end of the day, however, word filtered back that synagogues, prayer rooms, and Jewish-owned department stores and businesses throughout the city were in ruins. Ours was the only Jewish residence in the city to be directly targeted. We did not know what to make of that. Out of habit, my parents put the best face on things: we were not harmed, there was no fire, the damage could be repaired, we had insurance, *Grossvater's* apartment was undamaged. But

Mother's chin kept quivering, teeth clenched against the tears. Father could not look Paul or me in the eye as he reassured us that all this could be explained, that everything would be all right. He behaved as though we had just survived a natural disaster, a tornado or earthquake, not a raging mob of neighbors bent on murdering us. It was the most *unnatural* thing that had ever happened to me.

As I stood in the rubble, the Guthmann façade collapsed. I cried, great shuddering sobs. Thirteen years old, and in the space of two hours I had been forced to hide in terror, only to emerge and discover that what was left of my world had been destroyed by a drunken mob. My parents could not protect me. God could not protect me; His house had taken a worse trashing than ours. Paul poked fun at my tears, Mother turned away from them, *Grossvater* ignored them. Only Father gave me a brusque hug of sympathy. I wept for days.

Father kept his head. He found paper and pen amid the debris, sat down on the top step outside the entranceway and wrote out a detailed power-of-attorney for Mother to act for the family in case he was arrested. Almost before he was finished writing, three Gestapo agents in civilian clothes appeared. I was sent to my room. They questioned Paul and *Grossvater*, but they were too young and too old to be included in the round-up. Father was detained, placed in "protective custody arrest," supposedly for his own good. Silently, he packed a small suitcase. He did not have much left in the way of clothing, just his suit and a light topcoat and hat. He looked incongruously dapper. He was taller than the 'pure Aryan' arresting officers, and much more imposing. He embraced each of us, even Senny. Hard smiles and silence. We were not told where he was going, or for how long. Turning on his heel, he abruptly led the way out the door, the Nazis scrambling to catch up. His sure-footed military bearing was much in evidence as he cleaved through the crowd out front, briskly heading for the police station. He had hugged me hard for the first time in my life; it scared me as much as it comforted me.

The fear of *Kristallnacht* has never left me. It was the first time I realized that I could not stop my nightmare from continuing. Nor could my parents. Nor could anyone. What had I done to deserve this?

Moments after Father left, Helga showed up. Blue-eyed and blond, an Aryan stereotype, she gamely braved the mob outside. Thinking I was coming to school the next day, knowing that we had been attacked, she brought extra paper, pencils, my homework assignments and a couple of school books. She wept when she saw our apartment. She stayed with me until dinnertime. She told me what had happened at school after I left, who had won what during our recess games, stupid things the teachers had said or done, that our team lost at gymnastics in physical education class because I was not there to help. She tried hard to cheer me up. We did our homework and even played a bit, running around piles of rubble, ignoring the chaos, as all German children would learn to do by the end of the war.

While Helga and I played, Paul trudged up and down stairs, carrying piles of rubbish. *Grossvater*, Mother and Frau Güllering were preparing a long list of our damaged and lost property for the insurance company. They were visibly relieved that there would be some insurance to help us rebuild. Everything was laboriously translated into *Reichsmark*: so much for a new bed, so much to repair the dining room table, so much for new dinnerware, so much to fix the bathroom plumbing. I tried to listen. I heard no mention of new dolls for me – perhaps I was too old? – or any discussion of the hundreds and hundreds of lost books. *Opa* had often teased that our house was buried under books, that Mother's dowry had financed the largest private library in Wiesbaden. The big oak bookcase in the *Herrenzimmer* housed double rows of books on each sturdy shelf. I always had to move ten volumes to get to the one I wanted. After the deportations in 1943, our favorite book sellers would buy up what was left of the family's collection in wholesale lots for resale to our neighbors, the proceeds to benefit the *Reich Finanzamt*.

Mother came and sat with Helga and me. She said that she did not want me to go to school on Friday, which I could have as a holiday. Helga would be back to bring me my homework assignments, to make sure that I did not miss out on anything. I walked her to where our front door once stood, watching as she marched through the hole to the street, head up, not looking right or left, pressing past the crowd.

Senny fixed a light supper in *Grossvater's* undamaged kitchen. None of us had an appetite. Grandfather invited me to stay with

him for the time being, while Mother and Paul camped out in the rubble below. I was grateful for the invitation, although Senny was not terribly pleased to have a guest in the house. After nightfall, I settled down in *Grossmutter's* old bed, protected by a deep feather mattress and thick comforter. I could hear Grandfather and Senny puttering about in the living room, the low sound of hushed, worried talk seeping under the door, increasing the confusion which filled my head.

I had thought our Bahnhofstrasse house was an impregnable fortress. Purchased jointly by Father and Grandfather in 1936, its extravagance was our way of avenging *Grossvater's* beating in Eich, and the Aryanization, the legalized theft of his home and business. Grandfather had paid a lot of money to get even. It no longer meant anything. Our security had disappeared.

Until *Kristallnacht*, I never fully connected the unending slights we had suffered since 1933. Even that afternoon, while poking through the remnants of our flat, it did not occur to me to identify the Michelsberg Synagogue fire with the attack on us, or even to grasp that father's arrest was not for his own protection. Nor did I tie together the insults at the hands of Lore and my anti-Semitic teachers, the signs proclaiming 'No Jews Wanted Here,' the Brownshirts screaming for our blood. For a smart girl, I was slow to understand that there was a larger purpose to each small embarrassment and humiliation. "She's a Jew, but . . ." Until *Kristallnacht*, I knew I was a Jew, but so what? Despite the previous chaos flowing around me daily in the streets and at school, it did not seem wrong, let alone punishable to be a Jew. I knew better now.

I had thought we were insulated from the turmoil: Father was successful and influential; we lived in a beautiful home. Paul and I were still in school, accepted by our Aryan classmates. The *Lyzeum* was my real home. Even impeded by some anti-Semitic teachers, I excelled academically and in sports. I was popular, happy. I knew there was trouble ahead, because my *Abitur* was a ticket to university, and by now all universities had been closed to Jews. But I trusted my parents to provide an answer when the time came. I wanted to be a lawyer, just like Father.

Curled up beneath *Grossmutter's* comforter, I could not conjure up any way to liberate myself from the day's events. Attacked in broad daylight, in the center of town, on one of the

busiest streets. No one objected. No one helped. Our home ruined. Father in custody. The synagogue gone. I cried myself to sleep. Mother was standing guard over the rubble below with Paul. Grandfather and Senny were indifferent to my sobs as I fell asleep.

On November 9-10, 1938 our family did not suffer alone. Germany's Jews took a terrible beating. The pogrom saw most of the country's synagogues desecrated and destroyed. Thousands of Jewish retail businesses were damaged or demolished. Hundreds of Jews were beaten, several dozen killed. Between twenty and thirty thousand Jewish men were arrested and incarcerated for up to four months in Dachau, Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen.

When I awoke Friday morning in *Grossmutter's* bed, I thought for a moment that it was all a bad dream, that everything was back to normal. I was in a strange place, yes, but there were curtains in the windows, a carpet on the floor, nothing out of order. Then I remembered. As I washed up and dressed, I wondered what we had done to deserve this. There had to be a reason, we must be guilty of something. *I* must be guilty. I thought of Father in protective custody. Did we not all require such protection? Even at that early hour, I could see there were people gathered at the bus stop in front of our door, staring. My dolls and teddy bears, their arms and legs torn off, seemed so wonderfully complacent, smiling as usual, indifferent to the pain, good little Guthmann icons.

Senny was in one of her moods, distracted and upset. She had four siblings in Cologne, with no way of reaching them. She scolded me for splashing toothpaste on the bathroom mirror. I glared at her in silence. From that first morning, she kept her distance from our personal war zone, sticking to her own tidy little domain. Although a Jew herself, she wanted nothing to do with us. Like the *Ostjuden*, we were stained, marked, easy targets. After a couple of days, *Grossvater* too reverted to his usual schedule, leaving the nasty work downstairs to us and our hired Christian craftsmen and laborers. Strange: Aryans tore it down, now they rebuilt it.

We picked up where we had left off the night before, hauling the really hopeless pieces to the back yard. We still did not dare attempt to do anything out front, afraid to provoke the onlookers.

For at least a week, the Aryan population remained agitated by their bloodlust. They had stopped beating and burning, but they continued to harass us. There was a hard-core group who came back daily, joined by various casual onlookers. Snippets of conversation floated through our broken front windows. “*Die Juden sind unser Unglück.*” It seemed that everyone had a personal story to justify revenge against the Jews, all leading to the same conclusion: we deserved what we got.

The wives of our Christian tenants, the Estonian lady who had hidden us and an elegant, haughty Swedish woman who lived across the hall, were both subjected to abuse as they came and went. Although neither looked even faintly Jewish, they were seen as sympathizers as they pushed their way through the crowd. They hated the situation, and they hated us for bringing it down upon them. Both began looking for new quarters.

Paul and our workman had no choice but to carry containers of rubbish from the back, through the cellar to the street, where horse and cart were waiting. They often were met with catcalls and obscene remarks. More than once they returned to the cart to find a previous load of trash scattered in the front yard and street.

Fifty years later, during trips to Wiesbaden, I repeatedly heard tales from former classmates and others of how upset they had been about what had happened to us, how they assisted in various of our repair and reconstruction projects. Those lies, their lies keep them safe. Why do mine not protect me?

As the days passed, it was obvious that we were on our own. Even our cleaning lady deserted us. A Christian, she used to come early in the morning, around six, to clean Father’s office, do our laundry and care for other odd jobs. She was always gone by eight, not wishing to be seen working for Jews. After *Kristallnacht*, we never heard from her again. She did not even seek payment of the back wages she was owed.

By Sunday, we had made enough progress in the apartment to allow Frau Güllering, Father’s office manager, to begin work on the soggy mess in the office. Meanwhile, Mother was determined to reestablish some semblance of routine. For her, everything had to be the same, no matter what the effort or expense. She was determined to restart her *Teepilz* production. This involved home brewing from a local ‘tea mushroom,’ a

slimy, multi-layered plant. She had special crocks for making 'tea,' really a slightly fermented, semi-alcoholic soft drink. Watching her reassemble the brewing apparatus amid the wreckage, I could not understand what she thought she was doing. For me, nothing ever would be the same.

On Saturday, while Paul, Mie and I worked on the apartment, Mother joined a group of Jewish housewives searching for some trace of their husbands. They were not at the local police lockup, or the nearby prison, or in the holding cells at Gestapo headquarters on Paulinenstrasse. The authorities claimed to know nothing of their whereabouts. Practically every male Jew in Wiesbaden between the ages of 16 and 60 had disappeared without a trace.

Irmgard Levy finally got a lead. She and her mother went to Gestapo headquarters and actually managed to speak with an agent. He told her not to worry, that her father was safe, being held temporarily at "Hohenbuchau." Mother consulted with Frau Hallheimer, a friend whose Jewish husband was in hiding. A Christian, she was allowed to drive her 1936 Opel Olympia. Off they went, Frau Hallheimer at the wheel next to Mother, the two Levy women squeezed in the back. They were headed for a suburb known as Georgenborn-Schlungenbad and the huge castle Hohenbuchau. With its large park, studded with fountains, gardens and statuary, the women surmised that this was the proper setting to house their men while in detention. It was all a misunderstanding. The Gestapo man had probably said "Buchenwald," a name unknown to us. The women returned, confused and dismayed.

More disturbing news reached us. A report was circulating that a 'cache of weapons' had been found at the Jew Guthmann's house. We had no firearms, no weapons of any sort. What were they talking about? We finally decided that it had to be my father's fencing equipment. Paul was the star pupil of Herr Kronenberger, the *Schild* fencing master, and Hans Hauser, our gymnastics instructor. These two former law students, now prevented by the exclusionary rules from completing their education, devoted all their time and energy to the physical education of Wiesbaden's young Jews. We did not know it, but at that moment Hans was a prisoner at Dachau. During the intake procedure, he had given his profession as 'gym instructor,'

rather than law student. The Dachau SS made him the official prisoner physical instruction leader. Daily, he led thousands of doctors, university professors, lawyers, rabbis and other Jewish professionals in their endless workouts.

When Paul got his own room, he decorated the wall over his bed with two sets of crossed fencing foils, separated by dueling masks, a skull-and-crossbones motif. Father had used them when a student-member of a *Bruderschaft*, a 'fighting fraternity.' In those days, every manly university student was expected to sport at least one *Schmiß*, a dueling scar, received while defending his honor in the face of a contrived insult, pouring salt into the cuts to ensure that they matured into vivid scars.

Paul's decorations disappeared when the house was sacked, but Mother found four or five more foils and sabers in a basement storage room. On Sunday, she and *Grossvater* decided to make peace with the authorities by voluntarily turning them in at police headquarters. She dragged me along both for moral support and as a theatrical prop. A crying child: the perfect backdrop for an adult's act of contrition. If I insisted on bawling all the time, at least my tears could be put to good use. I did not want to go, but had no choice. She would not go alone and *Grossvater* and Paul were much too vulnerable, easy targets for arrest. Paul was furious. We were walking out with his gear.

Mother ignored my feelings. She instructed me to walk straight ahead, through the crowd, not looking right or left, no eye contact. We carried the foils tucked under our arms, non-threatening, as we pushed through the onlookers. I began weeping as we started up the big stone steps at the police station. Once inside, I continued to cry, providing blubbling background music as Mother said her piece. Apparently she did not think I was doing enough. During a lull, when the desk sergeant turned away, she planted a pointed elbow in my ribs and gave me a hard scowl. I never forgave her. One more moment which persuaded me never to show my true feelings. Her little act seemed to work. For the present, the local Order Police were mollified.

The next day we received a visit from our insurance agent. For days I had heard the adults saying things like "Thank God we have insurance. Not for THIS much damage, but at least

we'll recover something to help us rebuild." The inspector stood in the dining room, notebook in hand, surveying the damage. He attempted to appear neutral: neither conciliatory nor comforting; not unpatriotic; not disloyal to the insurance company, or his Führer. Everything was very professional, very matter-of-fact. It was as if he were inspecting the dented fender of a car involved in a minor traffic accident. Much to Mother's annoyance, Mie Güllering was present as the family's bookkeeper. Mie too was methodical, very factual throughout the meeting. She ended each sentence with a precise calculation of Reichsmark and Pfennige, so much for this, so much for that. "Now, the Guthmanns don't know if they will be able to precisely match the patterns of the broken china and crystal, but presumably you will give us an allowance of 7,000 Reichsmark to replace them with items of equal value." An absent nod. Two Christians totaling up the value of our lives while we looked on.

Mother and *Grossvater* remained impassive. They knew this was no friend. Although we were valuing broken furniture and dishes, defaced paintings and carpets, we knew we might just as easily be viewing broken bones and dead bodies. What we did not grasp was that this charade was the beginning of our family's funeral. The insurance man was our first pall bearer.

Later that week we received a notice from his company. Our claim was rejected. At the behest of the Reich's overburdened insurers, the Nazis decreed that no Jew could claim compensation for *Kristallnacht* damages, which the authorities determined they had brought upon themselves. In addition, Germany's entire Jewish population was assessed a penalty payment – known as the *Reichssühnesteuer*, the 'Atonement Tax' – in the amount of one billion Reichsmark! This was to reimburse the state and its citizens for the damage and inconvenience done to *them* during the *Kristallnacht* disruptions. Mother locked herself in her bedroom for the remainder of the day. She might just as well have taken a vial filled with some horrible metaphysical poison; the bitterness never left her. Her spirit, so tough, so resilient, was permanently compromised.

By Monday, we decided that it was safe to tackle the mess in the front yard. Strangers continued to pick through the debris lying in our garden. Among the papers and torn records were dozens of confidential files relating to Father's matrimonial

work. Following the passage of the Nuremberg Racial Laws in 1935, there has been a rash of divorces. Some were dictated purely by fear; other litigants used the new laws as a convenient excuse to abandon an unwanted spouse or family. Christian men regularly deserted Jewish wives and *Mischlings* children. Even Jews took advantage. Father handled one case where a Jewish man divorced his Jewish wife, using her infertility as an excuse. The Nazi laws encouraged large families. Failure to increase and multiply provided grounds for divorce, even for Jews.

Father was the attorney for the Jewish partners in these disputes, his confidential files kept under lock and key. The *Kristallnacht* mob broke into all his cupboards and cabinets, throwing their contents into the street with abandon. Also hiding in the wreckage was testimony to my own parents' marital discord. Months earlier, I had snooped through one of Mother's closets, finding several packets of letters. A few were early love notes between my parents, written during their courtship. A larger stack was devastating. Father had been contemplating a divorce. Because of me? Paul? Were we to blame? Now I searched desperately in the rubble, but never found them.

Later that afternoon, Helga showed up. Again she brought school supplies, books and the next day's homework assignment. We hugged and she began to cry. She had had a long talk with her Mother, who told her not to see me again. I kept saying "I understand, I understand." I knew it was difficult for her to push her way into the house, past the curbside circus. I tried to keep my composure. I even envied her the opportunity to stay away from the mess I was living in. We hugged and she left. I returned to the clean-up, weeping.

On Friday, Mother received a preemptory summons from Herr *Oberstaatsanwalt* Dr. Quambusch, Wiesbaden's chief prosecutor. He was also the president of the local bar association. He demanded to know why Father had neglected to apply for the single law position now available for a Jew attorney in Wiesbaden. Mother stammered out an excuse, explaining that Father had been detained after *Kristallnacht*, that she could not find him. Dr. Quambusch urged her to complete the application on his behalf, using her power of attorney. Mother did as she was told. Once completed, Quambusch took the forms and dismissed her, with instructions to get Father's office cleaned up

and ready for business without delay. There were more than a dozen other applicants, but it was clear the job was Father's. Why he was so favored by his Aryan colleagues remains a mystery.

Shortly thereafter, we learned that Father was imprisoned at Buchenwald, near Weimar, a hundred miles from home. We had no idea if or when he would be released. Mother also discovered that Grandfather Michel, *Opa*, her father, was there too. He was such a frail old man; she was terribly apprehensive about him. We later learned that first dozens, then hundreds, then nearly ten thousand Jews were squeezed into the camp following *Kristallnacht*, some dead in the trucks which carried them, others, like *Opa*, so shocked and confused that they were unable to give their names or addresses.

We next had an unexpected visit from Mother's 'almost half-sister,' cousin Hannah from Frankfurt. *Opa's* orphaned niece, she was raised with Mother. Hannah was married to Jakob Rosenthal, who with his son Hans was then imprisoned at Dachau. She invited us to join them in immigrating to Brazil. Years before, their eldest son had gone ahead, buying and developing a large coffee plantation. She had Nazi assurances that once all the paperwork was in order, the proper payments made, her husband and son would be allowed to emigrate. She wanted to include the four of us, and *Grossvater*, *Oma* and *Opa* too. Money was no object. *Grossvater* had plenty, and what we did not have, the Rosenthals would supply.

The two did not much like each other, so the offer was doubly generous. Mother stubbornly declined. Having signed the papers seeking Father's appointment as Jew *Konsulent*, Mother said that to flee now would be to abandon that obligation and Father's clients. I never knew if that was the real reason or not. It certainly was the worst decision of her life, sealing our fate. Father's sister, Aunt Anna, was long gone with her family, established in Philadelphia, their expenses generously underwritten by *Grossvater*. Widowed, Father and *Grossvater* even found Anna a new husband to accompany her. Now, after *Kristallnacht*, it was clear to all but us where things were headed. Jews by the thousands were fleeing, anywhere, at any price. With *Grossvater's* help, Father's younger brother, Eduard, with his family and his in-laws, were among them. Now there was a coffee plantation waiting for us near São Paulo, all expenses paid. Why not go?

Mother was dreadfully obstinate. She did not like being told what to do by others. The fact is that all the evidence to the contrary, my parents still did not see it as a life-or-death decision. The provincial charm of Wiesbaden still held sway. No, we could not go to the theatre, or concerts, or move about as we wished. But in Brazil we probably would not indulge in much theatre or concert going either. Far out in the back country, there would be no *Kultur*. We did not speak the language. Father would no longer be a lawyer. We would be as out of place there as were the *Ostjuden* were in Germany. So we stayed.

With *Grossvater's* help, we hired a full-time carpenter and several other workmen, plumbers, electricians, plasterers, glaziers and painters. Their work progressed slowly, destroying our privacy even as they repaired the building. The carpenter would arrive early and adjourn to the kitchen, where he fixed his breakfast and heated his smelly glue pot. The living room became his woodworking shop, filled with broken chairs, tables, and other objects in various stages of repair, disrepair and destruction. It once was a place for family and friends to gather, for doing homework, for reading. Now the stink of glue replaced the aroma of leather-bound books and furniture.

Even when the workmen eventually finished, we had no peace. Later, when Father assumed his position as *Konsulent*, he was so overworked that our dining room and the *Herrenzimmer* were full-time adjuncts of his downstairs office, filled at all hours with stenographers, legal assistants and clients. The hammering and sanding gave way to the clack of typewriters and ever-ringing telephones. Workmen were replaced by law office assistants, delivery men by frantic clients. Even as it was repaired, the flat's character changed. It was not home anymore. We already were living in exile.

The apartment was never clean again either, not the way it had been before the riot. I had been robbed of my security, Mother of her pride. Our house now was furnished with our friends' castoffs. Some remnants of our own furniture survived, but barely. The leather sofa and armchairs were patched, large pieces of mismatched leather glued over seats and backrests, covering the slash marks. For a German *Hausfrau*, perfection is in the details. It was the floors that gave me my first clue.

Throughout the apartment, the flooring was constructed of two-color inlaid wood parquet, intricate, unique for a private

residence, Mother's pride and joy. Since the early 1800s, the floors had been regularly and lovingly waxed and buffed to a high sheen. One hundred and forty years of accumulated elbow grease and it showed. Now they were washed with plain soap and water, kept clean, but nothing more. The brass nameplate on our new front door became cloudy, dim. No one thought to polish it.

I lost my bedroom. For years I had been waiting for my own space, away from Paul. Now I had to make do with a fold-up bed, a few battered books on the repaired shelves, no dolls to share it with. When I got up in the morning and concealed the bed, it was no longer my space. I never knew when a stray stenographer or secretary would settle down at my little table, or a law assistant would appropriate my space to interview a client.

Unlike those who scavenged through our belongings, fascinated, titillated by our discomfort, most of the local Aryans were *Weggucker*, literally 'away-lookers,' averting their eyes, pretending we were invisible. Long before *Kristallnacht*, Father could no longer get his weekly trim and Saturday morning shave at his regular barbershop – no Jews allowed; Grandfather could not get his favorite coffee rolls brought to his door each morning – the teenage delivery boys would not serve Jews. Our nameless milkmaid was an exception. Severely crippled, with a protruding hip and pronounced limp, she daily carried two metal five-gallon buckets of milk from door to door. At each stop, she would reach into her bucket with a measured dipper, fill her customer's container, and collect the price. Our usual method was for me to meet her in the courtyard across the street and obtain a bottle of *blaue Heinrich*, "Blue Henry," a blue-looking skim milk. While *Grossvater* cared for us after *Kristallnacht*, he arranged for her to leave a small bottle of whole milk, rich with cream, for me each day. She would deposit it at the door, and quickly limp on.

Abandoned by our Aryan neighbors, many local Jews came to our rescue, or so it appeared. For a few towels, kitchen utensils or some books, they purchased an admission ticket to view the ruins for themselves, complete with a guided tour by Mother. They were as ghastly as the strangers out front. I hated it: the commotion, their curiosity, and the stares. Within a week, their 'stuff' was arriving almost as fast as we could throw our things out. Our man-with-a-horse brought a full load from Rabbi

Lazarus who, with uncanny timing, was in the midst of immigrating to Palestine with his wife and two daughters. Our family, as was the case with the Michelsberg congregation, was divided concerning his move. To Mother, he was “a shepherd abandoning his flock as the wolves circle around.” To Father, Lazarus “was just doing the right and proper thing, going to the Holy Land where he belongs.” But if Rabbi Lazarus was leaving, why were we staying?

On November 15 I returned to school, treating my absence as if I had been home with a case of the sniffles. Helga was absent that day. Welcomed by my chums, I settled down to study. After an hour or so, Herr Professor Rang called me into the hall. He asked me to tell my parents that “What has been going on is appalling. It is not the will of the German people. All good and honest persons apologize for what has happened.” He then directed me to go home and not come back. I wanted to cry, but would not give him the satisfaction. I gathered up my books and pencils, marched out the door, and never returned. That day I tasted a full measure of Mother’s bitterness.

At thirteen, my formal schooling was over. No *Abitur* for me. All schools, at every level, purged their few remaining Jews. I was never to see my classmates again, I was never to be part of a German school again. Somehow I had become an orphan. Within a week or two, nearly all my friends at the *Lyzeum* had joined the Hitler Youth. In my dreams, they marched away from me in lockstep, singing Nazi songs.

Although we did not know it, Father too was struggling. Much of his time at Buchenwald had been spent at *Appell*, standing stiffly at attention for hours during endless roll calls and inspections. At other times he worked as a volunteer in the *Waschküche*, the ‘laundry room,’ where the elderly, injured, ill and dying were sent. On December 6, he answered a command to report to the main office. These summons often preceded the infliction of further arbitrary punishment. To his surprise, he was released and ordered to return to Wiesbaden. He was given train fare and warned to avoid any involvement with fellow travelers. After an absence of nearly four weeks, Buchenwald prisoner number 24868 came home. We assumed that Herr Dr. Quambusch had made the arrangements, but never knew for sure. Unfortunately, Father had to leave *Opa* behind. He remained

in the camp until after the turn of the year. *Opa* never recovered from his ordeal there. He died of undiagnosed causes in December 1941.

Father looked nothing like himself when he arrived: tired, disheveled, shorn hair, filthy clothes. Like most of the inmates, he suffered from dysentery. He had methodically torn out the lining of his coat to use as toilet paper. He walked through the front door at twilight, a ghost.

Within days, he was officially appointed as Wiesbaden's sole *Juden Konsulent*, responsible for assisting his fellow Jews in their dealings with the Nazis. Much of his time was spent expediting the emigration process for those who could get out. I later speculated about his decision to accept the position. As Wiesbaden's Jew *Konsulent*, over the next three years he became the local Nazis' principal link to the Wiesbaden Jews, inevitably the Gestapo's official harbinger of bad news for our community. Unconscious and then unavoidable complicity? At the time, however, the appointment was irresistible.

His professional pride hid an immense ego. He simply could not allow himself to believe that Germans would kill other Germans, even the hated Jews. He ignored *Grossvater's* beating, the *Kristallnacht* pogrom, his own incarceration at Buchenwald, his sister's and brother's decisions to flee, the diminishment of his professional standing, the unending official anti-Semitic abuse heaped upon us. I have no doubt we could have escaped in 1939 if we had made the effort. If not to Brazil, then to America. We had the resources and the contacts. But my parents never seriously considered it. Father was not about to forfeit his personal and professional standing, the family's accumulated financial security, his duties to his clients and his responsibilities to our Jewish community. Standing, security, duty, responsibility – in the upside-down world of the Third Reich, code words for near-sighted obstinacy and self-deception.

He put us in harm's way, he allowed himself to be manipulated by the Nazis, but he also took care of his clients, assisting many to escape, others to endure their hardships. He regularly placed their interests before those of his family. I may judge him, even condemn him, but knowing what came after, how can I not forgive him? In the Guthmann tradition, however, forgiveness is a very private matter.

Chapter One

Crossing the River Styx: Hell in a Very Large Room

We departed Frankfurt early on the morning of June 10, 1943. There were 15 or so on the transport, the last of the Jews from the Frankfurt-Wiesbaden area to be deported to Theresienstadt. There were four or five Gestapo agents escorting us, and a similar number of SD guards (the specialized security service of the SS).

We were doubly fortunate: we were placed in a single car attached to a regular passenger train and our family was assigned an individual compartment for the duration of the trip. Our circumstances were far superior to those of the poor souls deported earlier, crammed 80 or 90 to a single car. Mother had managed to pack some meager sandwiches for the trip and Father brought along an old scouting canteen filled with some sort of alcoholic drink. He swigged from it as we rode along and in due course began to quietly hum *Muss I' Denn* ('Must I Leave'). For a portion of the eight hour trip he seemed a bit tipsy, certainly very distant. He was saddened and depressed, of course, and frightened, as were we all. In Wiesbaden and Frankfurt he had been treated as a 'prominent,' but he had no idea whether that would be true at our new destination. It was not. When we departed Frankfurt, what was left of his privileged status, like everything else of value, was forfeit. He became just another prisoner, one among tens of thousands.

In the late afternoon we arrived at Bauschowitz, the small station about four kilometers from the Ghetto's walls. Although we were a small group, we had the distinction of being personally greeted by Theresienstadt's *Kommandant, Hauptsturmführer* (SS Captain) Dr. Siegfried Seidl. We were marched into the station's restaurant, where a number of female guards were assembled behind a long table. Seidl strongly advised us to hand over any contraband we were carrying, such as money, jewelry, alcohol or cigarettes. During the process – the *Schleusse* ('sluice') as it was known, a place designed to force arriving inmates through a narrow opening, where they were stripped of everything of value – I showed one of the guards a small charm bracelet I wore. Its value was purely sentimental, only a small silver-and-

enamel teddy bear and its tiny companions. Then and there, the guards began to relieve me of what little was left of my childhood as they appropriated the bracelet and other personal belongings. The process was not particularly harsh or brutal, only thorough. Somehow, however, when they finished with Father he still was in possession of a small portable typewriter, hidden under some clothes in his suitcase. He had delusions of preparing petitions for inmates and pursuing other legal busywork while in the Ghetto. The typewriter, never once used inside Theresienstadt's walls, was carried back to Wiesbaden by my mother in the summer of 1945. There, she used it to good effect preparing Guthmann family reparation petitions. How it passed that initial inspection remains a mystery.

Cowed and intimidated but otherwise unharmed, we were loaded onto a small truck for the trip to the Ghetto. Before we left the station, we witnessed an argument between our official escort from Frankfurt and the local authorities. Apparently the visitors wanted a tour of the camp; they were summarily rebuffed and re-boarded the train with their tails between their legs. For reasons that rapidly became obvious to us, casual guests and sightseers, even members of the Gestapo and SD, were not welcome at KZ-Ghetto Theresienstadt.

An hour or so later, my mother and I were tearfully separated from Father and my brother Paul, who were to be housed in the main men's barracks, the Hannover *Kaserne*. My mother and I found ourselves thrust into the midst of an enormous attic room, part of the Hamburger *Kaserne*. The gigantic, sprawling room was home to thousands of women, most of them speaking Czech. They lay on dirty bare floors under rough hewn, bare eaves. It was teeming, loud, filthy, dim and hot. Terrifying! I was sure we had walked through the doorway to Hell. Little did I know that this was but one of hundreds of antechambers to Hades, a much more terrifying place located far to the East of our present location, whose inner circle bore names such as Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka, Lublin-Majdanek, Sobibor, Chelmno and Belzec.

Remembering those early hours and days, I can't recall exactly how I perceived Theresienstadt. It wasn't quite a concentration camp – certainly not in the sense of the camps in Poland, where each inmate's every minute and movement were carefully monitored, where death could be inflicted on prisoners almost

whimsically by their guards – but there were severe restrictions on our movement. It wasn't quite a ghetto either, although there was an internal Jewish administration. Its power was illusory, of course; there wasn't a shred of real independence. The Ghetto's Council of Elders did what they were told to do by the SS organization that ran the camp, nothing more, nothing less. However it may have been perceived by the outside world, 'The City Hitler Built for the Jews,' as it was enthusiastically promoted by Goebbels' propaganda machine, KZ-Ghetto Theresienstadt was little more than a collection and concentration dumping ground, a trans-shipment point for Jews destined to be sent East to the notorious *Vernichtungslager* ('extermination camps') of Poland. Prior to re-deportation, the daily privations of the Ghetto, including foul sanitary conditions, utterly inadequate medical facilities, intense overcrowding, persistent malnutrition and despair, all added to a high 'natural' death rate. Between November 1941 and May 1945, some 33,000 prisoners perished within the walls of Ghetto Theresienstadt, sometimes as many as 100 a day.

With few exceptions, we were not faced with the daily roll calls, the dreaded *Appells*, characteristic of so many of the camps, which meant standing at attention on a parade ground in all kinds of weather for hours on end while guards endlessly counted and recounted the prisoners. The only times we were turned out of the barracks other than for work was when the Czech women working for the SS suddenly arrived for a surprise inspection, looking for illegal contraband. During these searches, which seldom lasted much more than an hour, we were made to stand in the barrack's central courtyard while our quarters were thoroughly ransacked.

In late July 1943, Seidel was replaced by Anton Burger as *Kommandant*. Burger was even more brutal than his predecessor, arriving with an intense loathing for Czechs, the largest component of prisoners. Ironically, as vicious as Burger and his administration were, their presence brought a small measure of relief to the German and Austrian inmates, since he visited such a disproportionate amount of grief on the Czechs.

On July 28, 1943, the residents of the Sudeten Barracks, the largest prisoner housing facility in the Ghetto, were summarily evicted and jammed in with the remainder of the Ghetto's already

overcrowded population. Three weeks later, a Gestapo contingent arrived from Berlin, hauling with it a substantial portion of the Gestapo's central files to be stored in the Sudeten *Kaserne* in order to protect them from Allied bombing.

In mid-summer 1943, with the arrival of our tiny Transport XII/5 from Frankfurt, together with other inbound trains from throughout Germany and Western Europe, Thresienstadt's inmate population stabilized at approximately 45,000, including 3,200 children aged 15 and under. The original garrison town had been built to house approximately 6,000.

The fourth floor attic to which my mother and I were assigned was crawling with people and visibly alive with vermin. We were in an enormous open space under the eaves, hemmed in by steeply slanted ceilings and huge beams crisscrossing both the ceiling and the floor, the latter made of bare red sandstone carpeted by years of filth. The space was simply defined by the underside of the shingled, leaky roof, the massive exterior walls, and the supporting beams. Set in the sloping roofs were perhaps 12 to 15 small gabled windows, providing the only source of ventilation and daylight for the entire attic. Jammed into this space were 6,000 women. The din was unbearable: women arguing, crying, complaining, yelling at each other, endlessly screaming at no one for no apparent reason. The voices were almost all in incomprehensible Czech, since there weren't many Austrians or Germans mixed into the population. As we stumbled, dazed, into this undulating sea of humanity, it appeared that everyone in sight was sick, dying, or dead.

The attic was sticky, stinking and hot, certainly no place I wanted to be, awake or asleep, alive or dead. I desperately wanted to run, but there was no place to hide. I wondered if this could really be the 'model ghetto' we had heard so much about, the exotic destination to which people fought desperately to be sent rather than face deportation 'to the East.' It took awhile for me to begin to imagine what the camps in the East must be like if this was considered so far superior. How young and naïve I was the day I entered that enormous space atop Block C-III.

A one meter-wide elevated walkway encircled the entire attic. The remainder of the space was divided by the floor

beams into smaller areas, each of which housed between 12 and 16 women, lying on thin, filthy straw mats. There were no bunks, everyone slept on the floor.

Moments after our arrival, we were directed to a corner where we were gruffly greeted by the Attic Elder. A middle-aged Czech, she spoke only poor, halting German. Amidst all this confusion, she'd been patiently awaiting us. She verified our names, transport numbers, official identity designations, birth dates, and the names of the other family members who had accompanied us. She handed us our precious ration cards and told us that we'd have to queue up for food, that other inmates would explain the process when the time came. She indicated that each of us should take a soiled, stained straw mat from a pile shoved deep under the eaves. We didn't even want to touch them, let alone lay our heads on them. Still, I reluctantly squeezed up into the space and pulled down two for my mother and me.

The Elder pointed to an area with barely enough room of her four new residents, my mother and me and two others from our transport. We claimed a tiny space next to four other women who had arrived only hours earlier from Breslau. We were told to be neat, placing our mats next to the others already in place, the head towards the beam, with two feet or so between the foot of each mat and head of the one below it, an arrangement which formed sort of an aisle, but with no space between the sides of the mats. We did as we were told, placing our hand luggage on the beam, also as instructed. Thus, 'home' for each of us became a space about six feet long and three or four feet wide, just about the dimensions of a coffin. The section, marked off by the floor beams, contained 16 women, our 'roommates.'

It was also a bizarre sensation to be known by a number, not a name. Upon arrival, Lotte Guthmann simply became Inmate Number XII/5-11. With typical German efficiency, it made ready sense: the 'XII' specified that I was from a transport originating in Frankfurt; the '5' signified the fifth such transport from that destination; and the '11' marked me as the eleventh member of that group. Although always called "Lotte" by other prisoners and my inmate supervisors, officially I simply became "XII/5-11" for the next 23 months. It made a kind of perverse sense. In this sea of women, most of them speaking an incomprehensible language with the occasional German, Hebrew or Yiddish word or

phrase popping up now and then, numbers seemed appropriate. Conceivably, there could have been another prisoner with an identical or very similar name, but there could only be one “XII/5-11.” How else could one safeguard one’s identity? So, in the topsyturvy world of KZ-Ghetto Theresienstadt, exchanging one’s name for a number was a stubborn way to remain a distinct person.

Moments later a little old lady came hustling up to us. She was gaunt with dirty, sparse hair, dressed in colorless gray ill-fitting tatters. Her voice sounded vaguely familiar, but I had no idea who she was. She promptly embraced my mother and began addressing both of us in the most endearing terms. It was several moments before I realized that it was Eugenie Löwenstein, one of Father’s regular office stenographers. She has been in the Ghetto for nearly nine months, making her a real old-timer among the camp’s German population. Somehow she’d gotten word of our arrival and rushed to greet us and give us the benefit of some badly needed practical advice about life in the Model Ghetto. While we were blessed by her presence – what she told us then was of immense importance in the days and weeks to come – we were shocked, absolutely dumfounded by her appearance. She was a woman in her late forties, who’d aged 30 years since we’d last seen her. When she left Wiesbaden she was a bit on the stout side, with a stately bearing and beautiful thick black hair. In less than nine months she’d lost half her body weight and her hair had turned completely gray.

However taken aback we were by her looks, my mother and I were certainly happy to see her. Of course, the first question was about *Grossvater* Guthmann and the others from the September 1941 transport. We’d heard nothing from or about him since his departure. Eugenie sadly told us he was long gone, having died within a month of arriving in the Ghetto, the victim of dysentery, malnutrition, general privation and a broken spirit. He’d been allotted a tiny space in a small attic in a house on one of the cross streets. I was left with this horrible picture of his last days, alone in that dark, filthy place, needing toilet facilities which weren’t available, as the life flowed out of him. It was merciful that he died so quickly. As we sat on our mats listening to Eugenie, I thought of the heavy sweater I had purposely brought with me for his comfort, hand-knitted by *Grossmutter* Lina years before. It would do him no good now, but in time it would help me to survive.

One shock gave way to others. Everyone we asked about had either died or had been re-deported East. One thought that had not occurred to me was that KZ-Ghetto Theresienstadt might not be our final destination, that this hellhole was only a way-station to some place much worse. It took some time for that thought to sink in. But from the first day we kept hearing references to that dreaded word, *Abtransport*, meaning re-deportation East. The fear it engendered even changed our sense of time. Instead of days, weeks and months, our measure became the time between departing outbound transports. Like our persistent physical hunger, this dread was always with us.

Eugenie immediately gave us the benefit of her experience in the Ghetto. Her counsel was as practical as it was simple: lay low, don't draw attention to yourself; don't rely on past credentials or credits, because they had no value here (I clearly remember her saying, "Life starts over completely, right now"); never miss the opportunity to grab all the food possible, even stealing it if the right opportunity presented itself; ration daily bread portions to alleviate nighttime hunger pains and to have a bit to nibble on in the morning and on those three nights each week when no evening meal was distributed; finally, when someone nearby dies, lunge for any of the deceased's belongings which might be useful. Her rules were long on common sense, her advice accurate. In the space of little more than hour, Eugenie saved us much trouble and unnecessary grief.

As she finished her lecture, we saw everyone gathering up small pots, pans and mess kits. It was time for supper. Although we had ration coupons, we were in such a state of disarray that my mother and I couldn't pull ourselves together to go anywhere. We attempted to make a gift of our coupons to Eugenie, but instead of taking them for herself she insisted on fetching our meals for us. Some time later she returned with a Ghetto delicacy known as *Knödlíčky*, Czech dumplings. When she proudly presented them to us, mother and I both involuntarily gagged; the blobs of dough looked as if they already had been eaten and regurgitated by someone else. We turned away in disgust, indicating to our guardian angel that she was welcome to our meals. She sat quietly on a pile of rags in the corner, wolfing down all three portions, smacking her lips with relish. It would not be long before we understood the insatiable hunger that drove her to devour such unappealing slop with obvious zest.

When she finished, it was near ‘lights out,’ so she hurried away to her own barracks. Although my mother met with her from time to time, I never saw Eugenie again. I don’t know what happened to her; death or re-deportation certainly. Despite her kindness in seeking us out that evening, she had been of no great comfort to us. Although we were enormously grateful for her assistance and guidance, she was obviously more dead than alive, a stark, unmistakable forewarning of what we now confronted.

We soon learned that the Hamburger’s only toilets were all on the floors below us, and on the other side of the building. Our greatest dread was to need the toilets in the dead of night, with no light, having to step over and around hundreds of bodies while making our way across the attic to the steep spot where you scabbled up onto the walkway, trying to get where you wanted to go and do what you needed to do as quickly as possible.

That evening there were many women on the walkway. I innocently asked directions to the nearest toilet. The first woman glanced at me and mumbled “*nerosumim nemecki*.” I had no idea what she was saying. In time, I learned that it translated to “I don’t understand or speak German.” The “*nemecki*” had a pejorative sense to it, meaning “crude,” “stupid,” “wicked” and the like. This was a surprise. Since childhood, I’d been taught that the Slavs were all these things, not us Germans. I can’t recall my parents ever specifically saying such a thing, but it was a given. And the Czechs were Slavs. But the joke was on us, because within the Ghetto the Czechs clearly held the upper hand. I quickly learned that most of them drew little distinction between their SS masters and their fellow German inmates. They hated all Germans. So my previous status, as a German, a Jew, as a child of the professional middle class, was simultaneously reduced on many levels. Entering the Ghetto not only defined *where* I was, but *who* I was. Over the next days I would discover that many of the *nerosumim nemecki* brush-offs were just that, uttered by Czechs who spoke German perfectly well but chose not to utter the hated language. That too was a shock. It told me that I was unwelcome even among the other inmates. For years it had been painfully clear that I was not welcome ‘on the outside’ either. So where did I belong? There was no solidarity here, at least none

that included me. Even though we were all prisoners, I remained an outsider. What was I supposed to do? Look for German inmates and connect with them? To me everyone looked and acted alike. I was thoroughly confused, totally disconcerted.

Finally, after several more rebuffs, someone took pity on me and my obvious distress and pointed me in the right direction. I think that there were two toilet installations on each of the three lower floors, none in the attic or anywhere near my entrance to it. No slop buckets, bedpans or chamber pots anywhere. Finally, I found the desired location.

In each toilet area there were six or eight privies in a row, open and unprotected, no stalls, no privacy of any sort. No seats, just topless commodes. No toilet paper. As often as not, no running water to flush. A line of 20 or more women impatiently waited for the next vacancy. In the late evenings and early mornings the lines were much longer, the tempers much shorter. When I finally arrived at the point where I could occupy a toilet, there was mumbling, grumbling and admonitions: "Don't take so long." "We haven't got all night." "That's long enough." A new lesson in degradation. The lucky few who were actually occupying the toilets were acutely uncomfortable. Few of us had ever been so exposed, we didn't appreciate having an audience, nor being bullied and rushed. It was an experience akin to being toilet trained all over again, but with a total revision of one's concepts of privacy, decorum and modesty. What would an unfortunate person do if visited by an urgent 'call to nature'? Not very much. She would be at the mercy of her fellow prisoners who were waiting in line ahead of her. And 'mercy' was not writ large in this community's conscience.

Sometimes a person would present herself at the line with a slop bucket. I had no idea whether these buckets' contents were of the same nature as that already resting in the bowls and overflowing onto the stone floor, or whether this was what was left from having mopped a floor in one of the smaller rooms on the lower stories, or dirty water left from some lucky few who were able to wash out their mess kits. Our attic floor was never washed, never swept. The prevailing rules allowed the bucket carrier to proceed to the front of the line and empty her container. Perhaps it was to provide flushing water for the toilets, momentarily clearing one or two of the evil looking, foul smelling bowls. In my time

in C-III, I never figured out who these people were or where they got their buckets. I did know that any unattended buckets left behind after a recent re-deportation were savagely fought over by the remaining prisoners. To me, it remained one of life's little mysteries at Ghetto Theresienstadt.

Nor did I have any idea how the fortunate residents of the rooms on the lower floors received their privileged housing assignments. To be one of only 30 or so women living in a single room was heaven compared to our existence in the attic. As I moved about, I could see through the open doors that there were bunk beds, some several tiers, others only double, a few singles. The rooms also had little pot bellied ovens, doors on the side facing the outside walkway, and a window or two. Light. The possibility of fresh air. Heaven!

Things were no better in the communal washrooms. Again, endless lines. Long, grimy, rust-streaked metal sinks, with overhead spigots, four or five feet apart, at eye level. The night we arrived, *Kommandant* Seidl had ordered the water to be shut off throughout the Ghetto as punishment for some real or imagined infraction, so there was no way to clean ourselves even if we'd had the inclination and energy to do so. There never was any soap for washing. We soon learned that the *Wassersperre*, the central shut-off of water, was one of the *Kommandant's* favorite punishments, together with the *Lichtsperr*, the sudden interruption of all electric service throughout the Ghetto. It was his way of inflicting mass punishment on the entire camp when he was disciplining two or three individuals for minor infractions. Sometimes these inconveniences were imposed in the name of rationing, to save water or electricity. There were rules, rules and more rules, posted daily outside the Magdeburger *Kaserne*, which housed the Ghetto's internal administration headquarters. They were contained in the *Tagesbefehl*, the 'Daily Orders.' Sometimes they made sense, more often not.

I soon realized that standing in line – for a toilet, for soup, for bread rations – could be an excellent educational experience for a newcomer like me, a modest but useful social encounter. I learned all sorts of things, some true, some imagined, some outright lies, some about things that were simply the product of false hope, of desperation. I made friends. I exchanged 'addresses.' I diligently worked to increase my smattering of Czech. No one

ever taught me that I could obtain such useful and important information while awaiting my turn to perform various bodily functions. Like everyone else, I hated the lines but I made good use of the social and educational opportunities they afforded.

Hunger soon drove us to consume anything we were given, but it was awful fare. 'Breakfast' consisted of a single cup of lukewarm ersatz coffee, which was hardly worth the effort. The mid-day food, the principal meal of the day, might typically consist of dumplings with a dab of mustard sauce and perhaps some watery soup. A frequent 'main course' consisted of a mysterious grain substance, wheat or rice I think, called *Graupen*. I had never seen it before or since. Perhaps it was an animal feed product. Three, sometimes four nights a week there was something that passed for supper, perhaps thin soup with a bit of unpeeled turnip, potato or carrot floating in it. It was also in the evening that the bread rations were distributed. The bread was handed out by the Attic Elder, a function that was one of her principal sources of power. She received the bread as whole loaves and then sliced them into quarter-loaves for distribution to her charges. There were many ways to slice bread, some generous, some niggardly. There was always the opportunity for her to slice a bit off each loaf for her own table, as she did regularly. Then there were her favorites, who always receive more generous portions. Others received the opposite. Whatever the case, there was no arguing with the results. You took what you got and you liked it. She occasionally handed out slivers of margarine too, which varied considerably in their thickness. The same rule applied; you took what you got without argument or complaint.

Aside from outright theft of your neighbor's bread, there were other ways to modestly increase your rations. Very early I noticed that attractive young girls received more attention in the food lines than did their less appealing fellows. 'Young' and 'attractive' were always equated with newly arrived inmates, because it didn't take long for the aging process to set in. The queues were controlled by the *Ordnungsdienst*, a sort of Ghetto police, whose principal responsibility was controlling the dense foot traffic, constantly admonishing us to "*rechts gehen*," "walk to the right." Soon after my arrival, when I was still reasonably

clean and presentable, one of these fellows who was keeping order at the food window began chatting me up. Soon one of the cooks who was dispensing food joined in. There were two advantages from their perspective. I was female, young and pretty, and as a recent arrival I might have 'new' news from the outside world. In exchange for small talk and a smile, I received a second small scoop of nasty tasting mustard sauce. Unfortunately, although I tried, the ploy never worked again, at least not for me. I really wasn't much of a flirt, my news was soon old, and it didn't take long for the starvation-induced aging process to set in. One could only hope that a smile and a bit of chatter would induce the cook stirring the soup to dip down to the bottom, where the soggy vegetables rested, and get you a bit of substance, instead of just skimming the salty, dirty water off the top of the kettle. As was true throughout the Ghetto, the general rule was that when one person received a benefit - an extra ladle of soup, extra slice of bread, a larger sliver of margarine - another suffered a loss. But sheer hunger dictated one's response. If I got a brimming ladle and the person behind me got less to make up for it, I didn't care. Anyone who experiences genuine, prolonged hunger quickly learns the meaning of desperation.

It was impossible to measure the daily caloric intake for an average prisoner, but even on the best days it was below the bare subsistence level. Even before reaching the Ghetto's general population, all the food supplies went through a complex pilfering process: first, by the SS and civilian camp administration; then by the internal Jewish administration; finally, by the cooks and their helpers in the kitchens and those charged with distributing the food. As much as I hated the food and the system, I gladly would have partaken of any food skimmed off in this manner if only I had had the means. Hunger became our constant companion and never-ending complaint. Even after eating, there wasn't a moment in the day or night when we weren't famished. It was just a matter of degree; some times were much worse than others, but all of them were bad.

It was common for new arrivals to lose as much as a third of their weight within their first four months in the Ghetto. The hunger was utterly, completely absorbing. One thought of food constantly. The elderly especially fantasized about the elaborate meals that had previously graced their tables, torturing

themselves by describing in excruciating detail the wonderful food they had eaten long ago. For me, the pain, the agony of a constantly empty stomach was about equally divided between the physical and the emotional. The loss of weight inevitably led to loss of physical strength and mental energy. That, in turn, led to a failure of one's inner capacity to cope with daily demands of the Ghetto, which caused an erosion of confidence and self-esteem. Finally, there was the visual impact of what starvation did to its victims. I arrived in the camp nearly six feet tall, weighing perhaps 155 pounds. When the war ended 23 months later, I didn't weigh more than 95 pounds, perhaps less. Eventually I learned to combat the psychological process, and even found ways to relieve my physical craving for food, but until the day the war ended nearly two years later, I remained hungry almost every hour of every day during my stay at Theresienstadt. Sometimes I felt less starved than others, but I was *always* hungry, often ravenous.

An early advantage I exploited came in the form of a friendship with another attic girl of about my age. The bridge-walk which encircled our living space led to one of the small *Kumbals*, little cubbyholes found in various corners of the attic where some semblance of privacy could be maintained. It wasn't far from my mat, the frayed fragment that marked the boundaries of my own allotted space. I soon found that four Czech women lived in this private space, including a middle-aged woman and her rather dumpy, heavy-set daughter. This young woman, whose name I have long since forgotten, walked past me several times, and then one day stepped down from the walkway and introduced herself. We started to chat – she spoke fairly good German and I was quickly picking up very rudimentary Czech – and I learned that her mother was a Ghetto cook. This automatically meant that she had access to multiple portions of our regularly allotted meals and could easily afford to trade off a portion of her bread ration for whatever a newly arrived inmate might have for sale or barter.

Fortunately, I was still in possession of a jar of a wonderfully smelling cosmetic cream, which somehow had survived the sluicing process. I was fond of using it, applying a tiny bit of it, perfume style, to the inside of my wrist, to counter the loathsome odors. My new friend promptly traded it for four quarter loaves of bread, to be delivered several days apart. A quarter of

a loaf of bread, sliced up four ways, one for each member of our family, yielded about one and half slices per person. Such was our new value system.

My friend also had a young man who regularly called on her, sat with her when she wasn't feeling well, tenderly held her hand. I always suspected that he loved her mother's extra soup portions as much as he did her daughter, and more power to him. As I recall, they were all re-deported in due course.

We also were fortunate to receive some food parcels sent us from outside the Ghetto. My parents had prudently left a large sum of money with the ever-faithful Frau Güllering, father's devoted Christian office manager, for just that purpose. Every month or two, we each would receive a package from her – some would get through the system, some would not – usually containing a small pound cake. While the cake was delicious, what we really needed were dried vegetables and other more nutritious edibles. But anything was a welcome relief from the loathsome monotony of the Ghetto's kitchen fare. Nor could we overlook the risk that she took every time she, a Christian, went to the post office with a food parcel to be mailed to Jews in a concentration camp.

That first night, however, the hunger had not yet seized us. Our stomachs were knotted with fear which strangled any appetite. Against all odds, my mother and I managed a get a bit of restless sleep. Aside from the continuous noise, we were covered with jumping, crawling, biting bugs and brushed by an occasional small rodent. When we awoke in the early morning, one of our immediate neighbors, an older woman from the Breslau group, was dead, having poisoned herself during the night. As was the case with so many suicide victims and with others who had just given up the struggle and let go, she looked relatively peaceful lying on her filthy, threadbare straw mat in the dingy morning light. I can't remember what happened to her clothes and other meager belongings. They were divided among the Breslau contingent, I suppose. A fitting introduction to our new home.

That first morning we made the effort to stand in line for 'coffee' because we were so parched. The water was still turned off, so there was no other way to quench our thirst. When we returned to the barracks, the Elder had our labor assignments

ready. We were to work on the *Hundertschaft*, mobile labor parties composed of 100 individuals who were shuttled about to various camps jobs, wherever manpower might be needed in the Ghetto. I don't recall our job that first day. It might have been anything from digging ditches, to carrying building materials, to cleaning latrines. The work was seldom dangerous, but nearly always difficult and unpleasant. Typically, we worked from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., with a short break for the midday meal. During the summer months, the workday might be extended for an additional hour or two.

The key technique for coping with these assignments was called *Tachinieren*, a Ghetto term that referred to each worker's capacity to cheat, steal and, most of all, delay. In practice, it meant playing sick, faking it, pretending to be ill or disabled. The idea was to do as little as possible, in as much time as possible, and to steal anything that might be of use along the way. We could get into serious trouble if we were caught, but if an entire work party employed the same method, it was difficult to identify individual malingerers or slackers. The whole idea was for a group of a 100 inmates to spend the entire day doing what 25 might do before noon, while simultaneously stealing building materials and other desirable items which were of personal benefit to the inmates (for instance, a couple of small scraps of lumber for a barracks shelf).

That first summer, my daily routine while working on the *Hundertschaft* soon became well established. We would awaken early. The noise of the other women, thousands of them, kept me from ever oversleeping. I'd make my way across the attic and run down one flight of stairs to use the toilets, then sprint down to the ground floor to see if the tap water was running and line up to use one of the spigots. Then back to the attic, dress and off to the *Arbeitseinsatz* (Work Assignment Office).

During my time as a member of the *Hunderschaft*, I mostly worked on the *Putzkolonne*, the cleaning crew. We would march out in groups of ten or twelve to another barracks to do our work. I remember one small complex of little houses that were inhabited by old, infirm, sick prisoners. We were issued brooms, buckets, scrub brushes and rags. My job was to mop large flagstones in the open courtyard. I didn't get much water to perform the work and didn't do a very efficient job of it. On

other days we would get there and not have any water available for cleaning. We'd sweep up, shake out and make the old people's beds, and stand around a lot. *Tachinieren* perfected!

The noontime break was an hour, but with little time to relax. We'd run back to our barracks to retrieve our mess kits, and then hustle to get in line for our food, run back to the barracks to eat, usually with no time or water to clean up the mess kits or ourselves. Then back to work.

On those evenings when there was nothing available but ersatz coffee, I usually didn't bother to join the lines. The benefit wasn't worth the effort; for the little you got, you expended too much energy. After working, my mother and I would often go and visit Father and Paul in the Hanover Barracks, a building complex very similar to ours. Father had had the good fortune to be appointed a room elder, which kept him off the heavy labor details. He didn't have much to do. Certainly he wasn't occupied writing petitions on behalf of his fellow prisoners. His singular presence had won him this little job as a room elder, but he would never be more than that, never a part of the Ghetto Administration. Just a minor functionary, with plenty of time on his hands during the day when the barracks were mostly empty.

Somewhere he'd acquired a small claw hammer. In his spare time he took to wandering around the enormous Hannover *Kaserne*, pulling out nails previously hammered into beams in places they were not structurally required. His badge of office as a room elder was a small, crude table and two little wooden benches. He would sit at the table, patiently striking the nails with his hammer, straightening them. The nails became a useful commodity. He traded them to people who wanted to use them to hang clothes and such on the barracks' walls or to attempt small construction projects. In time, the nails became an obsession with Father. He would sit at his little table hammering them straight for hours, laying in quite a supply for future barter. In fact, he and Paul used them to build a small version of a *Kumbal*, a little partition separating them from the general living area. Everything had its use at KZ-Ghetto Theresienstadt. Nothing was wasted save the inmates, who were treated as garbage and disposed of likewise.

Chapter Two

Changing Circumstances

I'm not sure exactly when I ceased being a newcomer and became a Ghetto veteran. It took several months, but I was adept at learning the ropes. I listened to others and paid close attention to what was going on around me. I quickly determined that I must find a way out of the roving work gangs and into a less physically demanding job. After a short time on the adult *Hundertschaft*, I was transferred to a unit comprised of young people about my age. But the workload remained the same – dirty, difficult and degrading. It was critical to be alert for positions that became available. Various work assignments opened occasionally due to organizational changes within the Ghetto's internal structure. Usually, however, vacancies were casually and cruelly created by the ever-present *Abtransporte*. It wasn't at all unusual for someone to live and work in the same place for months, even years at Theresienstadt, leading a reasonably normal, stable life – to the extent that life could ever be thought of as normal on the shores of the River Styx. Then, without warning, you were jammed onto a train headed East, to Auschwitz-Birkenau, the Ninth Circle. There was no accounting for it. One moment you were there, the next instant you were gone. A day or two later, you might be no more than a wisp of smoke blowing across the forlorn landscape of Eastern Poland. After each *Abtransport*, there were always job openings for the taking.

In some respects I was fortunate. First, I was young, resilient, determined to survive, better able to absorb the rigors of Ghetto life than were, for instance, my parents. Secondly, I was tall and reasonably strong, although I confess not particularly healthy. Throughout my nearly two years as an inmate, especially in the early months, I was sick more than I was fit: bouts of pneumonia, persistent throat and ear infections, often with high fevers, diphtheria, hepatitis, perhaps encephalitis (never fully diagnosed), a possible heart murmur, and scarlet fever, conditions which individually and cumulatively contributed to my gradual debilitation.

There was little real medical help in the Ghetto. The prescribed treatment for my hepatitis was the ingestion of a special allocation of a half-cup of sugar allotted over two weeks time, a

treat I shared with my parents and brother. The barracks doctor cared for my pneumonia and throat infections by prescribing a purple powder with which to gargle. Those prescriptions were filled at the Hamburger Barracks 'pharmacy,' located on the ground floor. There were always long lines during its limited hours. The man at the counter had a large container of this mysterious substance, which he meted out with a simple spoon, pouring the powder into neatly folded little pieces of paper of nondescript origin. I often passed up the medicine. More often than not there was no clean water to mix it with anyway; and when I was really ill, standing in a long line was anguish. Everyone else there was sick too, often contagiously so. If my illness didn't kill me, the treatment would!

Serious sickness was grounds for relief from assigned work duties, but there was a real risk to the consequences of a prolonged illness. If you were unable to return to work after three weeks of so-called 'bed rest,' there was a substantial reduction in the daily rations allocated to a nonproductive worker. *Krankenration*, the 'sick ration,' halved one's bread allotment and eliminated any margarine or sugar. In the upside-down world of the Ghetto, you didn't have to work so that you could recover, but you weren't fed because you couldn't work. A further week or two of rest on reduced rations might help. Anything more, however, could be nutritionally fatal.

Viewed in their most favorable light, work assignments were a way to meet new people, to establish friendships, to make connections. It didn't take me long to realize that as a German Jew, I was viewed by the Ghetto's establishment Czech community primarily as a German and only collaterally as a fellow Jewish inmate. The Czech inner circle were members, relatives and friends of Transports AK/I and AK/II, whose personnel had built the camp, whose leaders manned the first Council of Elders. With few exceptions, they were Czech. Most of them despised all Germans. Thus, while working on the *Hundertschaft* I was most fortunate to meet and become friendly with a group of young Zionist Czech Jews, members of Fredy Hirsh's influential group.

Fredy was a German Jew, born in Aachen, who had emigrated to Prague, where he had become a leader of the Zionist movement. At Ghetto Theresienstadt, he had formed a semi-secret group known as *Yad Tomechet* (Hebrew for 'Helping Hand'). This

was a Ghetto self-help youth group, with which I attempted to associate myself almost immediately. Following the evening meal, we would visit the quarters of the sick and elderly, wash them, fetch food, tidy their living spaces and do other odd jobs to make their lives marginally more bearable. This volunteer work, although not particularly pleasant, had much to recommend it: it was something that we wanted to do and it was a humanitarian gesture made in defiance of the Ghetto's natural proclivity to dehumanize its population, a demeaning process much encouraged by the Nazi administration. An incidental but important benefit was that it provided at least limited entrée into one of the more elite groups in the entire Ghetto.

Even before permanently escaping the *Hundertschaft*, my new Czech connections resulted in a one-day assignment as an attendant at the *Zentralbad*, the Ghetto's communal shower facility. Every six or seven weeks, select groups of inmates received red or white tickets with various designations for men, boys and females. They gave each recipient a date and precise time for a short trip to the baths. During a bathing period, there would be as many as 300 or more inmates standing impatiently in front of the building in any kind of weather, waiting for the doors to open. As the process began, those at the head of the line would present their tickets at the door and be allowed inside. That assumed, of course, that the water was running. If you were unlucky and your day fell when the Ghetto's water was turned off, you simply missed your turn and had to wait another two months before your chance came around again.

Inside, there were a few rough hewn, battered benches and wooden hooks on the walls to hang clothing. Occasionally there was a nurse present from the Internal Health Service who would check head and body hair for lice. Otherwise, the shower attendant was supposed to look for suspicious scratch marks around necks and shoulders. If a potential bather was thought to be infected, he or she was denied admittance and sent across the street to the *Entlausung*, the delousing station.

Many of the women brought improvised shower caps with them. These strange looking devices, really nothing more than a square of rectangular oil cloth sewn together along the edges and at the corners, were originally devised and carried as portable toilet devices during the endless transports. In the Ghetto, they

were converted for use as rain hats during inclement weather or as bizarre shower caps when using the baths. Of course it was a desirable luxury to wash one's head and hair, but the danger was that there would be no way to dry your hair before leaving the building. Everyone was terrified of illness, particularly in bad weather. At Theresienstadt, even a common cold could kill, so people went to great lengths to avoid anything which might encourage or induce illness.

As I stood there watching a batch of bathers, some wearing these weird hats, all trying desperately to scrape off weeks of accumulated dirt and filth without benefit of soap, I was rattled, seized by revulsion at the sight of their naked bodies. These were all inmates who had been in the Ghetto for several months, and it showed. Malnourished, deprived of essential vitamins and any nutritious food, many of them working at physically strenuous jobs, their bodies were literally wasting away, their hair turning prematurely gray, their teeth falling out. They were a pitiful sight. I could easily imagine myself looking the same in just a matter of months, gradually becoming a physical caricature of my former self.

There were perhaps thirty rusty, clogged showerheads, and 100 or more bathers in each group. Three or four people shared a single shower, often a source of provocation and embarrassment. My work as a *Bademeister*, bath attendant, was to regulate both the water temperature and pressure, to turn it on and off at five minute intervals. With no watch, I guessed at the time. People continually pleaded for more time, warmer water. But I had little leeway; there was always another group of 'customers' clamoring at the door outside.

I was lucky to have obtained this job, even for a day. It was easy work, much sought after. All the other bath attendants were Czech, most of them older than I. This was one of the Ghetto's plum jobs, with regular access for each attendant to the showers. One of the girls, Elizabeth, also managed to work at the *Zentralwäscherei*, the central laundry service. This meant that she could bathe and have her clothes washed without regard to the normal rotation. Later, once or twice she even arranged to have my things washed for me. Then she volunteered for an *Abtransport* to stay with her boyfriend. I never saw or heard from her again.

My single day's work at the showers was enough to introduce me to a couple of the regular attendants, who would afterwards occasionally allow me unauthorized admittance for a quick shower. A real extravagance, another small way to combat the filth and squalor of the Ghetto, to stay alive, to feel human.

A month or so after my arrival, my tenuous connection with the Ghetto's young Czech Zionist infrastructure landed me a job far away from the *Hundertschaft*, working as a junior clerk for the *Jugendarbeitseinsatz* (the Youth Labor Service Assignment Office).

One's attitude meant everything, made all the difference. These young people, mostly Czechs in their twenties, had lived in the Ghetto since early 1942 and were just as deprived as everyone. Admittedly, some few were genuine prominents and they all had youth on their side, but otherwise they faced the same daily trials and tribulations, and were assaulted by the identical effects of long-term privation that stalked all the other inmates. The difference was their energized group coping mechanism. Even my limited experience in scouting and with various competitive sports groups in Wiesbaden had taught me to recognize, seek out and embrace the spirit of camaraderie, fellowship, self-help, idealism and everything else that was appealing and positive about this group. Their stance was a form of semi-covert defiance vis-à-vis our captors. Even though a difficult, frustrating and often ineffective task, these young people sought to face our situation head on. Without denying reality, they protested with what limited means were available. I dreamed of being part of this group. I was willing to do anything to escape the bleak hopelessness which pervaded life in the Hamburger attic and work on the *Hundertschaft*.

But even within this group, the bonding process among the members was problematic at best. Often after developing a relationship with a peer, the next time I looked around he or she was gone, dead or, more likely, the victim of an *Abtransport*. Personal relationships were constantly fractured by selections and re-deportations, but I kept at it nonetheless. After the war, I consistently maintained a reluctance to engage the trust required for such close relationships, preferring instead the safety

of lonely isolation. This, among a great many other negatives in my later life, was part of my haunting personal legacy of the Holocaust.

In the Ghetto, however, there was a pressing need for the lateral support provided by these friendships. Isolation was death. It is no exaggeration to say that to have friends, to be accepted and supported, could save your life. To succeed, I simply ignored the risk of rejection, of being hurt. I tried, and then I tried again. It wasn't easy. The group was young, but most of them were several years older than I. They were predominantly Czech, Zionist, with some communists; I was German and knew or cared nothing about Zionism. The Ghetto's internal culture was anti-German, wed to 'the faith of our fathers,' and rigidly intolerant of anyone who dealt with the oppressors; I was German, not particularly religious, and Father had played a leading role in negotiating with the Gestapo on behalf of Wiesbaden's Jews. I hid what I could and did my best to fit in. I worked hard, learned a few words, then a few phrases, then whole sentences in Czech. No one would ever mistake me for a native, but by year's end I was speaking the language quite fluently. As much as anything, this is what established my protective coloration and facilitated my entrée into the group.

Our office was located in Barracks L218. The building was part of a small, interconnected group of structures which formed a housing complex set aside for young men ranging in age from seventeen to their early twenties. The Youth Labor Assignment Office was housed in single small room on the ground floor. Given my experience as an apprentice clerk in Father's office, the daily routine was easy to learn. Each morning, labor allocation requests arrived from various parts of the Ghetto Administration. Say, twenty young men were needed for the carpentry unit or 40 were required for agricultural activities or a dozen youngsters were needed as messengers. Individual workers from the Ghetto's youth labor pool, young men and women, children really, aged ten to eighteen, would then be dispatched by the various units' managers. I spent the day preparing endless paperwork which accompanied each individual work assignment. German thoroughness, or at least its appearance, prevailed. One minor but pesky problem constantly plagued me. There was a persistent, severe lack of paper in the Ghetto. The

individual work slips that I was required to fill out, official SS-approved forms, were exactly the right size to be used as toilet paper. As a result, at the end of the day I was unable to find the assignment slips with which to complete my daily summary rosters. The youthful workers who hung around the office were adept at stealing them from my desk, right under my nose. By the time I reached for them in the late afternoon, they had long since disappeared into the Ghetto's sewerage system. I often had no choice but to fabricate my day-end reports. Fortunately, I was never found out.

The work was relatively easy and provided me with numerous opportunities to establish and cultivate contacts with members of Bobby Fleischer's inner cadre, the senior members of the original AK transports. I'm not sure it was a complete coincidence that the early Prague-to-Theresienstadt transport numbers bore the prefix 'AK.' It may have been an allusion to the *Alte Kämpfer* ('Old Comrades') designation conferred on the first Nazi street fighters, Hitler's earliest supporters. Bobby's AK superior, Jiri, was a large burly man with reddish blond hair. I soon discovered, however, that the senior administrators did little of the real 'management' work. This was left to men like Peter Tauszig, Bobby's nephew, and three or four other young Zionist men and women.

By then, after only three months or so in the Ghetto, I had instinctively suppressed my 'Germanness' and had begun to adopt an ersatz Czech camouflage. I would forever remain German, both in my eyes and theirs, but I did what I could to blend in, particularly with the Czechs who were involved with my own office, or those working with the *Jugendfürsorge*, the Youth Care Administration, headed by Fredy Hersh. This was the administrative unit that took care of the Ghetto's younger children. I liked and admired these people. I worked diligently to persuade them to accept and like me too.

In addition to providing me with an undemanding work assignment – certainly when measured against physically hard labor, which burned up far more of our precious daily calories than did my desk job, filling out forms, and placing me on the outer edges of one of the Ghetto's influential groups – my assignment kept me in daily contact with many young people. Even now, decades later, I can vouch for the emotional and spiritual

importance of those youthful contacts. Life in the C-III attic, as in most of the adult housing facilities, was as emotionally depressing as it was physically debilitating. Each evening was like coming home to my own little corner of hell. But most of the younger Jews in the Ghetto, especially the Czech Zionists, constantly worked to develop and promote an upbeat, positive attitude. Their approach was infectious. Even though I did not share their dedication to the establishment of a Palestinian homeland, I readily adopted their emphasis on youthful activities and physical training, a part of their regimen to prepare for the rigors of emigration to the Promised Land. Nor did they require that I become a Zionist. The only informal requirement imposed upon me was that I work to fit in, to play by their rules, to make myself useful. In that way, I was able to penetrate the group, albeit at first only as a tolerated outsider. As subsequent events proved, I finally became fully accepted. In the end, the friendship that was so generously extended to me almost certainly saved my life and my sanity, even though so many of my friends perished in the process.

Oddly, it was another serious illness that permanently changed my life for the better at Theresienstadt. In mid-September 1943, I was felled with a bout of hepatitis. After a couple of weeks of bed rest in the attic and my portion of a half-cup of sugar, I was deemed well enough to return to work. In mid-October, however, I was stricken again, this time with a severe case of diphtheria.

The daily 'diagnosis' of the sick-call inmates, those who deemed themselves too ill to report for work, was made quite literally at arm's length. The barracks doctor would pursue his rounds standing on the elevated walkway. The patients would remain lying on their straw mattresses in the near-darkness. His assistant nurse would come within a few feet of each patient. If a fever seemed possible, she would hand the patient a thermometer, to be used under one's armpit, an instrument that was never sterilized. Sometimes the doctor would come a bit closer, but not often.

Because I had such a contagious disease, I was ordered to be quarantined. I was hauled from the attic by two male nurses, who hoisted me aboard the wooden stretcher which regularly served triple duty: transportation of the sick; removal of the

dead; and carrying the bread rations from the bakery to the barracks. These two oafs seldom moved live objects; they were far more experienced with inanimate loads. As a result, they nearly spilled me from the makeshift stretcher several times as they made turns in tight corners, twisting and shifting their load as they carried me from the attic to street level.

I was confined to the Isolation Ward on the second floor of the *Kavalirska*, an old cavalry barracks behind the *Hohen Elve*, which served as headquarters for the Ghetto's Medical Service (the lower floor, the former stables, was reserved for the Ghetto's demented and emotionally ill population, who were incarcerated there in total isolation under the most wretched circumstances imaginable).

One of the few advantages to the ward was that each of us had our own military style cot, a set of threadbare linen (never changed during my nearly two months there), a blanket and a little pillow filled with real goose down and feathers. A least for sleeping purposes, it was heaven compared to C-III. But daily life in the ward was pretty awful. We'd be awakened in the early morning, with ersatz coffee available. If I had any bread left from the previous ration distribution – which might have been as long as three days earlier – I'd tear off a tiny slice and dunk it in the coffee. This method had two advantages: the bread had quickly grown stale, hard and difficult to chew; the 'coffee' tasted terrible. This way, the lukewarm liquid softened the bread, and the bread disguised the taste of the liquid. I'd then take a nominal sponge bath, little more than a cat's paw daubing at my face and hands with a semi-damp cloth.

I'd visit a bit with my fellow patients. We were seen by a doctor every three or four days. Our noontime meal was delivered, again by the nurse, an elderly Czech woman. I don't recall her ever taking a day off while I was in the ward, but her duty wasn't very demanding either. I'm sure, like all the inmates in this line of work, she was able to purloin an extra ladle or two for herself while dishing out our rations. She wouldn't want to take much time off under those circumstances.

There was none of the usual hospital activity: no taking of pulses, temperatures or the dispensing of medication. Certainly no charts were kept. If someone complained that she felt sicker than usual, she might get a bit of extra attention. One time when

I was feeling very poorly, I got my own cold washcloth placed on my forehead. We were not hospitalized to be cured. We were confined to protect other inmates from us disease carriers, not a situation from which one could take much comfort. But although there were many deaths in the Ghetto from disease, I do not recall anyone expiring in our long, damp, dark cave of a room while I was confined. I too eventually recovered.

We couldn't communicate with the outside world except in the most rudimentary way. Set in the thick outer wall of our room was a small window. Two stories down, directly beneath the window, was narrow path. When someone wanted to 'visit' a patient, he or she would throw a pebble at the window. We had a short wooden ladder leaning against the wall on the inside. Because of the wall's thickness, we couldn't see down on the path without it. When we heard the distinctive click of a stone striking the glass, a patient would climb up the little ladder, peer down and inquire who the visitor wished to see. I had few such experiences. My parents and one or two of my friends from the *Jugendarbeitseinsatz* occasionally came by. Towards the end of my two-month stay, Lilly and Bobby Fleischer visited to tell me the most wonderful news: upon my release, they had arranged for my transfer out of the Hamburger Barracks attic to the far more congenial environs of Building L414 – another quirky example of how from an awful moment, good things could come. In the end, I would survive the Ghetto because of my life in L414.

When I was released from the ward in mid-November 1943, I returned to the Hamburger attic only long enough to fetch my few meager possessions. The Fleischers, my saviors, had made arrangements with Sigi Kwasniewski, the Barracks Manager at L414, a large children's barracks, to admit me as a resident, even though I was really too old to be properly included in that group. I finally was able to escape the misery of attic life and move to a much more welcoming, congenial home within the Ghetto. Both Sigi and the Fleischers were from either the first or second Czech transports to the Ghetto, the venerable (and, to some degree, venerated) AK/I and AK/II, so they had much standing within the community. They could extend their protection to me too, at least in terms of arranging for my new billet.

This moment was the decisive turning point in my life. We had been persecuted for more than a decade by the Nazis. But our family, led by Father, resisted the reality of National Socialism with a misplaced sense of patriotism, steadfastly clinging to our presumptive safety as fully assimilated Germans, buttressed by Father's distinguished war record. For years he had clung to the notion that nothing really bad could happen to us in a civilized country filled with law-abiding citizens, even as those laws were changed and corrupted to make Jews, us, non-citizens, Reich 'subjects,' who existed outside the protection of the state. His legal training and experience worked against us. The early professional recognition afforded by his colleagues, his initial successes defending Jewish clients against the machinations of the Nazi regime, all gave him, and us, the foolish and foolhardy illusion that somehow we could survive within the Third Reich. The apparent economic independence afforded by *Grossvater* Guthmann's deep pockets also supported that illusion. Before Theresienstadt, I readily adopted my parents' perspective. "Families must stay together" – the Guthmann family motto. It seemed natural and the right thing to do, despite everything in my own experience which contradicted their views. Until arriving at the Ghetto, I was still very much my parents' child.

Once we arrived in Theresienstadt, all this proved groundless. Beginning with the news of *Grossvater's* death, the inescapable conclusions to be drawn from Eugenie's appearance, her description of life in the Ghetto as reinforced by our own early experience, I knew how wrongheaded we had been to believe that there might still be hope for us. Even though a Room Elder, Father was a thoroughly beaten man, no longer the powerful hero whom I'd always imagined him to be. Enter my Czech Zionist friends and colleagues. They didn't bang their heads against 12-foot thick walls trying to beat an invincible system. They simply found ingenious ways to work around it. They acknowledged that they were prisoners, that they had nothing. But by an act of sheer collective will, they did not allow themselves to give in to desperation. They maintained their dignity and self-respect by helping those worse off than themselves, the elderly, the sick and the infirm, and by sheltering and nurturing the Ghetto's children. This was immensely appealing compared to the bleak, passive, debilitating alternatives. There

were no illusions here, no dream of victorious confrontation between a Jewish David and Nazi Goliath. There were no overly ambitious goals. Just doing good, helping the least of their fellows. I was completely seduced by that notion, by their camaraderie, by their pragmatic decency, by their commitment to others.

My new friends did not completely displace my old hero. He was still my Dad. I continued to admire him for who he was, for what he had done in the past. But as of the day I left the attic, I had a new set of heroes. There were many of them, with names like Sigi, Fredy, Bobby, Henny, Lilly and the Two Bobs. They might have been no match for my father in an earlier time, but in KZ-Ghetto Theresienstadt they were at the center of everything to which I aspired. As I moved from C-III to L414, more than anything I wanted to become one of them. It was an irresistible opportunity. I knew that I was turning my back on my mother, quite literally leaving her behind, that in a real but indefinable way I was breaking away from my own family, but this chance was everything that I had dreamed about within the narrow confines afforded by the limited opportunities of Ghetto Theresienstadt. I would be with young people. I would be out of the hell of that damned attic. I was still in the Ghetto, yes. I remained an inmate, yes. Nothing had changed, but everything had changed. As Theresienstadt was heaven compared to the extermination camps in the East, so L414 was a real home when contrasted to the hellishness of the Hamburger attic.

During our first five months in the Ghetto, my mother continued to toil six, sometimes seven days a week at various menial tasks. The work was mean, dirty and exhausting. She didn't adapt very well to the Ghetto in general and found the work immensely wearisome, not to mention humiliating. With her naturally introverted personality, she turned more and more inwards. She got up each morning, did what was expected of her, didn't complain. She kept in contact with Father and my brother, who remained at the Hanover Barracks. Except for my time in the hospital, we slept side-by-side all those months.

But we did little to help each other adjust to our diminished circumstances, to make our way together in Theresienstadt. Our relationship, never rich in the usual connections which so often

develop between mother and daughter, was almost barren. There were no hopes or dreams to share, no real warmth, no genuine companionship. Mother existed; I tried, as best I could, to live. We were a study in contrasts. The thing that we shared in common was a desire to survive, no matter what the cost. She had nothing to give me in the way of comfort or, if she did, did not know how to convey it. The same can be said of my relationship with her. She asked nothing from me and received nothing, only the passive comfort of my presence lying beside her at night, our mats touching, two exhausted souls too tired and dispirited to acknowledge our shared humanity and needs. I think that it gave her some measure of comfort just to know that I was there, her own flesh and blood, wordlessly pressing up against her in that sea of anonymous, semi-hostile humanity. When I left for the comforts of life in L414, I took even that from her.

A single incident demonstrates our distance, a moment I remain ashamed of to this day. While stricken with hepatitis that first summer, I was allowed to stay in the barracks. One day as I lay there alone, I couldn't resist the temptation to help myself to some of my mother's precious bread ration. At first I cut only a very thin slice, thinking that no one would notice. I then cut two or three thicker ones, obviously diminishing her quarter loaf. When she returned that evening, she immediately noticed the loss. She certainly knew that I was the culprit. In her fashion, however, she didn't confront me or reproach me in any way. Hurt and angry, she simply withdrew deeper into herself.

When I accepted the offer to move into the Youth Barracks at building L414, I knew that I was abandoning my family to far less appealing circumstances. In L414, I was protected from the worst rigors of the camp, both by virtue of my less arduous daily work assignments, as well as the beneficent influence of Sigi, Bobby and the others who administered the various Youth Services. As Theresienstadt veterans, they had real influence that far exceeded their nominal titles. My parents and Paul, however, despite Father's position as a room elder, were essentially unprotected, part of the Ghetto's general population who had routine jobs, no 'connections,' no access to the back-channels which could protect an inmate from the vicissitudes of Ghetto life. Looking back, I cannot recall whether I felt that I was deserting them or not. I did know that I was taking a step which would further separate us,

which made me different from them, but the instinct for self-preservation was simply too strong. My decision to move to L414 was a harsh, difficult moment, but I embraced it without hesitation. I never looked back.

Life for the inmates in the camps of the East, especially at Auschwitz, has been described elsewhere as a series of 'choiceless choices,' i.e., when no choice or any choice was as good as any other choice. This was not entirely true at a place like Theresienstadt. Some of us were lucky enough to be presented with opportunities that truly had the potential to change our lives for the better. The morning I moved my things out of the attic at C-III, leaving my mother behind was one such instance. We embraced, but without warmth. The situation was unavoidably uncomfortable and discomfoting. I've both cherished and repented that moment throughout the remainder of my life. But my life literally depended upon it; there was no question in my mind about what to do, no second thoughts.

When I first arrived at L414, I was designated a 'youth resident,' which is to say not a counselor or other caregiver, although I would soon begin to grow into that role. In November 1943, I was a mature 18, too old to be considered a youth resident and a bit too young to be a permanent staff counselor. I was still weak from my illness and confinement in the Isolation Ward, so I really wasn't able to fully participate in the barracks' vigorous daytime activities. By random good luck, I was fortunate enough to be assigned to a room supervised by Henny Burckhart, an experienced *Betreuer*, a 'caregiver,' who would quickly become my mentor, best friend, surrogate mother and protector.

Henny was a rather imposing person, middle-aged, a bit masculine in appearance, a former biology professor from Vienna. As I recall, she wasn't a teacher but rather had worked in a research laboratory. She had foregone an opportunity to emigrate in order to stay with her elderly mother who, like *Grossvater*, had died within weeks of arriving at Theresienstadt. Henny then had thrown her considerable talents and enormous energy fully behind the Ghetto's youth care efforts. During my first months in L414, I acted as her unofficial 'assistant counselor' while I sought to regain my strength. There were 25 – 30 girls in

the room, ages 13 – 16, so there was plenty to do. Many of them were orphans whose parents had died in the Ghetto, or were missing, or had been re-deported East, leaving their children behind to fend for themselves.

My first bunk assignment was behind the door to the room on the lower portion of a single, two-tiered bed. The girl above me, an Austrian half-Jew from Styria, had an altogether different background from mine. She apparently was the illegitimate offspring of a Jew and a Christian. Shortly after birth, she was placed with a shepherd in the Austrian mountains. She had grown up without the benefit of either a formal education or any acquaintance with the rudiments of urban life. She simply lived in the mountains and tended the sheep and goats that were her charges. She was deported to Theresienstadt when she was about 14 years old. The Ghetto presented her with a terrible shock, on every level. She was an emotional wreck and developed the unfortunate habit of bedwetting, with me sleeping directly below her. When one of the other girls, a close friend and bunk-mate of Henny's, was re-deported, I boldly asked for the vacant bunk. It was near a window and away from the door, and probably shouldn't have been mine to have. But knowing the circumstances, Henny graciously allowed me to make the move. After that, I knew that I had a friend I could depend upon. (The young Austrian girl who I left on the other side of the room was eventually re-deported to Auschwitz where she perished, sharing the fate of most of the children whom I came to know and care for over the next 18 months.)

The abrupt departure of Henny's long-time bunkmate perfectly illustrated the vagaries of life at Ghetto Theresienstadt. She was a well-connected young Czech, about age 21, who really didn't belong in our room but whose protected status and connections had placed her there. She only slept in L414, independent of any control by the barracks' administration. She worked on the agricultural team. Her bed was a bunk above Henny's. One day her *Abtransport* notice arrived. Voilà, she was gone. All the connections and protection in the world could not save you from the trains headed East once your number came up.

There were other early benefits to living in L414. The children with TB were allowed an extra bowl of soup each Monday evening, a nourishing delicacy made from dried vegetables, flour

and bouillon cubes. Sigi, the Barracks Elder, assigned me the job of supervising the preparation of the brew, watching over the middle aged Czech cook to make sure that she used all the available ingredients for no purpose other than the children's soup. Then I distributed it to the residents, checking them off against the official list. The advantage was that I too was allowed a generous portion. Each Monday evening, I would run through the barracks announcing that the soup was ready, thereby earning myself the nickname *Schleimsuppenlotte* (literally, 'Slimy Soup Lotte'). So began my new life within Ghetto Theresienstadt. Following the twists and turns of those early fateful months in the Ghetto, I had finally found my home, a place where I would remain during my next eighteen months in the Ghetto. Nor, as subsequent events would prove, was it the last time that apparent adversity would lead to something better for me within the thick walls of Theresienstadt.

Chapter Three

L414: Heaven in a Large Room

L414 was a sizeable barracks; three stories tall, with twelve to fifteen large rooms on every floor, each containing between twenty and thirty children and their assigned caregivers. On any given date, there were between 1,100 and 1,300 children, aged six to sixteen, living in the building. Earlier, L414 had housed only girls. Now, the lower two floors were for boys, the top one for girls. The Ghetto's youngest children, infants and toddlers, and those up to age five, were housed separately with their mothers in the larger barracks.

Many of the L414 children were actual orphans, their parents having been re-deported or perhaps killed prior to the children arriving at Theresienstadt. Those who weren't true orphans might just as well have been; they were separated from their families, from parents who, although they might also be in the Ghetto, simply couldn't indulge in any activity which properly could be called 'parenting.' The conditions in the adult barracks, the work schedules, the unrelenting privation and misery, all conspired against anything remotely approaching a normal family life. Not only were the Ghetto's youngsters far better off in the segregated youth barracks, but this arrangement made life easier for their families as well. As far as I knew, the parents weren't given a choice in any event. Nor were the parents entirely deprived of their children's company. Although it required time and effort to arrange for visits, it was always possible, at least as long as the family unit remained intact within the Ghetto. They could visit during their free time in the evening after work, before lights out. Such activities didn't require special permission or passes, only inclination and effort.

The L414 kids, even the youngest, knew that they and their families were at risk, that we all were under the long shadow cast across the Ghetto by the continuing re-deportations East. But with a few exceptions, those at L414 didn't live under a cloud. Knowing first hand what the remainder of the Ghetto was like, they were happy and content to be part of the protected youth barracks environment. They only had to visit their parents' quarters to be reminded of the misery they had left behind.

The children bonded first with their individual rooms (for each unit, we used a *Heim*, or 'home,' to project a more comfortable

sense of time and place), a group of twenty-five to thirty children of the same sex and roughly the same age, and mostly speaking the same language. Their next loyalty was to their barracks, a mixed group well in excess of one thousand in L414's case. In some measure, this process had the effect of superseding even family loyalties. Their barracks loyalties became, at least in the short term, more important than their relationships with their parents. Certainly mine did. Many of the room counselors and other members of the barracks staff became role models for the children. Some were true surrogate parents. The longer a child resided in the youth barracks, the more likely it became that he or she would require a shove to make their way back to their families for a visit. Arguably, the families needed the attention and affection of their displaced children at least as much, if not more, as the children needed theirs. It was a peculiar world in which we lived: the 'orphans' were envied by those who were left behind in a 'normal' setting.

This was not a coincidence. Our oppressors saw to it that nearly every aspect of ordinary life was turned topsy-turvy in the Ghetto. Nothing remained unchanged: abnormal became normal, there seldom were 'good' choices, only some less undesirable than others. For example, many of the younger children in the *Jugendarbeitseinsatz*, the Youth Labor Administration, ten or eleven years old, worked as *Ordonnanz*, runners, messengers and such. It wasn't difficult or demanding work. But as often as not, it was these children who had the unenviable task of delivering re-deportation notices to adult inmates, knowing full well what those papers signaled. Young children used as messengers of death.

When one's world is turned on its head, one is prone to lose one's equilibrium, emotional and otherwise. Everyone in the Ghetto, even the children, woke up every morning knowing that the day's only certainty was uncertainty. That was the insidious, destructive dynamic which the Youth Administration strained against. Each day the barracks counselors, the good ones at least, sought to substitute stability for instability, caring for abandonment, security for uncertainty, a sense of safety and comfort in place of the disorientation and privation which were the daily fare for most of KZ-Ghetto Theresienstadt's population.

To further this nurturing process, it was often the little things which mattered most. For instance, when I arrived in

Henny's room I was given my own personal washbowl. I would fill it with water each morning and use it to wash up during the day. Once in awhile, I was even able to rinse some clothes, an unheard of luxury in most of the Ghetto's adult barracks. I recall washing a load of handkerchiefs and other personal items on one occasion. Henny had 'organized' (which is to say, stolen) a couple of handfuls of soap powder for me to use. I set my metal washbowl atop the hot little pot bellied stove, boiled my hankies, and rinsed them out afterwards. Heaven! One of the first things that I did after arriving at L414 was to wash out a filthy pair of rayon stockings which hadn't seen clean water for months. I hung them to dry on a string tied between two of the three-tiered bunks. Imagine my disappointment the next morning, when I discovered that they had been stolen during the night. I even knew who the thief was, but I didn't see fit to confront her with her crime. Indeed, later we would become friends. We never discussed my missing stockings. She was eventually re-deported to Auschwitz and beyond, but somehow survived. When she arrived back at Theresienstadt with the other death march survivors in early 1945, I shared my remaining clothing with her.

But the barracks in general, and our room in particular, functioned quite well on the honor system. For instance, unlike the adult barracks, we had a large shelf upon which to store our individual bread rations so that that they didn't sit on the floor, easy prey for vermin and rodents. There was hardly any stealing. When the odd case of theft did occur, it was dealt with internally, within the room, or at least within the barracks. All in all, as desperate as conditions were, most of the residents of the youth barracks behaved quite well. Like me, they were so grateful to be where they were that they didn't want to risk losing their privileged environment.

This not to say that everything always went well. The children, even the youngest ones, knew that they were prisoners, that they were despised Jews, that they might some day end up on one of the dreaded re-deportation lists. In a vague sense, they also recognized that they might die soon. Even at their tender age, they knew all about death. It was around them everywhere, every day in the Ghetto. Some reacted badly, as was to be expected. Some of the kids could be cold, hard, aloof, difficult and nasty. But mostly

peace prevailed; we all did what we could to make the best of the situation. The Zionists who dominated the Youth Services Administration continually attempted to instill a 'Scout Movement' atmosphere, a group mentality which included a viable support system for the children, which would meld them into a functional unit. In turn this would produce a cohesive group from which the Zionists might develop a cadre from which they could recruit individuals for emigration to Israel. It may all have been a pipe dream, but it served a desperately useful purpose.

I never knew where the impetus for a separate youth barracks environment originated. We owed most to the Ghetto's Council of Elders, whose members always recognized the need to protect, nurture and, to the extent possible, nourish the Ghetto's children. By protecting the young, they were providing for the future. By shielding and helping the children, they also were giving relief to the parents, who couldn't cope with caring for their own offspring. I always suspected that they paid special attention to the young because they knew that couldn't save the old, who suffered the most, who died in the greatest numbers, who were the most at risk to succumb to the Ghetto's many privations. There simply weren't enough resources to go around. Somewhere in the Ghetto's early history, I expect that a choice, subliminal perhaps, was made by the Elders to sacrifice the elderly so that the young might have a chance to live. This makes sense, of course, but the consequences of such a decision were appalling. Middle-aged parents had to watch their own parents die, so that their children might live. Monstrously melancholy moments could befall a family's life, a wounding sadness incomprehensible to someone who has not experienced its consequent lifelong sadness. It's one of the many reasons why survivors are forever in mourning. So, even in a relatively upbeat place like the environs of L414, there was a persistent and pervasive sense of sadness and dejection, one which the counselors were constantly fighting against, both on behalf of their young charges and for their own protection too.

When I arrived at L414, I began as merely an older 'youth,' convalescing from a debilitating illness. As I grew stronger, I became an unofficial assistant to Henny, helping her with the younger children, relieving her of some of her more menial tasks,

doing what I could to be supportive and helpful. Each morning the barracks counselors held a meeting where they discussed the news of the day, good and bad, as published in the *Tagesbefehl*, issued by the Council of Elders: the arrival and departure of incoming and outbound transports; changes in rules and regulations; personnel problems and the like. At our meetings, Sigi, both personally and in his role as senior barracks elder, was always upbeat, chipper, pushing his people to do their best.

Sigi was deeply in love with a counselor from Vienna. He would visit her nightly, sitting on her bunk after curfew, very prim and proper, talking late into the evening. In the summer of 1944 they were married, one of the Ghetto's many wedding ceremonies. The entire barracks' population, and many more, was invited to the ritual. It was the first Jewish wedding that I'd ever attended, complete with an improvised *Chuppa*, a bridal tent, the breaking underfoot by the groom of a glass (a great treasure in the Ghetto!), everything one would expect from such a wonderful event.

Although formal educational activities were strictly forbidden by the SS administration, Sigi was forever arranging for someone to 'educate' his charges. For example, he hired Herr Professor Bergel, an art historian and accomplished painter, to spend each Wednesday evening with us, explaining art history. His pay was an extra ration of bread or other food. He had an edition of "Prophylaen," a thick volume filled with illustrations and pictures. I was particularly interested in his view on impressionistic painting, a topic which the Nazis would not have allowed to be taught even within the Reich.

But as interested as I was in the material, and even allowing for the excellence of Professor Bergel's presentations, all too often I found myself dozing off in the middle of his lectures, a victim of the chronic weariness which comes with persistent malnutrition. Lack of vitamins caused all of us to suffer from bleeding gums; most of us faced severe, chronic bouts of diarrhea; others had to contend with blurred vision and constant headaches, all related to our common malnourishment. Mostly, there was the constant sense of fatigue, morning to night.

Meanwhile, I continued to help Henny as her unofficial assistant, while spending some time each day at my old assignment,

doing record keeping work at L218. More and more, however, my life was tied to Henny and the other occupants of our room in L414. Henny was a pure delight: smart, educated, good natured, understanding, cultured, tough minded when necessary, always caring and concerned. Everything, in fact, that I wished to be.

Rita Rosenberger, from Freiburg, was another resident. She had been in the Ghetto since the fall of 1942, one of the early German arrivals. She was beautiful in a classic, Roman patrician manner. She was the girlfriend of Gerd Steinhagen from Berlin, who was in charge of his all-boys room on the floor below us. If he was the king of L414, she was the queen. All the young residents of Gerd's room treated her with the utmost respect. She much enjoyed the attention.

Many residents of L414 suffered from tuberculosis. There was no real treatment available or offered, only bed rest. There certainly was no proper medication. Monday evenings' extra offering of *Schleimsuppe* could hardly have made a significant difference. Irene suffered from open TB, while sharing a double bed with Hannelore, sleeping face-to-face without ever thinking or worrying about infecting her. Her mess kit was washed out, in cold water, along with everyone else's, all in the same tub. We all breathed the same air and we all hollered in protest when Henny insisted on opening the window, however briefly in winter, to air out the room. I can't say that I much noticed it, but the stench must have been pretty awful.

Irene's condition exempted her from any formal work obligations. Neither did she participate in any of the regular house-keeping chores. She wasn't alone in that regard. All of us shirked our more onerous duties when and where we could. But Henny insisted that someone wash the floor every day, in the morning before going to work. It was up to any of us who claimed a disability to arrange for a healthy roommate to do this job when our turn came around.

Aside from the several TB cases among our number, Little Jenny was badly crippled by an early childhood bout with polio, I had a real or imagined heart murmur following my diphtheria confinement, and several others had recurring bouts of encephalitis. About half the room claimed one disability or another, sufficient, we contended, to avoid daily floor washing or water carrying duties. That left a diminished group of 'healthy' roommates to

shoulder those tasks, mostly willingly, mostly cheerfully. There was no open criticism of us malingerers that I recall.

Lotte Dubek had a difficult and demanding permanent work assignment. I believe that she was a nursing aide in the main old people's barracks, the *Geni Kaserne*, or in one of the small housing complexes set aside for the elderly. She was kind and even tempered. She always seemed to be doing the grubbiest work around our barracks. She didn't smile often, but she never complained or criticized others. She took my floor washing turn so often that I knew I could never catch up or otherwise repay her kindness. She also hauled fresh water for all of us almost every day. We kept the room's communal supply in a big awkward tub, which, when full, held three or four large buckets, allowing us to take sponge baths when there was sufficient water. We also used a small amount of this water, cold, to rinse out our food containers after each use. These activities were unknown luxuries to the attic residents of the *Hamburger Kaserne*.

Lotte was included in one of the early re-deportations shortly after I arrived. She was totally alone in the Ghetto, without family. When she received her notice, she simply packed her things and left. No tears. No prolonged farewells. I'm sure that she was sad and frightened, but she didn't show it. Those of us who remained were gloomy and remorseful. We had regularly taken advantage of her good nature. We knew it, and she knew it. We also felt guilty about staying behind. The first pang of survivor guilt.

Lotte's bunkmate was known simply as 'The Elephant.' She was from Vienna. The name was intentionally ironic. She was very tall, with a stately manner. She had beautiful eyes and fair skin. She seemed to know everyone in the Ghetto. When I arrived, she had already been there a long time, working on the agricultural detail. Her parents were also in the Ghetto. I remember her mother visiting our room one time, a beautiful, elegant woman, like her daughter. I think that Lotte and The Elephant were assigned to the same *Abtransport*. I hope so. They were good friends and would have been supportive of one another.

Little Jenny also was Austrian. The polio had left her with a crippled foot and a deformed spine. A year or two younger than most of the others, she was wise beyond her years. She had

lovely eyes and pretty hair. Her mother visited her often, usually bringing soup, I suspect from her own ration. We all feared for Jenny when she received her *Abtransport* notice. We did not know for sure what lay ahead for our re-deported friends, but we knew enough subliminally to fear the worst. Jenny's condition made her a much-coddled member of our little room-family. We worried that such support would be unavailable to her at her next location. I'm sure our worst fears were well founded.

Karla Kohn lived in a middle bunk, over Jenny. She had a wonderful position, near the window. Lots of light. She was very studious and participated actively in our evening education meetings with Henny. She contributed original, well ordered thinking to those sessions. Like so many of L414's residents, she was an only child. It seemed as though many German and Austrian Jewish families had only a single child during the Twenties and Thirties. I wonder why?

Micky was one of two Czech girls in the room. The other was Anka, who was re-deported soon after I arrived and whose bed, just above Henny's, I would ultimately occupy. Mickey came to us because there was no room for her in L410, the other youth barracks, a building containing mostly Czech children, much as L414 favored German and Austrian residents. She was quite competent at teaching all of us who were interested some Czech. I was one of her better students. We returned the favor by correcting her slightly flawed German. She soon left us. Thanks to the ongoing re-deportations, there suddenly were bunks available in L410. We never heard from her again.

Rena Adler, from Hamburg, lived near Lotte Dubcek and The Elephant. She was tall and long legged, with a lovely figure. Her mother also visited the room several times, as did her stepfather. Mother Adler, remarried and carrying a new name, was a stunning woman of about 45. Whether widowed or divorced, she'd married a much older man in order to avoid re-deportation East. The stepfather was a dignified former Court Chancellor, about 20 years older than his new bride. In the end, both were re-deported East, separately as I recall.

There were Hannelore, Annemarie from Kaiserlautern, Marianne, Lore from Ludwigshafen, and many more. Most of the others were in their late teens, quite self-sufficient and didn't require nearly as much attention as did the younger children.

I soon settled into Henny's room and the L414 routine. At about 7 a.m. we would wake the children, making sure that there was water available for at least a light round of sponge bathing, assuming the taps were on. There was only a single sink with a faucet on each level, and a single toilet at our end of the floor. Sanitary conditions were not a great deal better in L414 than in C-III, but we treated each other with much greater personal consideration and humanity. The crowding, of course, was less, although there were many young bodies squeezed into a relatively small space.

Then there would be a brief clean-up of the room, mopping the floor with whatever water was available. In the winter months, which were quite cold, we would send two or three children to the basement to fetch coal for our little pot bellied stove, the only heat we had for the room. If there was no coal, we did without both heat and warm water, a real hardship. We'd air out the room and make sure that the children got off to work on time. We'd help with the beds, ensuring that they were neatly made up. We'd also listen to complaints: about stolen bread, missing clothing, personal problems with parents, siblings, and friends. We'd comfort any children who were sick, and promptly report health problems to Dr. Freund, the friendly barracks doctor.

We would regularly check to see if any of our children's transports had been notified that they were due for shower or laundry privileges. If so, we stitched each child's individual number on any piece of clothing for its first trip to the communal laundry facility, which was the only hope of ever retrieving it after it had been washed. During Sigi's tenure as barracks elder, of course, there were regular morning meetings of all the caregivers.

The children would file back for lunch around noon. We'd supervise the noon meal, sometimes detailing one or more of our charges to bring back rations for sick children who were confined to bed. After eating, we directed a joint washing of all mess kits, usually just by rinsing them out with cold water. Hardly sanitary, but better than nothing. Then, back to work.

The children would return to the barracks between five and six in the evening, depending on the season. Monday evening I distributed the slime soup (which wasn't all that bad). Later, thanks to the insistence of the Danish Red Cross, all the children in Ghetto, Danes and everyone else, received a sweet roll

and ersatz coffee for dinner on Wednesday evenings. Several times I received a portion too, although I was obviously much too old for such preferential treatment. Once or twice I took the treasured delicacy to my father's quarters in the Hannover Barracks, where it would be carefully quartered, to be shared by each member of the family.

Henny would lead 'learning sessions' in the evenings, talking a bit about everything from science to literature. At eight o'clock the children went to bed. Tired as they were by their various activities, and severely malnourished, which drained the spunk out of them early in the day, they seldom needed any urging to lay down their heads.

It was winter when I arrived at L414, and cold. I still had *Grossvater's* sweater which I had brought for him with me from Frankfurt. Lovingly knitted by *Grossmutter* Lina years before, it was made of thick, warm wool, but was much too big for me. After a month or so, once my 'initiation/acceptance' process was satisfactorily completed, I hit upon the idea of using *Grossvater's* marvelous sweater to fashion some warm clothing for myself. Typically, Henny encouraged the project. I undertook to unravel the entire bulky garment and re-knit a sweater that would snugly fit me. Such an idea would have been completely impossible in the chaos of the Hamburger attic, but here in the hospitable confines of L414 I thought it was worth a try.

I slowly set about unraveling the wool, then twisting the treads into skeins. Henny, Rena and other of my neighbors pitched in and helped. Henny 'organized' sufficient washing powder to thoroughly clean the skeins. When dried, they'd mostly returned to workable wool thread. I carefully rewound the skeins into balls of wool. Lilly Fleischer, from the barracks sewing room, found me a pair of knitting needles and showed me how to use them. So I set out on my great adventure, to knit myself a nice warm sweater, with a kind of high, turtle neck. I did most of the work over a long period of weeks in the evenings, when Henny was giving her nightly lessons. Henny, Rena and my other roommates took quite an interest in my project. They helped me figure out the intricacies of shaping the sleeves, commenting on my progress, encouraging me. In some small measure, Lotte's 'magical sweater' became the entire room's venture. One sleeve done. What kind of collar will you do, roll-up or mock

turtle neck? Be sure that the sleeves are long enough to cover your wrists (if you have enough wool), because a double thickness helps to keep your hands warm, being so near the pulse. During the many weeks I worked on it, the magical sweater became a topic of considerable comment. Well recognized by all, my accomplishment when completed was the subject of much applause.

I didn't know it then, but I was acting to, quite literally, save my own life. A year later, during the endless, brutally bitter winter of 1944-1945, my magical sweater and a heavy pair of black ski pants were my daily outfit. From a great distance, *Grossvater* and *Grossmutter* did their part to keep me warm and safe during the frozen months at KZ-Ghetto Theresienstadt. It is possible that I might not have survived the unrelenting bitter cold of the second winter without it.

So there I was that first winter, knitting a sweater for myself, cheered on by my roommates. It was a very reassuring activity. There was something normal, even home-like about my situation, convalescing in that big stuffy room, recovering from my bout with diphtheria, placed there by Bobby Fleischer and watched over by Henny and Doctor Freund, making new friends, mostly excused from my real work at L218 (again thanks to Bobby). Heaven!

Then, after I had been in Henny's room for several months, seemingly out of nowhere there came one of those wildly wonderful moments which, even within the bleak confines of the Ghetto, occasionally occurred and left us breathless.

I had become good friends with Karla Kohn. Her father, a noted attorney from Berlin, was an accomplished violinist who was an active member of the Ghetto's principle music group, sponsored by the *Freizeitgestaltung*. Much has been written about the 'leisure time activities' at KZ-Ghetto Theresienstadt, although it had very little influence on my life in the Ghetto.

There can be little dispute that Theresienstadt had among its inmates many of the finest and most famous Jewish artists and musicians, swept up from across all of Europe. Because they were among the Ghetto true 'prominents,' they were usually assigned the most agreeable job positions within the Ghetto. From my perspective, this was one more perversion of the

camp experience: because you could write music, or draw, or play an instrument, you were deemed more worthy than some poor soul whose only credentials were the capacity to dig a deep ditch. Postwar writings on the Ghetto are filled with praise for the ‘hope’ that the activities of the *Freizeitgestaltung* – concerts, art shows, lectures and readings – gave to the prisoners. It never struck me that way, perhaps because like most of my fellow inmates, I had little contact with the ‘cultural’ side of the Ghetto. For instance, September 12, 1943, when I was struggling with my many illnesses, marked the Ghetto’s first performance of the children’s opera, *Brundibar* (‘Grouchy Bear’). Originally composed in Prague in 1938 by Hans Krasa, the brilliant Czech composer and pianist, its initial premier was at the Prague Jewish Orphanage. At the time of his deportation to Theresienstadt, Maestro Krasa had been unable to bring the score with him, so while an inmate he diligently re-orchestrated the entire opera. Some of the children from the Prague Orphanage also were in the Ghetto and were anxious to participate in a performance of the work. *Brundibar* played to rave reviews; over the next nine months or so, it was repeated more than forty times. Its final appearance was a ‘command performance’ staged for visiting Red Cross personnel in June 1944. Thereafter, most of the performers, producers and crew were re-deported to Auschwitz, where they perished. Maestro Krasa was murdered in Birkenau on October 17, 1944. I never saw a performance of his work while at the Ghetto.

My first encounter with a *Freizeitgestaltung* presentation was in the courtyard of the *Hamburer Kaserne*. I was returning from work on the *Hundertschaft*, headed for my straw mat in the attic, tired, hungry and dispirited. I observed a crowd in a corner of the courtyard. They were ticket-holding members of an audience for a performance being given by a young Czech woman. She stood on a small raised platform, wearing some sort of national costume, singing Czech folk songs. I can’t remember what instrument provided the accompaniment; an accordion perhaps, or a tambourine. She was swinging and swaying to the music as she sang, performing a dance on her tiny stage.

I watched for a few minutes from afar. I didn’t know the melody or understand the lyrics. But I caught the spirit, one of defiance against our captors. I admired her for her spunk, but didn’t stay very long. I didn’t have a ticket and I was tired, hungry and

very, very lost. I wanderer off to the other end of the courtyard, climbed up to the attic and my little straw mat, and sat there, trying to sort out the strange new world which now surrounded my every moment.

Returning to Herr Kohn. Somehow he had arrived in the Ghetto with his violin (if not his law books). Unbeknownst to me, Henny had conspired with Karla to give me a wonderful surprise birthday party on the day I turned nineteen, April 1, 1944. Herr Kohn arranged for a small group of musicians to come to L414 and perform for my benefit. Henny, with the complicity of all the other members of our room, had saved enough bread and a quantity of a sweet, creamy substance which we received once a week, and used it to make a bread pie, layers of bread soaked with a sweet, thin pudding-like substance.

My parents and brother were invited to join the festivities. Paul had visited me on a couple of occasions, and my mother at least once, but I believe it was Father's first trip to L414 (it was traditional, though not an inflexible rule, that the young residents left the Youth Barracks to visit their families wherever they were living, rather than having the families come to places like L414 — it simply was easier that way and supplied a measure of stability in our barracks, which might otherwise have been undermined by a continuous procession of visiting parents looking for their children). The musicians, four or five in number, gave a lovely chamber music presentation. Each player received a portion of bread as payment for his services, as well as some of the wonderful bread pie.

I also was presented with two lovely gifts. The first was a hand-wrought broach-like pendant, made from a silvery metal — probably the 'bowl' of a steel spoon — flattened into an elaborate medallion with a cover that closed on tiny hinges over a small, hand painted picture of the Ghetto clock tower (which didn't keep time then or now, sixty years later). The picture was a watercolor by Henny, done on the back of yet another Ghetto SS form. The medallion had been produced by some Ghetto artisan who had access to scraps of metal and the proper tools. He too had been paid in bread, all of which had been hoarded for weeks and donated by my fellow roommates.

Finally, Henny presented me with a tiny 'book' of poetry from the Romantic period, handwritten by her on twenty-five or thirty

tiny scraps of stolen paper, bound between a cardboard-like material which had been covered with a bit of fabric from someone's summer dress or blouse, presumably obtained by Lilly Fleischer, who easily could have procured it while working as a seamstress.

I was moved beyond description by these events. Even my normally staid parents were obviously touched. Father, always at his best on formal occasions, gave a short speech. It was a wonderful event, one which will forever linger in my memory in contrast and, in some measure, as a rebuttal to the other, awful memories of those times. To me, then and now, the events of that evening prove that even in the midst of the worst times, people are still capable of great kindness and caring. I shall always cherish my memories of my 'Ghetto birthday,' perhaps the most wonderful single day of my life, and of the people who cared enough to make it possible. Very, very few, if any of them, survived the Ghetto, re-deportation or the war. I will never know why Fate allowed me to live, while so many others died. In the intervening years, I somehow lost track of Henny's little book of poetry. But I still have and treasure the wonderful broach, the most single precious possession of my lifetime.

Chapter Four

Life and Loss in KZ-Ghetto Theresienstadt

Much has been recorded concerning the operation and history of Ghetto Theresienstadt. My story is much narrower, however, more personally focused. Aside from a working knowledge of its geography, the rules and regulations, and something of the character of the general inmate population, what I knew had to do with who I was, where I was, what I did, and with whom I spent my time. With scant exception, my life there can be amply described as a small part of the bigger world of Ghetto Youth Barracks L414.

My time in L414 came at an especially critical moment. Under the most demanding and difficult circumstances, I was making the transition from a dependent, dutiful daughter to an independent young adult. The moment was compact, almost fleeting, from mid-June 1943 to year's end, and the space constricted, marked by the few hundred meters from the Hamburger attic, to the Isolation Ward at the *Kavalirska*, and finally to Henny's room in L414. During my transition I was immeasurably aided by Henny and her fellow caregivers, by their continuous, conscious effort to keep all of us closely connected to a human and meaningful existence. That was a tall order, especially since the children under their care weren't comprised of a normal 'student body,' but rather were part of a constantly and dramatically changing scene. Their job was akin to molding something firm and definable out of a fast flowing stream of water. As will be seen, my mother receives credit for saving my life. But Henny and the other caregivers saved my spirit and my sanity. L414's caregivers operated with the barest of essentials. There were no books, papers or any of the other usual paraphernalia of a school. While they struggled to care for their children, they knew that they too were an endangered species, starving, subject to re-deportation, illness or death at any time. Nonetheless, all of them regularly sacrificed their own interests in order to make a difference, using whatever material goods they could scrounge, borrow, liberate or steal, relying mostly on their own intelligence, instincts and kindness. Without question, they were the most generous, remarkable group of people to ever grace my life.

At the center was Henny. She was in her late thirties, with an unimpressive figure and an awkward gait, a long prominent nose, and prematurely gray hair always tied back in a sensible bun. Her most appealing physical features were her big blue eyes and ready smile. She usually could be found wearing a pair of old gray ski pants and a nondescript top of some sort. She was utterly disinterested in her clothes and appearance, except for cleanliness and neatness.

As noted, she arrived at Theresienstadt in November 1942, having had the opportunity to immigrate to America before the borders were closed but choosing instead to accompany her mother to the Ghetto. Henny never evidenced any bitterness or regret over her decision or its outcome. After her mother's death, she simply turned her full attention to the Ghetto's children.

She was a trained biologist with a wonderful education, her doctorate not the least of her accomplishments. To us, she seemed to know everything about every subject. Her evening study sessions not only included academic subjects; she'd also entertain and enlighten us with tales of theater performances, operas, and concerts she'd attended in Vienna. She also told us about mountain climbing excursions and ski trips, even causing some of us to snicker, as teenage girls will, when she alluded to what we thought might have been a one-night tryst with a fellow climber in an Alpine village. She once mentioned, laughing, that 'he' had been a Nazi. This made the tale double intriguing, not to say bizarre. She never supplied any other provocative details, so we simply made up our own.

Of course it had not taken long for Henny and I to develop a close relationship, one which allowed me all sorts of special little privileges. For example, in the evenings when my roommates assembled to hear her lectures, they sat primly on the room's one and only hard, thoroughly uncomfortable wooden bench, or on the floor in front of it. You were expected to sit up, not sprawl. Because I was still nominally recovering from my bout with diphtheria and had to contend with my supposed heart murmur, I was allowed to listen to the evenings' presentations while lying on my bunk, often while re-knitting *Grossvater's* magical sweater. It was only on those occasions when my 'listening' turned to discernible snoring that she made me climb down and join my roommates.

In due course, Henny was compelled to include sex education in her repertoire of evening lectures. Reni, a roommate from Hanover who was a non-working inmate because of her tubercular condition, had a boyfriend in the building, a rather handsome young man named Werner. He lived in an unsupervised room below us, although Sigi did his best to keep an eye open for trouble. As I later learned, however, he did not detect that the boys had set aside one upper bunk in a corner of the room for what they referred to as 'the honeymoon suite,' to be used occasionally by two couples from the boys' room and ours who had established intimate relationships. In time, Reni discovered she was pregnant. The barracks doctors promptly, efficiently and humanely terminated her pregnancy and the matter was hushed up, but thereafter Henny saw to it that we girls knew something about the facts of life. Shortly thereafter, Reni was re-deported East in one of the regular *Abtransporte*. She barely survived the war, finally being liberated by the British at Bergen-Belsen. She made it to Sweden to convalesce, but died soon thereafter.

I was made a full-time caregiver shortly after my birthday party. With that designation, the change spared me the continuing trek back and forth to the Youth Labor Administration offices at L218, thereby saving me a total of 24 blocks of walking, six each way, twice a day. Even though it was but a short distance as the crow flies, because of all the barriers we inmates were required to negotiate through the center of the Ghetto the walk was interminable. With my new fulltime assignment, I now needn't leave the barracks in which I resided. For every physical effort which we were spared, we gained another calorie's worth of energy. It sounds like a small, almost insignificant consideration, to be saved perhaps a half-hour or so of daily walking, but every little bit helped towards the ultimate goal, conserving strength, edging towards survival. No saving was too small to be overlooked, no bit of nourishment too unappetizing to be ignored. Indeed, I've since learned that one of the characteristics of starvation is that its victims begin to voluntarily, albeit perhaps unconsciously diminish their spontaneous movements in order to conserve energy. I can think of endless examples of such behavior in the Ghetto. Lying in bed, uncomfortable with a very full bladder, rather than face climbing up and down the stairs to the bathrooms in the Hamburger

Kaserne for example. The persistent hunger made us perpetually drowsy and a bit disoriented and loath to spend any extra energy that could be saved.

Henny and I also developed an informal communal system of sharing. Many of the younger inmates were Czech and Zionist, quite a few were communists; personal property meant little or nothing to them. Often these young people would demonstrate their friendship for one another by sharing everything, especially food, that most valuable commodity of all. Some of these arrangements were merely symbolic, since they only made practical sense in those relatively few situations where one of the participants worked in the bakery or in one of the camp's kitchens, or had access to someone else who did, or who received packages from outside the Ghetto, generally from Christian family members or friends.

In addition to the packages that arrived from Frau Güllering, the Christian wife of one of my father's Jewish clients in Freiburg sent a monthly package containing a single sanitary napkin (very useful, when carefully pulled apart, for use as toilet paper), and some small notions, such as a tooth brush or a comb. The utter uselessness of those gifts tended to confirm the German home front population's complete misconception of what life was like in the camps and what was required to sustain us – food, food, and more food!

Frau Güllering's small cakes, while sometimes divided with my family, mostly were shared with Henny, despite her protests. I knew that Frau Güllering braved the postal workers' hostile stares (and possible denunciation to the Gestapo for persistently sending food packages to incarcerated Jews) in order to send a separate package to each member of the Guthmann family. Henny and I also shared our regular rations, as well as my extra weekly portion of *Schleimsuppe* every Monday evening.

One of Henny's other kind gestures was her insistence that she 'purchase' a new dress for me. With the arrival of a small number of Danish Jews who were trapped before the mass exodus of their brethren to Sweden in October 1943, there were some fairly new clothes to be seen in the Ghetto. There were also some Dutch prisoners who had arrived with relatively new

clothing which, in keeping with tradition and necessity, they promptly began to barter away for food. With half a loaf of her own bread, Henny bought me a black silk dress, primly tailored but softened by a pattern of pink roses in the fabric. I loved the dress, of course, and adored the gesture, but never had a proper place to wear it. Like the organization of my birthday party, that gesture was typical of Henny's loving generosity.

With the arrival of the Danes, the well-organized and directed Danish Red Cross began to actively concern itself with conditions at Ghetto Theresienstadt. In the early winter of 1943, they began sending food parcels not only to the Danish Jews, but to all the children under age sixteen in the Ghetto, irrespective of their nationalities. The children in my charge each received two or three of those parcels over time, containing such unheard of delights as chocolate, cheese, summer sausage, crackers and the like, really wonderful stuff.

One of our more absurd joint undertakings was to chip in portions of our bread rations to pay a man to teach us Gregg shorthand (which I remembered and was able to use for the remainder of my life). Before deportation, he'd been a court stenographer, working mostly in German but with a very sound grasp of English too. When people arrived in the Ghetto, you never could tell what they would bring with them, e.g., a small antique bone china teacup, a prayer book, perhaps a copy of Goethe's Faust. He had brought a Gregg shorthand instruction book. He was desperate to earn extra rations and Henny and I both knew enough English to benefit from his instruction, so we retained his services. The lessons were useful, but we soon realized that they were not worth the price we were paying, bread being so increasingly precious. We didn't know quite how to extricate ourselves from our arrangement. In the end, Theresienstadt solved the problem for us. Our instructor was re-deported East. Presumably his Gregg shorthand book ended up on a rubbish heap at Auschwitz.

So, although we were literally living from hand to mouth, we were living. Compared to conditions that prevailed elsewhere in the Ghetto, we were surviving too, our enthusiasm for life blighted only by the every-lengthening, ever-present shadow of the re-deportations East which, like our hunger, gnawed at us relentlessly.

I knew of the *Abtransporte* from the first evening in the attic, thanks to Eugenie's briefing. Within weeks, it became apparent that there was a nearly continuous movement within the Ghetto; one day an inbound train would arrive, the next an outbound transport would head East. Sometimes two or more trains would arrive and depart on the same day. Occasionally, weeks would go by without any trains at all. Whatever the schedules, there was an incessant, unnerving ebb and flow of humanity. It was never static, never stable, never a place where you could count on anything other than the vagaries from On High that ruled your life.

When preparing for a re-deportation, the Ghetto's SS administrators provided the requisite quota of deportees to the Ghetto's internal Jewish management. Thereafter the selections were made and the re-deportation notices delivered. There was an agenda, a process, but it was kept opaque, which made its apparent randomness all the most fearsome and provocative. First it would be Czechs who left, then Germans, Austrians and others. Sometimes whole families were designated, sometimes children were sent while parents stayed behind and vice-versa. Sometimes the deportees were elderly, sometimes entire transports were made up of younger members of the Ghetto. The procedure was ruthless, efficient, and entirely indifferent to the human suffering it inflicted. The only invariable was the flow, and the established rule that anyone who wished to join their family or other loved ones was welcome to do so. For that matter, anyone who felt like it could hop aboard a train headed East, a one-way ticket to . . . ? Immediate family members often joined each other. Children voluntarily boarded the trains to care for elderly parents, parents rode East to tend to young children, wives to be with husbands, whole families, sometime three generations, simply to stay together. It was also quite normal for close friends who had been through thick and thin together in the Ghetto to voluntarily leave with one another, gaining strength from each other's company, opting to face the future, no matter how bleak, together rather than alone. Desperation does desperate people make! It was a heartbreaking dynamic and, far more often than not, turned out to be a deadly one. Very, very few ultimately survived the *Abtransporte* East. If they weren't gassed or died of other circumstances at Auschwitz-Birkenau,

those who were still alive when the camps were vacated died in the horrible winter death marches of January – March 1945.

Within the daily life of the camp, the use of one's special privileges and benefits, if you were lucky enough to have them, was as natural as breathing. Those with the proper connections exploited them to the maximum during each re-deportation selection process. The Ghetto's internal staff at the Magdeburger Barracks was besieged the moment that deportation notices began to circulate. Those who had been selected who knew someone, anyone in authority, always had a list of reasons why they should be excluded: health, the importance of their work assignments, personal friendships, blood relationships, past favors unredeemed, even facts with which to blackmail an administrator or a member of his family. Occasionally the supplicant was successful, usually not. Although at the time self-deception was the norm, in the end many of those who were removed from the lists and ultimately survived the Ghetto paid a terrible psychological price for their reprieve. As time passed, it became inescapably apparent that for everyone who escaped a designated *Abtransporte*, someone else's name was added to the list to make the numbers right. Survival yes, but at what price? And how to ever balance the ledger?

Within L414, there was a constant turnover of children in the barracks and in our room. I, a sick, new, entirely unconnected German, received my superior bunk because a well-connected healthy Czech girl, who worked on the much sought-after agricultural brigade, had been summarily ordered onto the next day's *Abtransporte*. How was one to begin to make rhyme or reason out of such arbitrary occurrences? Later, when one of 'my' children disappeared onto an *Abtransporte*, I was momentarily heart-broken. But almost immediately there was another child to replace her. Concentrating on the new children was an effective antidote for my sorrow over the lost ones. In time, of course, the new ones became the old ones, then the lost ones, as the cycle endlessly repeated itself.

This perpetual line of fractured relationships inevitably took its toll, in my case paid out over the remainder of my lifetime. To never know when one will have a dear friend snatched away without warning quite naturally leads one to resist the temptation to make dear friends, to trust circumstances, to allow

vulnerability to unnecessarily seep into your life. For a variety of reasons, the capacity to trust was often an early casualty sacrificed to the stress of Ghetto living. One small incident speaks to this issue. A young Czech counselor in L414 had discovered a hidden hot water heater with an attached showerhead in an obscure corner of the barracks, likely a throwback to Terezín's garrison days. She had scrounged some odd bits and pieces of wood, filled the tank, heated it up and then enjoyed a hot shower, and unbelievable luxury. But she hadn't used her entire supply of hot water so she quietly invited me to help myself. Heaven! But I was never able to thank or repay her – she was snatched at the last moment for the next day's *Abtransporte* (no doubt to replace someone who secured his or her removal). Henny and I conspired to use the shower two or three times, but wood was so scarce and the room's stove so incessantly demanding of wood when we ran out of coal, that we agreed that we couldn't indulge ourselves at the expense of the room. Still . . .

My family, of course, was among the unprotected. Father's position as a room elder in the Hannover Barracks, a very minor functionary, afforded him some slight advantage. Often, however, he was the bearer of bad tidings, since it fell to him to deliver deportation notices to those who were in his section. My position in L414 placed me in the immediate environment of Sigi Kvasnievski, a well-protected Czech old-timer. But that wasn't even a nominal safeguard, since other caregivers were being re-deported right and left. There was simply nothing to be done about it. My mother's and brother's situations gave them no defense either. And the orders could arrive at the strangest times.

One hot night in the summer of 1944, everyone from our room was sleeping on the bare ground in the barracks' courtyard to escape the ferocious bedbugs. There was no anticipation that an *Abtransporte* was in the making. When we woke up, my friend, Rita Rosenberger, was already upstairs, having been awakened during the night by Sigi and Henny and told that she was scheduled to depart that morning on a train headed East. We said our good-byes and she left. Although sad, there was nothing in the least unusual about the event.

At the railroad loading dock, Rita abandoned all caution and directly approached one of the SS men who was supervising the scene, telling him that she should be exempted from

the *Abtransporte*. She was a *Mischling* (literally ‘hybrids,’ a term used by the Nazis’ to designate part-Jews) and spoke of her half-Jewish brothers living in the Reich, the offspring of their father’s earlier marriage to a now-deceased Christian. Her brothers were themselves married to Christian wives and had had ‘quarter-Jewish’ *Mischlings* children. Her father had already been re-deported East, while the remainder of her family were living in or near Freiburg in the still protected, confused, confounding world reserved for part-Jews and members of mixed marriages. Somehow she persuaded the young SS officer and was released from the transport. Much to our amazement, an hour or two after she’d left us, she was back in our midst. Rita was one of the few who, like me, survived Theresienstadt until the day of liberation. My story of ‘salvation’ would take an even stranger turn.

Without knowing the specifics, we assumed that re-deportation notices amounted to death sentences. Earlier, like so many in the Ghetto, we had believed desperately, irrationally that Germans would not wantonly kill other Germans, even if we were Jews, and that those of us who left on the *Abtransporte* were being sent to colonize Jewish settlements in the East. By now, by mid-1944, we knew better. We realized that as far as the Third Reich was concerned, we weren’t German, just Jews who happened to speak German, who had once lived in Germany, and that there was nothing that they were doing to everyone else whom they considered an enemy that they would not do to us. Even so, hope by its very nature is a curious experience, subtle in its capacity to penetrate and placate desperation, a phenomenon that the Nazis consistently used to lull us into mass self-deception, into a delusional state where they could persuade us to believe anything but the truth, precisely because the truth was so unbelievable. But the clarity now afforded by hindsight simply cannot be used to decipher the desperation which so drove and distorted our thinking in the Ghetto. It was a constant emotional muddle: ‘knowing’ the worst on the one hand, ‘believing’ in something better on the other.

It is no coincidence that the Ghetto’s daily dose of ‘news’ always favored the good over the bad. There were few sources of reliable information. The Elders were the best informed, and some of the workers on the agricultural detachments who worked outside the Ghetto’s walls obtained objective if limited

information from sympathetic Czech farmers. Also, some of the more friendly Czech gendarmes would occasionally give inmates reports of the war, and members of newly arrived transports from the West sometimes had relatively fresh news to pass around. But on the whole, the camp depended on word-of-mouth communication, without paying too much attention to truth, falsity, absurdity or other relevant considerations. Known as *Bonkes* – which, rough translated, is the American equivalent of ‘scuttlebutt’ – it was essentially conjecture, based on rumor, premised on speculation, driven by fear and anxiety. The inmate population persisted in a concerted attempt to create good news, because it needed good news; there was always plenty of bad news to go around. The process may have consisted of nothing more than grasping at proverbial straws, and may have been entirely delusional, but much effort went into it.

Bonkes was a peculiar institutional solution to a pressing need. The fact that we used the word *Bonkes*, which probably derives from the French ‘bon,’ or ‘good,’ is itself telling. The Ghetto’s population was largely urbane and well educated, whether Czech, German, Austrian, Dutch, Danish or any of its many other nationalities, people accustomed to cultural activities, widely read and knowledgeable. Suddenly, they were completely isolated from the outside world. And neurotic in the extreme: we lived in this absurd, convoluted environment where we were fearful of today, terrified of tomorrow, longing for the past. We knew that we were unjustly incarcerated and understood all too well that there was no way out for us except for major upheavals and reversals in the outside world over which we had no control, such as Germany’s complete defeat by the Allies. But it was a long time before that happy expectation took hold within Ghetto Theresienstadt. Even allowing for the fact that a genuine piece of news occasionally penetrated the camp, when it had been repeated for the fifth or sixth time it bore no resemblance to its earlier incarnation. Each *Bonkes* rapidly became twisted, distorted, misunderstood, misconstrued, elaborated upon and wrought in ways designed to make even the worst tidings into good ones. Always in its transmission around the camp, it was shaped by the dreams and hopes of the people through whose hands it passed.

When we entered the Ghetto, we were constantly approached by other inmates. “Are you new in the camp?” they’d

ask. When we answered in the affirmative: “What’s going on in the outside world,” was the inevitable question. And we would relate, as best we could: “The Wehrmacht is making good progress in Russia. The northern front is holding well. The Allies have been stopped cold in Italy” or whatever we had reason to believe the facts to be.

“Oh no,” our questioners would haughtily correct us. “We just spoke with a Belgian [or someone from Holland or France or Berlin] yesterday.” They would then repeat, with complete conviction, the most fantastic fabrications: “The latest is that Hitler has disappeared. He cannot be found anywhere.” Or, “Roosevelt made a speech a few days ago in New York and said he has heard of our suffering and is sending boats and planes to fetch us to take us to special rehabilitation encampments in some American resort area.” The most fantastic and bizarre of these *Bonkes* went from one end of the Ghetto to the other in record time, accepted without reservation by one and all. Many of the inmates may have been ill, all were starving, but each had enough emotional energy to dream. I fully understand the need for such things, because it was the only way to cope with our insane, intolerable living conditions and bleak prospects. But fantastic? Hollywood had nothing on Thresienstadt’s *Bonkes* syndrome.

And yet, even when word of the Allied invasion in Normandy seeped into the Ghetto, I was completely indifferent to the news. I was only interested in today, tomorrow, perhaps next week. To think of next month or next year was too much of an effort. By my view, at least, we shouldn’t have wasted time or energy speculating about tomorrow’s events when we were fully occupied with today’s problems. Frankly, I was more concerned with bed bugs and other vermin than with liberation. I could do something about the bugs; I was powerless to influence our liberation and I didn’t dare allow myself to think the worst – either that it would never come or that I wouldn’t live long enough to see the day. As a measure of my impotence, I really couldn’t do anything about the bedbugs either. Cumulatively, they were a more powerful presence in the Ghetto than any SS officer, no matter his rank or penchant for sadism. We could occasionally catch and kill one of the horrible things, the bugs that is, but victory was almost as revolting as defeat, since when we crushed them they stank out of all proportion to their size, leaving our

hands covered with blood spots. By my experience at least, there were few inmate 'victories' of any sort within the thick walls of Ghetto Theresienstadt.

In the spring of 1944, we were delighted to discover that our barracks was to be fumigated to rid us, at least temporarily, of the awful vermin which infested every room, every bed, every square inch of space, including the dreaded bedbugs. The size of a small fingernail, you could feel them crawling over you at night, biting, making even one's sleeping moments disagreeable. Short of killing them by the thousands, the only mildly effective remedy was to keep the light on, since the little beasts were nocturnal creatures and shunned illumination. So our barracks were fumigated with a potent insecticide known as Zyklon-B. At the time, of course, it was unknown to us that the Nazis were using the very same gas to 'fumigate' the gas chambers of Auschwitz in their attempt to kill what they viewed as another kind of insect, "Jewish vermin unworthy of life."

Then, much to our amazement, we were handed buckets, scrub brushes, mops and rags, and ordered to clean the streets, sidewalks and house fronts on the planned route of what was to be a forthcoming tour by personnel of the Red Cross. The SS wanted the streets in the 'Jewish Settlement' to look well scrubbed, cheerful, flower-decorated, a scene straight out of a Bavarian village picture postcard. The work was difficult and dirty, but at first we did think that we were helping ourselves, so it was not an entirely unpleasant experience. We were naïve enough to believe that things simply were getting better, that as the inevitable end of the war drew nearer the SS administration was making an attempt to ease our lot in order to make themselves look better. Slowly, however, word began to spread that we were preparing for an inspection by the International Red Cross. As one might imagine, the Ghetto's *Bonkes* mechanism promptly went into high gear.

First, there was construction of a small music pavilion. Next followed the removal of most of the barriers that cluttered the interior of the Ghetto and which kept us out of the parks and other open spaces. Then came the construction of the children's pavilion and the opening of various 'shops,' stores which in fact

were stocked with clothing and other items looted from incoming transports. Although it took weeks for it to penetrate, the entire charade consisted of nothing more than the elaborate construction of a Potemkin village. What we did not know was that as early as November 1943, Adolf Eichmann had given the International Red Cross provisional permission to visit the Ghetto, a reluctant decision precipitated in large part by the arrival of the first of three groups of Danish Jews in October 1943. Shortly thereafter, the SS launched a *Stadtverschönerung*, a city beautification project. In February 1944, Anton Burger was replaced as *Kommandant* by SS Captain Karl Rahm. Allegedly, at least one reason for the change was that Burger had shown inadequate enthusiasm for preparing the Ghetto for the forthcoming IRC inspection. Rahm, however, was determined to make a sterling impression on our visitors, and eventually put nearly the entire inmate population to work readying Theresienstadt for the big day.

As the inspection drew nearer, our most presentable children, which is to say the best looking, least Semitic appearing kids, were outfitted in 'new' clothes obtained from the Ghetto's *Kleiderkammer*, a large storehouse which contained all the Ghetto's confiscated goods, mostly clothing taken from the incoming transports, all of which had been carefully searched for concealed contraband – jewelry, money and such – and then stored prior to shipment back to Germany. Even though the clothes were used, most of the children hadn't seen anything like them in two or three years. They could barely contain their excitement. It was all very difficult to process and accept. It was as if the most imaginative *Bonkes* was suddenly becoming reality!

Much has been written about the International Red Cross inspection that occurred on June 23, 1944. I will leave it to the historians to discuss, dissect and analyze the events of that day. Some say that the Red Cross personnel – consisting of two Danes, led by a Swiss, Maurice Rossell, the deputy head of the International Red Cross' Berlin office – were entirely taken in (my view, personally). Others contend that our visitors only appeared to be persuaded that the Ghetto was, in fact, "Hitler's Gift to the Jews" in order to protect the inhabitants against future retaliation (this was the post-war, self-serving view of the inspection team). Whatever the case, the L414 children did their small bit to make the day a success, although the bulk of the building's

residents, including most of the staff, were kept well out of sight in the barracks under house arrest, threatened with dire consequences if we dared to show ourselves during the inspection tour, or even to be seen at a window as the inspection team passed by.

Several of our children from L414 had been carefully coached for their participation in the big event, right down to 'spontaneously' addressing SS Captain Rahm as "Uncle Rahm" when they greeted him on the street. We would all have burst our sides laughing if it weren't so pathetic and potentially dangerous in the event of a slip-up (after all, no one, ever, addressed an SS officer, let alone the Camp *Kommandant*, unless they were spoken to first or were intent on joining the next *Abtransporte* East). One of our charges, Katie, a darling girl of seven or eight, featuring luminous dark hair with a natural streak of white right down the middle of it and big eyes, beautiful skin and even features, was rehearsed to greet Dr. Rossell as the senior Red Cross representative. In a famous picture taken by our visitors that day which is reproduced in many of the texts which have discussed Theresienstadt generally and the Red Cross inspection in particular, there she is, leaning lightly against her somewhat older sister for support, gracefully performing her duty. (I later heard that both sisters survived and immigrated to Sweden after the war.)

It seemed that we passed our inspection (or that the Nazis' passed theirs, however one wishes to look at it). In the weeks that followed, many of the inspection's attractions were removed. Practically all of the children's toys which had been passed out were reclaimed, as was most of the newly issued clothing. There were some residual benefits, however: our barracks area was clean for the first time in years and our rooms were relatively free of vermin; the music pavilion remained standing and in use (although I never attended any concerts or other cultural presentations there – no time, too much effort); best of all, many of the barricades, which made foot traffic within the Ghetto so burdensome, remained down, thus allowing improved freedom of movement with a far greater economy of effort.

The remainder of the summer of 1944 passed in relative peace. Some of us even dared to hope that the worst was over,

that all that remained was the long wait for the advancing Allies, the Soviets, to wrest Czechoslovakia back from the Germans and free us. As usual, those who fell into the trap of wishful thinking underestimated the Nazis' determination to see the Final Solution through to its bitter end, irrespective of the likely outcome of the war.

In mid-September, the Jewish High Holidays were surreptitiously celebrated throughout the Ghetto, just as had been the case in the preceding two years. Reflecting on both the miserable year gone by and the slowly rising expectations within the Ghetto, Walter Popik, a mathematics teacher from Vienna who was one of the more popular counselors in L414, composed a New Year's greeting for his fellow inmates and friends. Handwritten on stolen paper, his poetic greeting is dated "Theresienstadt, Rosh Hashanah 5705, 17.Sept.1944," and reads:

*A year went by. And now we gaze
Back at what passed.
Much pain and sorrow did it bring
And little of the hoped-for good fortune.*

*A blast of trumpets hits our ear -
The faithful, bent in prayer.
God aims the sun's rays and the stroke of lighting.
He judges, weighs and decides our fate.*

*We do not fear the Day of Judgment.
Bad times are holding us in check
We could not find our way to freedom.*

*But lo, the Shofar sounds,
We see the light.
Full of hope and trust
We raise our sight
To the new dawn.*

Walter was one of the lucky few among us who could 'go home' to his family after his work was done. He lived in a tiny *Kumbal*, an improvised garret room in L414's filthy, treacherous attic, with his wife and two year old son. When first deported,

the couple was compelled to leave their infant son behind due to the child's infection with some contagious disease. They were brokenhearted and especially dispirited, but some time in 1943 the child arrived with a transport of children from a Vienna orphanage. Needless to say, the Popiks were in seventh heaven. Sigi and the other counselors helped with the construction of their humble residence, which at least provided a tiny bit of personal privacy for the little family. Their modest comfort was about to evaporate.

His poetic hopefulness was profoundly misplaced. The "new dawn" which he, his wife and toddler son would soon see was colored not by God and His sun, but by the Devil and the fire and the greasy smoke filling the skies above the crematoria at Auschwitz-Birkenau. As events unfolded, the three of them were likely dead and turned to ash within a month of the date of Walter's hopeful poem.

In late September, the dreaded *Abtransporte* began again to roll East. The initial announcement came in the middle of the Jewish Holy Week, the time that Walter's poem was intended to tenderly memorialize: the first transport was scheduled to leave on Yom Kipper, the Day of Atonement. On September 27, the first of three transports took 2,500 inmates to Auschwitz; on September 28 and October 1, two more left the Ghetto, each carrying a further 1,500 prisoners to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Included in the third transport were my father and my brother.

Father and Paul received their re-deportation notices a day or two in advance of their actual departure. They were told to report to the back door of the Hannover Barracks at a specific time; they would be allowed two pieces of luggage each. Father, a lawyer to the last, took the precaution of writing and signing another general power of attorney in favor of my mother, one which would play a large role after the war in furtherance of her relentless efforts to obtain the return of or restitution for our lost property. Reading it today, its legalistic terms encapsulate the desperation of the moment, the recognition that this was likely the formal memorialization of Father's final farewell to my mother. Although not styled as a Last Will and Testament, I believe that its substance, when considered within the context of the moment, achieves the same end. Written in German, its English translation reads:

I herewith issue a general power of attorney to my wife Clara Guthmann, nee Michel, XII/5-9 [her official Ghetto identification number], to take my place in all matters with full legal authority, before official institutions inside and outside this country, as well as with private individuals, wherever such representation is legally permitted.

Everything she negotiates agrees to on my behalf and in my name, applies for and declares, shall be considered as having been done by me personally.

Theresienstadt, September 28, 1944

S/

Witnessed: et cetera

The document doesn't contain the obligatory 'Sara' or 'Israel' mandated by the Nazis when identifying Jewish names, which tends to support my recollection that such ceremonial anti-Semitism, including the mandatory wearing of the yellow Star of David, had little application within Ghetto Theresienstadt. We were all Jews; we were all treated by our captors as Jews. And that was that. There was little need for the usual designated discriminatory indicators. If you were an inmate of the Ghetto, that was designation and discrimination enough!

The evening before their departure, my mother and I visited with Father and my brother. When I returned to L4141 at lights out, my mother remained behind to spend the night with them. Although such an action was entirely against regulations and subject to severe penalties, it wasn't uncommon in such wrenching situations. During our visit, while Paul was momentarily absent running some last minute errand, my father pointed to his son's already packed knapsack and traced the contours of two loaves of bread inside which, under the circumstances, was a very considerable cache of food (nearly a two weeks' supply for an individual by then-existing Ghetto standards!). Paul had not spoken to Father of the bread. We wondered: was he carrying two loaves, one for himself, one for Father? Was he planning to

keep both for himself? Why hadn't he said anything about his plans? I do know that Father and my mother were both upset and hurt, perhaps needlessly so, because it appeared that Paul was holding out on his father. In the ensuing half-century, I've seldom thought about my brother without wondering about those two memorable loaves of priceless bread. I'll forever wonder, but I'll never know what was intended, what actually happened. I am perpetually haunted by that question. I will always be angry with God for leaving the images of those two loaves as the lingering legacy of my brother's memory.

I don't know what Father and Mother did that evening. While it is possible that they had a last night of passion – the attic was no longer crowded, my brother was in and out spending his last night with friends, and Father's little *Kumbal* provided at least a modicum of privacy – I very much doubt it. I suspect that they just sat there together all night long, not saying much, each allowing his or her thoughts to wander, going back over 24 years of marriage, being as much together and apart as they always had been. Their unhappy past could not be undone, remade, or patched-up. Time had run out. Even to my naïve eyes, they remained strangers to each other at this juncture in their journey together. I imagine a long, quiet night of mutual regret. They may have discussed what use my mother might make of the Power of Attorney after the war, but I doubt that either of them believed that she would live to see that day. That document was little more than a gentleman's farewell, a formal expression of Father's affection for her at the moment of his departure.

In those late, last hours, did Father speculate what might have been if he had gone through with his pre-*Kristallnacht* plans to divorce my mother? Did he think of what might have been the result had he pursued emigration more vigorously while it was still a viable possibility? What might have happened if we had received greater support and encouragement from our family abroad? Did he think of *Grossvater*, who had died in misery probably within blocks of where he and my mother now sat, shortly after the old man's arrival in September 1942? Or of the fate of Mother's parents, *Opa* and *Oma*, both gone even before we headed for the desolation of Theresienstadt? Did he feel any sense of regret? Of guilt? I expect that 'yes' is the answer to all these questions.

Early the next morning, October 1, 1944, my mother and I accompanied Father and Paul to their designated train. Both were subdued, seemingly detached from what was going on around them. I suppose they were in a state of shock, as were my mother and I. They remained by the train with us for as long as possible, forgoing any attempt to obtain space on the few available seats in their compartment. We kissed them good-bye, hugged them, and watched as they clambered aboard. Our last sight was of them standing in the aisle of the third class passenger car – at least they were spared the discomfort and humiliation of the endless cattle cars that eventually made their way to the rail-side ramp at Auschwitz-Birkenau – as the train pulled out of the station. We never saw or heard from them again.

As we walked back to the barracks, my mother asked me what I thought Father expected, “to live or to die.” I could only utter, “How would I know, I don’t know, how could I know?” When she asked me that question, filled with desperation, she was reaching out to the only person who could be properly supportive and perhaps ease her pain a bit. I did not. I could not. It would have been a reversal of roles for which I was totally, utterly unprepared. The long established dynamic within our family was such that I could not be her confidante, even, especially in this moment of her greatest distress, a fact that takes on added significance considering what happened to the two of us together a few weeks later when our own time rolled around.

After the war, my mother went to great lengths to establish exactly what fate had befallen her husband and son. Father apparently was murdered in the gas chambers of Auschwitz-Birkenau in October 1944, shortly after his arrival, perhaps on the very day of his arrival. In the summer of 1945, when we were making our way back to Wiesbaden, I ran into one of Paul’s former girlfriends, a *Mischling*, who claimed she had seen my brother march by her in Buchenwald. Seeing her, he yelled, “Have you seen my mother or my sister,” which leads me to presume that he knew by then that Father was already dead. Paul was sent to Mauthausen, a particularly dreadful camp about 75 miles west of Vienna. The official camp records confirm that he died “at 3:30 p.m., March 12, 1945, of circulatory weakness, intestinal catarrh.” The records unearthed by the Red Cross make no reference to his incarceration at Buchenwald, however. They list him as an inmate at the

equally infamous KZ Sachsenhausen, for the period from January 24 through February 12, 1945, so I don't now if his girlfriend's recollection was accurate or not. Nor do I trust the details recited in the Mauthausen records, other than the fact of his death and perhaps its date. In sum, I have never known anything about the details of their deaths. Like so many survivors, I am left to endlessly wonder, "Why them and not me?"

Chapter Five

Betting Our Lives

Next it was my mother's turn, and mine. After the initial transports, it became apparent that the Ghetto's population was being systematically thinned out. Unknown to the general inmate population, on October 2 *Kommandant* Rahm had informed Rabbi Benjamin Marmorstein, the Ghetto's senior elder, that numerous further *Abtransporte* were to be sent East. In the following month, eight more transports re-deported an additional 18,500 Theresienstadt inmates to Auschwitz. Thus, in the span of a little more than forty days, nearly 24,000 Jews were sent East, the vast majority to perish in the gas chambers of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

The SS were clearing the Ghetto methodically, from east to west and north to south, selections to be made from one's place of residence. By then, my mother had finally been able to move from the Hamburger *Kaserne* to a more comfortable situation in the Magdeburger Barracks, the building that housed the Ghetto's Jewish internal administrative offices and provided improved housing for Elders, managers, their families and certain other prominent or otherwise privileged inmates. Given the recent deportations, there were a number of vacancies. Mother was by then working in the Ghetto's Health Department, holding a responsible position working for the *Ärztchamber*, a sort of central registry of inmates with medical training and experience; plus, by then she had a relatively long tenure within the Ghetto, entitling her to improved living space. But as luck would have it, and probably not coincidentally, the Magdeburger was in the corner of the Ghetto where the SS began the selection process, so she was caught up early in the deadly process.

Unlike the usual procedure, which was for the SS to give the Ghetto's Council of Elders a designated number of deportees and then leave it to the Council to do the dirty work of making the actual selections, this time the SS itself made the life or death decisions. Hundreds of men and women were turned out of the Magdeburger and made to file past an SS panel of three junior officers seated at a table. None of the prisoners had any idea what the criteria were, only that the results likely meant life or death. Each prisoner approached the table in turn, gave his or her camp identification number, and the selection was

made, quickly, perfunctorily. A simple mark was placed by each name on the long list as the inmates presented themselves, and then on to the next person. To add to the prisoners' torment, the results were, for the moment at least, unknown to them. A day or so later, those selected would receive notices telling them when they would depart. Period. No reasons given. No review. No appeal. Just a simple piece of paper pronouncing the sentence.

As she waited in line that morning, my mother – whatever her other faults, never anyone's fool – knew that the jig was up, that time had finally run out. As I later learned from her, while she moved slowly towards the panel she noticed a senior SS officer standing off to one side, observing the process. Acting on pure instinct and unpremeditated impulse, she suddenly stepped out of line, approached the officer, and politely but firmly asked that she be exempted from re-deportation. She had no idea who she was addressing, but did understand that she was breaking every rule in the camp, risking death on the spot. But she held her ground, convinced that to do otherwise meant certain death. The officer was *Sturmbannführer* (SS Major) Ernst Möhs, one of Adolf Eichmann's principal deputies within Gestapo Section IV-B-4 (Jewish Section), who served, among other things, as liaison between the Gestapo's headquarters in Berlin and the operation at KZ-Ghetto Theresienstadt. He was present that day because he was in overall command of what would turn out to be the final mass re-deportations from Theresienstadt. Despite his relatively modest rank, he was an immensely influential individual, whose authority far exceeded that of Rahm, the Camp *Kommandant*. Mother had stepped over the threshold of Hell, and was speaking to an incarnation of the Devil himself. Two armed SS soldiers ran towards them, but Möhs calmly waved them away. He stood, motionless, listening impassively to Mother. After a moment's reflection, he simply instructed her to present herself at his office at ten o'clock the next morning. When she respectfully asked whom she should ask for, he gave her his name and rank and turned away to attend to business. Mother stepped back into her place in the line, avoiding the incredulous stares not only of the other inmates but of the members of the SS panel too. She then followed her fellow inmates through the process.

Late that afternoon, she came to see me at L414. We huddled in a corner of the corridor, speaking in whispers. She told

me what had happened. Although never close, I thought that I knew my mother well, but I was absolutely stunned by the tale she told. Knowing something of her inner grittiness, I can't say that I was entirely surprised either. She then asked me to lend her my good grey overcoat, the one which was still reasonably presentable and which would make her appear all the more so. I agreed. She was frightened by her own boldness, and more so by what lay before her the next morning. She told me what she planned to say to Möhs, relying heavily on Father's war record, his prominence in the Wiesbaden and Frankfurt Jewish communities, his former standing at the bar. My own barracks selection was still a day or two off, but she asked me to accompany her the next morning nonetheless. She wanted, needed both my company and moral support. She also hoped to include me within the scope of any relief she might be able to secure for herself. If, as seemed unlikely, all went well, it certainly would be better for me to be present and share in the benefit. If it went badly, the adverse consequences probably wouldn't make much difference to my ultimate fate anyway. As had been the case when Father and Paul were re-deported just days before, there was no one else in the entire Ghetto to whom she could turn for support. If I declined to accompany her, she'd be entirely on her own.

Despite my deep and endearing attachment to Henny, Sigi, the other caregivers and the children of L414 – my second family in every sense of that word, a group who always treated me with more sweetness, respect, kindness and compassion than had my own parents and brother – I didn't hesitate. Of course I'd go with her in the morning; we'd face the Beast as one. At that moment, I knew to a certainty that we'd live or die together. I wasn't optimistic about our chances, but they couldn't be much more perilous than if our fate were to be decided in the Ghetto-wide selection process. When I nodded my agreement, her relief was palpable. So we made plans for the next morning. Mother returned to the Magdeburger, I to my room. Neither of us said a word to anyone about what was about to happen. She later told me, rather sardonically, that that evening in the Magdeburger everyone, even people she knew quite well, kept their distance. She had scared them all with her rash approach to Möhs and no one wanted to be seen anywhere near her. I don't think that she minded in the least.

The next morning we each dressed in the best clothes we could muster, Mother wearing my good coat, me in a two-piece suit from our original luggage, made by the same Wiesbaden seamstress who had tailored the coat, both of us looking terribly out of place. With our hearts in our mouths, we walked together into another world, the world of the Enemy, the Beast, the Devil, the SS.

The Ghetto's main SS-*Kommandatur* was located at Q414 and Q416, some distance from L414. But Möhs' office (which we later discovered he shared with his immediate superior, Adolf Eichmann, during Eichmann's infrequent visits to Theresienstadt) was in building Q619, almost directly across the street from my barracks. She and I were both concerned that if we were seen entering a heavily restricted and guarded area, dressed in our best clothes at that, our inmate neighbors would draw the wrong conclusions. But we were too fearful of what lay before us to let that get in the way. I was so deeply burdened, already ashamed that I was betraying my second family, that I was about to become a traitor to my friends at L414, that I felt that their eyes were on my receding back, boring holes in it. Likely, no one was even watching. We trudged on. As we came to the steps in front of the building, we faced our first group of heavily armed guards, SS troops, not ordinary Czech Gendarmes. Even approaching the guards at their barricades, we risked getting shot. As it was, they just looked at us in amazement. When close enough, we invoked Möhs' name and stated our business; after what seemed like an eternity, they motioned us through. They appeared as befuddled by our presence as we feared theirs. We had to negotiate our way through several more heavily guarded checkpoints, but we kept moving. Fear, panic, terror – in my long life since, I've never known anything quite like those moments.

Möhs' office was on the second floor, behind two large, well-polished wooden doors. (Today, that room, its history largely unknown I suspect, ironically serves as the City Council Chamber for the Terezín municipal government, while another part of the building houses the town's civilian police force.) A stern young SS officer, presumably Möhs' adjutant, knocked, opened the door, announced us, and motioned us in, then stepped back into the corridor and firmly shut the door behind him. The room was large, mostly empty of furniture except for two large

handsome desks, situated to the right and left near the windows at the rear of the room, opposite the door we entered. There was an ornate ceiling, dark wooden wainscoting up to a height of about one meter, above which the walls were covered in a dark damask wallpaper of some sort.

Möhs was alone, seated erect behind the desk to our left. His uniform was crisply pressed, the silver SS runes clearly visible on the collar. There were a few papers neatly stacked on the ornate blotter in front of him. His officer's cap sat perfectly aligned at the front of the desktop to his right. For just a moment, I couldn't move my eyes from the SS death's head insignia at its center. Behind it was a crystal carafe filled with water and a single glass, nestled on a small silver tray. There were two telephones to his left, one black, one red. He was writing something when we came in. Without looking up, he casually motioned us forward. We stopped about ten feet from his desk. He motioned us forward again, until we were about four feet from the highly polished edge of Eternity.

After a moment's hesitation, Mother began to speak, sticking closely to the mental script she'd prepared. Almost everything was about Father, with emphasis on his war record. If Möhs had taken the trouble to check, which I doubt was the case, he almost certainly knew that Father already had been gassed and incinerated at Birkenau. Whatever the case, there we now stood, invoking the good name of a dead man, our husband and our father, who to Möhs was no more than another dead Jew, as the reason to spare our lives. He, of course, made no comment to that effect. In fact, he barely spoke at all, preferring to communicate by gesture. After Mother stopped, I mumbled a few words in support of our petition. I was so scared that I wanted to cry, but I physically forced back the tears and chocked down the sobs. My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. He stared at me for a long moment. After all, I had not been invited to this intimate meeting and I was intruding. He then asked first me, then Mother for both our name and our number, writing them down on a separate sheet of paper. I was close enough to notice that the fountain pen he held in his gloved hand used a dark purple ink. He summarily dismissed us with a wave of his hand. I recall to this day the little pearl button that fastened the grey kidskin glove at his wrist and the expensive gold watch that was partially

visible just above it. I remember thinking that it would be a shame if he stained such lovely gloves with that purple ink.

As we unsteadily emerged from his office, we were escorted back downstairs by the same stiff young SS officer who had met us at the door. He kept his eyes rigidly ahead, looking neither left nor right, trying hard, I imagine, to not acknowledge our physical presence. As we ran the gambit in reverse through the checkpoints that protected the building, we had no idea, none, what decision, if any, had been made that morning. Before parting, Mother and I hugged, long and hard, tears running down our cheeks. No words were necessary. We'd done everything we could to save ourselves. There was no turning back. Not only did we not know the result of our labors, but we had no idea of the cost. I would pay it every day for the remainder of my life.

Late that afternoon, the decision conspired to reveal itself. Sigi had received his own re-deportation notice later that day. In the October 1944 re-deportations, a disproportionate number of the Ghetto's long-protected administrators, prominents and other exempt personages and their families joined the endless line of *Abtransporte* that had been rolling East out of the Ghetto for so long. As I recall, he said something to the effect that "I've just come from the Magdeburger and seen the records [relating to, among others, the staff of L414, although apparently not the children residents]. I'm headed East, day after tomorrow. There's a note by your name in the files which says that you are not to be re-deported." He added, rather too casually, I thought, "It's a mistake of course, but enjoy it while it lasts." Knitting my brows as if perplexed, I pressed him for further details regarding 'my' notation. He said it was just a single line, that he could not make out the initials at the end, but that it had been written in dark purple ink. He appeared unperturbed by my question, but I thought I would faint. I don't know whether he noticed. Within a matter of days he, along with so many others whom I knew, trusted and loved, was gone, forever lost in the haze of smoke and flame that hung over the East.

Mother never received any official notice of Möhs' decision as it affected her. She simply wasn't re-deported. It was a moment of great empathy between us, perhaps the only one we truly shared during her lifetime. This once, in the face of the most dramatic of circumstances and following a course of action that she had initi-

ated, we shared a deep, terrible, guilt-ridden secret, one which I kept entirely to myself for the next 51 years. I don't believe Mother ever again spoke of the incident to me during our remaining time at Theresienstadt. Nor did we ever do so thereafter. We treated the incident as if it was something of a secret even from ourselves, one from the other, a Faustian pact that we dared not reveal.

At the time, we did not know that the October *Abtransporte* would be the last ones to leave Theresienstadt. Unknown to us, the mass killing apparatus at Auschwitz was shut down on Himmler's order in early November. We also didn't know that other plans were afoot, ones that envisioned the mass killing of the remaining Ghetto inmates *in situ*, right in the Ghetto, without the need to re-deport us anywhere. So, one of the many reasons that allowed Möhs his seemingly generous gesture was his sure and certain knowledge that if we were not killed one way, we would die another. Or perhaps it was a decision that was entirely whimsical on his part, done as much for his own amusement as for any other reason. But of one thing I am sure: it was Mother's grit and guts that saved our lives that day.

Momentarily, at least, our near brush with death drew Mother and me closer together than at any time in our life. Since my father's and brother's departure, she'd had no one else. I had lots of friends, my fellow caregivers, many children to tend to, and interesting, satisfying work. Mother had no friends, no confidants. Her work was routine and utterly monotonous. Ultimately, all that record keeping and the compilation of internal Ghetto statistics served no useful purpose other than keeping the deportation/re-deportation machine fueled and well oiled. Even for an introverted, reserved and essentially dour person such as my mother, prior to the Möhs incident she must have been going through a special kind of hell as she sat alone in the Magdeburger after Father's departure. My news, our news, delivered by way of Sigi's revelation that my name was off the L414 caregiver re-deportation list, was the first reassuring information she had heard in a very, very long time.

By the end of October, over two-thirds of the Ghetto's population was gone. Most of the veteran caregivers in L414, gone; many of the children in L414, gone; the Popik family, gone; several friends from Wiesbaden and Frankfurt, gone; Sigi, gone. To my knowledge, almost none of them returned. Gone. Forever.

Mother and I were among only 11,000 inmates remaining in Theresienstadt. How had she mustered the courage to confront the SS? Why did I join her, instead of staying with my second family and sharing their fate, as I gladly would have done in any other circumstance? Why had Möhs spared us? I had no answers then, I have none now. Life and death in the Holocaust were, as often as not, entirely inexplicable.

I lost Henny too. She was among the late October re-deportations, the final one. I subsequently learned that the last Theresienstadt *Abtransporte* was the penultimate deportation to reach Auschwitz and to be sent directly to the gas chambers. Two days later, a final trainload of Jews from Salonika arrived and were promptly murdered too. On November 2, 1944, Himmler discontinued the mass gassings. Although thousands upon thousands of Jews would continue to die in that innermost circle of Hell from disease, starvation and the effects of accumulated privation, and more still from the brutal winter death marches yet to come, the massive, systematic extermination of Jewish life in Europe had come to an end. But too late to save my lifetime's most cherished friend, Henny.

In late September, she had assumed occupancy of Walter Popik's *Kumbal*, at last obtaining some personal privacy for herself. I spent much time sharing her space during our off hours, although I continued to reside and sleep in the room with our shared charges in my original L414 dormitory. I never knew whether or not Sigi told her that my name had been struck from the earlier re-deportation list. I certainly didn't say anything. It was likely that, knowing of the bond between Henny and me, Sigi might have said something, innocently or otherwise. Yet another lingering question without any possibility of an answer.

Henny was in Walter's *Kumbal* for less than three weeks when she received her own re-deportation notice. She promptly 'willed' me the rights to her *Kumbal* and also a stack of Walter's poems that he had left behind with her. She had little time, perhaps only 24 hours or so, between the notification and her departure, so our good-byes were said as she packed her satchel, slipped her illegal medical kit into one leg of her ski pants, and left. Several of 'our' children were going as well, including little Jenny. Those

on the list rallied around each other, somewhat to the exclusion of those of us who were remaining behind. Henny seemed cheerful enough. I was guilt-ridden, stricken by my own survival of the earlier *Abtransporte*. She may have been quietly waiting for me to volunteer to join her and the others from L414, but I don't think so. We never discussed it. I could not have done it even if I had wanted to. Not after Mother had rescued me from the clutches of the Devil himself.

At the same time, as part of the same confusing human dynamic, there was a natural, if unrealistic inclination amongst the L414 population to view each re-deportation as just one more move to yet another camp, where we'd all meet again and reestablish our former friendships. "See you soon" was a sentiment implicit in almost every farewell, albeit subject to differing interpretations. Even as our cadre of established caretakers was depleted by re-deportations, the L414 population remained fairly cheerful, both its workers and residents. Sigi and his staff had struggled diligently to establish and reinforce a team spirit, to maintain some sense of dignity under the most trying conditions. Those of us who remained behind did everything we could to maintain and reinforce that tradition. This was in contrast to many of the other billets, where the departure of the senior barracks elders led to much theft, bickering and a disagreeable atmosphere, not to mention increasing filth and unrelieved despair.

As to Henny, her fate is one of the few which I need not wonder about. She was accompanied on the same train by Rena Adler, who herself made it back to Theresienstadt, more dead than alive, in one of the ghastly winter death marches near the end of the war. When she returned, Rena told me that, in typical fashion, Henny had taken charge of the children caught up in her transport, and in particular had cared for one little boy, aged six or seven, who was one of the TB children we were nursing in L414, one of my regular Monday night *Schleimsuppe* customers. According to Rena, when they detrained at Auschwitz, Henny – who was herself probably young enough, big enough and healthy enough to have survived an initial ramp-side selection – was asked by a guard if the boy was her child, to which she replied "No." When asked if she wish to remain with him, she picked him up, cradled him in her arms and answered with an emphatic "Yes!" Henny was last seen by Rena, who was herself

spared in the selection process, walking with a large group toward the gas chambers, holding her young charge in her arms. That day she behaved as she had while in the Ghetto, with courage and dignity under unimaginably difficult circumstances, her arms wrapped around someone else, helping him to do what had to be done. In one sense, perhaps, it was suicide, in another martyrdom, perhaps a bit of both. To me though, she was the ultimate *Betreuer*, giving care and comfort to little children until the last possible moment.

At the end of the fall 1944 re-deportations, the Ghetto's population of 11,000 was at its lowest count in more than two years. Those of us who remained waited for the Gates of Hell to finally open and let us out. Little did we know that more than six months of bone-chilling misery remained before some of us would escape the Devil's clutches.

Chapter Six

Ashes in the Stream

Soon after relieving the Ghetto of the majority of its living residents, the SS decided to rid us of our dead too. In the early months of KZ-Ghetto Theresienstadt, there had been some attempt to properly bury our deceased. Limited space, an eventual daily death rate of more than 100, and the scarcity of wood for coffins soon dictated a more expedient approach. With typical SS efficiency, Theresienstadt's four-oven crematorium was installed in September 1942. Thereafter, all bodies were promptly and efficiently incinerated. At first, the ashes were placed in small wooden boxes, later in simple wax-paper bags, the kind you would bring home from the delicatessen. Each, wood or paper, had the essential information written in pencil or chalk on the outside of the container: name, Ghetto number, birth and death dates. The remains were then stored in casement near the *Zentralmaterial-Lager* which, in a classically bizarre allocation of space, also housed the main bakery and central food storehouse. By the fall of 1944, more than 17,000 such containers had been accumulated.

In early November, several hundred inmates were assembled, single-file in a long line, stretching from the casement nearly halfway across the Ghetto, to the road which led to the infamous *Kleine Festung*, the Little Fortress. That ghastly place housed certain particularly dangerous political prisoners and other notorious undesirables from throughout the Reich Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia (Czechoslovakia). It also was used by the SS as a punishment barracks for especially dangerous troublemakers from the Ghetto; we feared the Little Fortress even more than we dreaded the *Abtransporte*. Between the Ghetto's gate and the Little Fortress ran the Eger River ('Ohre' in Czech). Throughout the long day and into early evening, the thousands of containers were unsteadily passed from hand to hand, their contents then unceremoniously dumped into the slow moving stream. As the ashes floated away, the Ghetto's dark sense of humor surfaced. The Eger fed into the Elbe. It, in turn, flowed back into Germany, where it provided much of the area's water supply. Remarks passed up and down the line suggesting how our remains would be served up as sparkling drinking water

throughout the Reich, how, one way or another, we'd see too it that they'd never entirely rid themselves of us. The Reich's water table would be permanently tainted with our non-Aryan remains.

It was gallows humor, used with some effect to relieve the plight of those who found themselves momentarily handling the remains of loved ones or friends, whose names were clearly marked on the containers. No doubt *Grossvater's* ashes passed into the river that day, although thankfully neither Mother nor I were involved. Every once in awhile a box or bag was dropped, breaking open, spilling its contents at the feet of those assigned to this unseemly task. Four or five poor souls were given dustpans and brushes, assigned to walk up and down the line tidying up each such mess. All of them were covered by grey-brown dust by day's end. In a blink, the remains of several generations of inmates became nothing more than ashes in the stream. Today that spot is marked by a modest monument near the water's edge surrounded by willows, a beautiful location regularly visited by ducks and an occasional pair of swans. As in nearby Lidice, a lovely setting to memorialize a ghastly event.

After the departure of the October *Abtransporte*, the remaining L414 caregivers found that their emotional equilibrium had been undermined. We had been struggling for months to throw off daily malaise and despair, especially in the face of the continuing loss of friends and family. Even before the mass re-deportations of September and October, such stalwarts as Henny had been weighed down nearly to the breaking point. Like everyone in the Ghetto, the caregivers daily faced the grim living conditions, a bleak scenario darkened by the continuing loss of 'their' children to illness and death, and the anguish of the toll taken by the departing *Abtransporte*. Then there was the endless war. Even though Theresienstadt can only be favorably compared to conditions that prevailed in the East, and even though arrangements at L414 and the other children's barracks were undoubtedly better than most of the living quarters scattered throughout the Ghetto, it was a depressing, debilitating, unrelentingly cheerless existence. Those of us left behind were convinced that soon we too would be gone. I took little comfort from those handwritten words in purple ink next to my name on the

L414 list. We didn't dare to hope, and we didn't dare not to hope. Hope was like an egg, strong in construction, but fragile if mishandled. Without at least a trace of hope, there wasn't much sense in continuing the daily struggle. If we or the children could be snatched for an *Abtransport* the next day, then why worry about today, why bother doing anything at all? The real struggle, the only one that truly mattered, was the fight against the inclination to give in and give up. Like the hunger that gnawed at us, it was an alarming instinct that was always there.

I had no clue about the outside world. It had ceased to exist for me. *Bonkes* buzz words like Odessa, Stalingrad and Normandy had seeped into the Ghetto's consciousness, but meant nothing to me. I wasn't even curious. What energy I had was reserved for coping with today, with seldom a thought of tomorrow.

To think about the future also led one to think about the past, especially about those who'd disappeared into the murky night of the East. It would be months before my worst thoughts were realized, but we all knew, admit it or not, that 'to go East' was tantamount to death. When I ultimately heard of Henny's fate, I understood that in some abstract manner she had committed suicide during the ramp-side selection at Birkenau, at the same time managing to comfort that terrified little boy. Even people like Henny, dedicated, selfless caregivers, sometimes lost the will to live. They put down the struggle and simply passed on. Had she remained at the Ghetto, it's perfectly possible that she might have survived. But at Auschwitz I suspect that she viewed her choices with clarity, conviction and compassion, for both herself and for that nameless youngster.

Those of us left behind all suffered from survivors' guilt. Perhaps survivors' shame is more apt. One need not have done anything which might have contributed to another's misfortune. Nor did one need go looking for the awful bleakness. Sooner or later, it would find you out and punish you for the simple fact of living while others perished. As the re-deportation notices began to circulate, so did the guilt, accompanied by the muted recrimination of those who would not be left behind, those who had been selected to be shipped East. Guilt and recrimination, two sides of the same coin, were the common currency of the Ghetto. We who stayed mostly learned to live with it, while continuing to agonize and ask "Why them, not me?"

Why me and not them?" It is a bitter fact: Of the dozens of friends and hundreds of children who surrounded me during my twenty-three months at Ghetto Theresienstadt, I can count on my two hands the number who, like me, lived. Aside from the *Mischlings* children who arrived late, in February 1945, it is estimated that of the 15,000 children or so who passed through Theresienstadt, no more than a few hundred survived to the end of the war.

Of the eleven thousand of us who remained, only about five thousand were able-bodied and well enough to work. Those of us who could work were left to care for those who couldn't fend for themselves, the ill, the young, the aged. Youth counselors, cooks and bakers, the medical staff, the agricultural division, all lacked the manpower to make the Ghetto function at even minimal standards. The only advantage that the *Abtransporte* conferred on us was more space. Mother now had secured her own single room in the Magdeburger Barracks, rather than the crowded area of forty or fifty women she had joined when she'd finally escaped the attic. I promptly occupied Henny's *Kumbal*. I would soon move in with another roommate, but before that happened I experienced one of those inexplicable, fleeting moments of happiness in the Ghetto. For a week or two I was blessed with food, more than I had seen in years.

Prior to the fall re-deportations, the Ghetto's administration had pleaded for a shipment of potatoes large enough to accommodate Theresienstadt's then much larger population. They arrived just as the last *Abtransport* pulled out. More startling yet, someone had made a wonderful mistake: the precious potatoes were of good quality, fresh as opposed to the semi-rotten, mushy, insect infested produce that usually made it to the Ghetto. I soon learned from the *Bonkes* that this treasure trove was stored in a barracks warehouse in an area of the Ghetto that was strictly off-limits to all inmates at all times. I also discovered that, uncharacteristically, the SS and Czech guards weren't closely guarding the storehouse, relying on its ACHTUNG VERBOTEN! designation to do the job for them.

My stomach made the decision for me. All of us were half-unhinged from starvation. The notion of all that food sitting there drove me right around the bend. I gladly risked being shot for a full stomach. I made three secretive, scary trips to the forbidden

warehouse after dark, each time coming away with two handfuls of five or six of the precious potatoes, accumulating fifteen or twenty in all. I passed a few to my mother, but greedily kept most of them for myself. Soon the SS caught on and began actively patrolling the warehouse. In the meantime, several hundred pounds of illicit nourishment had seeped into the Ghetto. A small victory, but a hopeful one.

In Henny's *Kimbal*, I found another prohibited item, an ancient but serviceable hotplate. There was only one other family in the immediate area, a Czech mother-and-daughter team. Since the mother worked in the Ghetto's kitchens and the daughter frequently managed to be sent out on agricultural work parties, they always had enough of their own food, which they zealously guarded. Evidence that I was illegally cooking nearby didn't cause them undue concern. In fact, the daughter showed me how to prepare my new treasure. I heated water on the hot plate, boiled some of the potatoes whole, grated others with a makeshift instrument she loaned me for that purpose, and devised a wonderful dumpling-like concoction. My stomach was shrunken, so it didn't take a great deal to fill it. For ten days or so, I had all the food I could eat. The hotplate kept blowing fuses, which earned me several reprimands from the L414 managers, but that was a small price to pay for the unheard of luxury of a full stomach. Heaven!

I settled into a new routine. I was a full counselor now, with complete responsibility for my young charges. I remained accountable for the German and Austrian girls in Henny's old room, but they were older, fifteen or sixteen, reasonably mature veterans of the Ghetto and generally able to care for themselves. They were assigned to regular work parties, so they were only in the barracks in the evenings. There now were less than a dozen of them, so I simply kept an eye on them from a distance.

My real responsibility was two rooms of much younger children, one of girls, one of boys, thirty-five or forty altogether, aged seven to ten. By then, children aged ten and under were exempted from work details, so they were in my care practically around the clock. Most were orphans, emotionally distraught, many of them sick. They were a handful! Taking care of them

took all my time. With the loss of Sigi and most of the other veteran barracks cadre, there was little help. Thankfully, I did get some assistance from my mother. In the evenings and off-hours, some of the children would visit with her in the Magdeburger, where she derived real pleasure from acting as a sort of surrogate grandmother, an arrangement that comforted both her and the kids. Nonetheless, at age nineteen I was the counselor for and substitute mother to three or four dozen young children, working almost entirely on my own.

Vlasta (“Wawa”) Schoenova, a longtime Czech inmate of the Ghetto, was made our new, albeit nominal, Barracks Elder, replacing Sigi, thanks to her friendship with Rabbi Marmelstein, who then was running the Ghetto pretty much as a one-man show. But for all practical purposes, she was essentially uninvolved in the operation of the L414. She was busy with her agricultural work assignments, which were far more important than her supposed administrative responsibilities, since they led directly to food. She was one of the stars of the Ghetto’s theatrical troupe, preparing to put on a performance of Glühwürmchenher and her own tour de force from Jean Cocteau’s La Voix Humaine, entitled Die Geliebte Stimme (‘The Beloved Voice’). She lived in L414 in her own space, with an elegant room divider, a former theatrical prop, the famous Degas dancers painted on a large white bed sheet. I rather liked her, in part because she had paid me the compliment of requesting that I act as her unofficial voice coach to help her with German diction and elocution during her performances. That service resulted in some additional rations too.

Aside from such things as ‘room dividers’ and the like, the Ghetto’s supply of sheets served other useful purposes. The Czech women, especially those from Prague, were savvy and smart looking. Many of them had contrived to dye surplus sheets, scrounged from incoming transports or reclaimed from the dead and re-deported, a dark blue. They then made them into jean-like garments for themselves, slacks and a kind of bib overall, which they wore with considerable flare. This came as something of a surprise to fellow prisoners arriving from Germany and Austria since, according to accepted Nazi lore, these Czechs were mere Slavs, no better than the inferior Poles and other *Untermenschen*. We urban dwellers had never seen blue jeans or thought

of such an article of clothing, the use of which made much sense in the grubby, hardscrabble environment of the Ghetto. It's truly amazing, the strange and diverse revelations of all kinds that came to the inmates of a concentration camp.

From an operational perspective, L414 was now run by Frau Klinke, a Czech woman from Maehrisch Ostray in the Protectorate, who had been a member of the chorus in the Ghetto's famous Bartered Bride performance. (It was one of the children's frequent small pleasures to mock her behind her back as she walked the halls, practicing her singing parts at the top of her considerable lungs.) Few of us had attended the Bride performance, in part for lack of energy, in part because it was entirely in Czech and totally unintelligible to most of us. She wasn't a particularly pretty woman, in her mid-thirties, about medium height with reddish kinky hair. But nice enough, although lacking in the many well developed care-giving skills of her predecessors. In turn, she was supervised by Sigi's former assistant, a Dutch woman, Frau Meyer, previously a German resident from Hannover.

Both of them were apt at attending to the barracks' administrative details, but neither of them was a leader in Sigi's mold. Nor did they recognize the need to provide emotional support to their cadre or to their charges, the children, which was one of Sigi's great strengths. They were the Ghetto's equivalent of middle-level bureaucrats who believed that they were doing their job well if they 'managed' the barracks and kept up necessary appearances. The problem was that I was left completely adrift, with as many as forty youngsters in my care, without help or guidance.

In late November I was confronted with both a move to new living quarters and a new roommate. The barracks' administration placed me in another room in the attic, known locally as 'The Two Bobs *Kumbal*,' because a few months earlier it had been built by two experienced and popular L414 caregivers, each named Bob, who had since been re-deported. My new roommate was Irma Semecka, a Czech half-Jew who had been confined to the Ghetto from its early days. Irma's claim to fame was that she had been Gideon Klein's girlfriend, before he too was re-deported. Gideon was a young, handsome, talented musician, a concert pianist and composer, the apple of just about

every young woman's eye in the Ghetto, mine included. He continued to perform brilliantly, mostly using a legless piano as his principal instrument (if you wish to view a bizarre still life, keep your eye open for a piano without legs, propped up on a small wobbly table for support). He was an inspiration to many inmates. On the eve of his re-deportation, he had requested his friend Dr. Murrelstein to take care of Irma for him. Since Gideon was much concerned for the Ghetto's children and their welfare, I presume the Rabbi thought that he'd be acting in Gideon's spirit to allocate Irma a 'cushy' job as a caregiver for a group of Czech boys in L414. It was only natural that we'd be assigned to live together.

Irma's heart was in the right place and we actually became quite fond of one another in the six months that we spent together, but she was utterly unqualified for her job as a youth counselor. So was I, of course, but at least I had my many months as Henny's assistant and in the process had learned a great deal about her refined approach to caregiving. I was much more attuned to the barracks' former spirit and the sense of teamwork and group support which had been instilled by Sigi, Henny and the others.

In some measure, the entire atmosphere at L414 changed after Sigi and the others left. As was always the case, the barracks was filled with troubled children – how could it be otherwise? – but the new administration was more concerned with well-made beds than with dried tears. If Sigi had been there, the staff would have participated in daily meetings, there would have been a group effort to solve particular problems plaguing specific children or members of the cadre, and there would have been a cohesive attempt to control any difficult situations. Unfortunately for me and my children, there was no such awareness or inclination on the part of Frau Klinke or Meyer. They simply didn't know better.

Although Irma and I always managed to get along, we weren't especially close. We were very unlike: she a Czech, me a German; she was ten or twelve years older than me and spoke German rather poorly. Fortunately, my Czech was a good deal better; in fact, I learned much of it from her. Her mother was a Christian living in Prague who paid little or no attention to Irma. Irma herself had been married to a Christian Czech, who

typically and promptly divorced her as soon as the anti-Jewish laws were passed in Czechoslovakia in 1939. She had few teaching or parenting skills and was not much interested in 'leading' her children. On the other hand, she was personable, got along well with me, and I so admired her former boyfriend that I transferred some of my vicarious affection for him to her. In the end, she too survived. After the war, she lived in Switzerland with her second husband, had two daughters and, like most of us, I expect somehow learned to live with her memories.

As with Henny before, Irma and I soon developed a communal sharing arrangement. We were blessed with our *Kumbal* which, given its remote location at the far end of L414's attic, afforded us almost complete privacy. To reach it, we had to climb to the top floor of L414, then up a narrow set of ten or twelve ancient, well-worn sandstone steps, then make our way across a rickety wooden 'footbridge' suspended over huge wooden beams, all this only dimly lit by a few distant attic windows. At night it was nearly impossible to navigate, since there were no interior lights. (I can't recall any candle or battery-operated devices in the Ghetto, so once 'lights out' was ordered, often with a complete interruption of all electricity, lights really were out. Blackness! During the winter, that made for exceedingly long nights!) At the far end of the bridge was a crudely fashioned, nearly hidden wooden door through which we gained entrance to our modest quarters. Once inside, however, it was quite nice. We had our own tiny window, a great blessing. When Gideon and his sister Elizabeth were re-deported, Irma had come into a comfortable inheritance. There were several blankets, an exceedingly valuable commodity. We even had a spare one which we could afford to use as a kind of rug, a luxury unheard of in the Ghetto prior to the fall 1944 re-deportations. Irma also had a collection of several washbowls, buckets and other paraphernalia which made living easier. She always was generous in allowing me to use them.

She had a bright yellow velour top, which Gideon's sister had given her for safekeeping, but which became something of Irma's personal trademark. Gideon also had left behind a pair of good, brown leather riding boots, which he had brought into the Ghetto. They didn't fit Irma, but I liked them, so we traded, her boots for my precious travel alarm clock. I never did wear them, but somehow it gave me comfort to own them. Of course

we also had the invaluable hot plate to cook on, which at least allowed us to reheat the watery soup served at dinner, making it a bit more palatable. These devices were strictly forbidden, although many of the attic *Kumbal* families had them. We were never able to synchronize our use of them, however, so we were forever blowing precious fuses, much to the annoyance of the barracks management. To no one's great surprise, after a number of such incidents the internal fire protection guards, two young Czech prisoners, appeared on our doorstep and confiscated our prize. At least they had the decency to be embarrassed as they relieved us of one of our most prized possessions. But they had their orders and of course we easily could have caused a fire, placing the entire barracks in jeopardy. Fortunately, we got off with no more than a severe warning. The incident did not endear us to the new L414 administrators, however. In due course, no doubt our little hotplate was put to good use by another inmate, presumably someone with better access to a stable electrical supply, or at least with more discretion as to its use.

Irma also struck up a friendship with Bubi, a young Slovak inmate who arrived with the transports from Sered sometime in late 1944. He was something of a pest, although nice enough. One night when I came home from one of my very infrequent visits to one of the Ghetto's 'cultural' presentations, I stopped by my younger girls' room to make sure that the children were all right. There I found a note from Irma asking that I please spend the night in my old bunk in Henny's room, which was set aside for me but which I normally never used. She even had been thoughtful enough to make it up for me in advance. She and Bubi were together, which I thought a bit unkind to Gideon's memory.

Bubi also had the annoying habit of arriving for regular visits at mealtimes, knowing that we would share some of our soup or other rations with him, dividing them three ways, despite the fact that there was barely enough for two. He never contributed anything of his own to the common pot. I received the short end of that arrangement but really didn't mind, since I'm sure that had the shoe been on the other foot, the result would have been the same. It's a good thing we both didn't have hungry boyfriends, however.

It wasn't long before my children picked up on the fact that I was no great friend of 'management,' which made it difficult

at times to persuade them to obey the barracks' rules. They clearly maintained a conspiratorial relationship with me in that regard. Under the circumstances, it was a stroke of genius that I hit upon the idea of producing a theatrical event based on a story that I had been reciting to the children in the evenings. I was trying to emulate and imitate Henny's home schooling programs, although I couldn't begin to compete with her seemingly endless store of theatrical, literary, poetic and concert experiences. I was, however, very well read for someone my age, so at least many of the stories were lodged in my memory, allowing me to draw upon them to flesh out my improvised lesson plans.

I attempted to follow Henny's routine closely. In the evenings after eating our meager supper, I would sit with the children and tell them stories, always encouraging them to participate. Many of these kids had been incarcerated in one form or another for two, three or four years and had no real experience with or recollection of the real world 'Out There.' They didn't lack for active imaginations, however. Mostly I specialized in reciting Nancy Drew-type children's detective and adventure stories. I would recount the story and then encourage the children to elaborate on it, to try and fit themselves into the storyline, to adapt it to their own circumstances. It was easy to get them involved, to provide them with both a semi-educational experience while at the same time encouraging a sense of escapism that took them outside and over the thick walls of the Ghetto. This process also helped to instill a sense of cohesion among the group and a certain intra-group status to some of the individual children who successfully adopted and played out various roles.

One tale which particularly engaged them was The Black Hand. It was a story patterned somewhat like that of the famous Emil and the Detective, both a story and movie (ca. 1932) about a small town boy who is sent to Berlin by his mother in order to take 100 Marks to his grandmother. On the train, a thief steals the money from the boy's pocket. Emil relentlessly pursues the bandit, with much help from a group of street urchins. They follow the bad guy in a sort of reversal of the Pied Piper story.

When the police become involved and arrest the man, they discover that he is a long-wanted bank robber. The children receive a 1,000 Mark reward for their efforts and live happily ever after.

In The Black Hand, a story that I had read in my childhood, a rich American comes to Germany to promote his new brand of cigarettes, known by their trade name, Black Hand. As was the case in Emil, a group of young street kids gets involved and begins promoting the product, much to the satisfaction of the American and the distress of an ornery policeman, who tries unsuccessfully to stop them. The story ends with the children all going to America, where they become big shots themselves in the company. Needless to say, the original storyline, as embellished in our evening discussions, accommodated a host of plots, subplots and characters. One night several of the children spontaneously suggested that “We put on a play.” The idea was an instant success.

I wrote the script, which certainly was a more fanciful production than the original story, crammed as it was with allusions to the hopes and dreams of my children (and myself too). I paid great attention to small details: for example, what it would be like to prepare for a trip to America, including the purchase of new clothes, shoes that actually matched and fit comfortably, arriving on board a great ocean liner to find deck chairs in the sun, mountains of cookies and gallons of sweet lemonade, and finally the arrival in New York, where the weather was always perfect, there was never a shortage of any kind, with soap and endless hot water flowing from faucets that were never shut off. In a word, Paradise. Meanwhile, the children worked on the ‘sets.’

We found a suitable place for our play, a large area in the L414 attic which even had benches and was used secretly, very secretly, as a makeshift synagogue on some high holy days and for special ceremonies, such as Sigi’s wedding. In order to avoid unnecessary difficulties, we obtained informal permission from the barracks’ administration to proceed with our great adventure. Even the renowned Dr. Leo Baeck became involved. He was perhaps the most highly regarded man in the entire Ghetto, having headed the most prestigious synagogue in Berlin, not to mention the national German-Jewish umbrella organization, the *Reichsvereinigung*; indeed, there were those among the Nazis who referred to him as “the Pope of the Jews.” By then he

was a member of the Council of Elders at Theresienstadt, in charge of the *Jugendfürsorge* responsible for all child care and youth activities. At his request, I met with him in his office at the Magdeburger Barracks. When I explained what we proposed to do, and why, he gave his enthusiastic support, even agreeing to be our guest of honor at the first performance.

As preparations accelerated during the six weeks of rehearsals, I, and presumably many of the children too, knew deep down that this was as close as we would ever come to realizing the dreams contained within the outlines of the script. Nonetheless, the residual fear, long a part of the Ghetto's daily fare, didn't damper anyone's enthusiasm. We spent much time rehearsing and refining our story. The children's eagerness never waned, but as the premiere of the production neared I had a pronounced attack of the jitters, something that went far beyond mere stage fright. What if the show was a flop? What if the kids didn't perform well? What if we got into trouble for undertaking the project and the children were punished by the authorities? What if? What if? What if?

In the end, I took the coward's way out. One afternoon, when the children were being particularly noisy and seemed a bit out of control, I announced, with a secret sigh of relief, that because of their bad behavior the play was off, cancelled, not to be performed, *kaputt!* I then stomped off to my *Kumbal*. Once there, however, I wept uncontrollably, berating myself for my temper tantrum. I seesawed back and forth: one moment I felt an immense sense of relief that the whole thing was over and off my back; moments later I focused on the children's disappointment and how I had selfishly cancelled their project just to calm my own nerves. I realized how badly I had behaved: it wasn't the kids; they were only trying to do their best to please me and to have some fun in the process. How could I ever go back and face them again as I had to, soon – to tuck them into bed that very night. The situation was hopeless; no matter what I did, I couldn't possibly undo the damage.

Then came the sound of shuffling little feet outside my door. "We came to say we're sorry." A small faced peaked through my half-opened door, with many others crowded behind him. They were as embarrassed by the whole situation as I was, but with a good deal less justification. They were generous and forgiving,

judging only themselves, not me. They made all sorts of pledges designed to placate me, promising anything so long as their play went on. After a long cry together, they easily persuaded me to return to the room and continue the rehearsal where we had left off. I was terribly proud of them, but not big enough to apologize as I should have done. They were much too kind, too sweet to think that I had done anything wrong. Their attitude was all the more remarkable because most of these children had survived for years with little or no loving care, in a totally disruptive and unsettled atmosphere, always hungry, stealing food from foul refuse piles, supplementing their meager diets with such delicacies as thin potato peels with dirt still clinging to them, and yet they cared enough about me and our play to find a way to set things straight. The play was only one small incident in my twenty-three months at Theresienstadt, but the children taught me much about the human spirit, bringing a youthful brightness to that dark and dreary attic. It was a rare moment indeed, the equal of my birthday celebration.

In less than a week we were ready. Our first performance was for the children of L414, with Dr. Baeck in attendance. Judging by the audience's reaction, we were a smash. Subsequent performances were held for other children, including the Czech girls from L410, many of whom spoke no German at all but who nonetheless seemed to thoroughly enjoy themselves. The play was very well received by just about everyone who had anything to do with it, but after a half dozen performance we had to strike the set and return to our normal lives, 'normal' in Theresienstadt's terms that is. Within months, most of those children would be gone, never to be seen by me again. With a single exception – a little boy who was adopted by a family in Boston after the war – I don't know to a certainty whether any of them survived. I am both gladdened and haunted by their memories, hoping that they made it, thinking that they didn't. Such is the recollection of a survivor — so many faces, so few names.

As the play ended, we had five long months to endure, and still did not know whether we would live to see the dawn. Despite the caregivers' best efforts to keep up appearances, there was a notable lack of optimism among the adults in the Ghetto. As it turned out, with good reason.

Chapter Seven

Endgame

In early 1945, the Ghetto's population began to increase. First came additional thousands of Jews from Hungary and Slovakia. Then from throughout the Old Reich came more thousands of *Mischlinge* and Jewish partners from mixed marriages, those who had been spared deportation until now. With these transports came more children, so L414 began to fill up again. Although often depressed and weary, I felt needed and useful. I was now nearly 20 and a bona fide member of the Ghetto's administrative establishment.

On February 1, 1945, word of a tantalizing offer began to spread through the Ghetto. It was a call for volunteers for a transport to Switzerland! The *Bonkes* machine immediately became frantic: "It's a trick, the SS is simply looking for an easy way to kill more Jews before the Russians arrive!" "Not so. We're being used to ransom a high German general who was captured by the Americans." "Don't be silly. The SS is trying to curry favor with the Western Allies in order to protect themselves from the Russians, who are killing every Nazi they get their hands on." As it turned out, this last rumor did have some substance to it.

Even in the face of relentless fear regarding the fate of those who'd "gone East," there remained enough hope, coupled with despair over deteriorating conditions in the Ghetto, especially the pressing lack of food that was now worse than ever, to convince two thousand inmates to swallow their customary caution and volunteer. They were somewhat reassured by *Kommandant* Rahm and the SS administration, who took pains to make it clear that no one would be made to leave, that for the first time in our collective memory inclusion in a transport was entirely voluntary. Once the initial list was prepared, the SS pared it down by excluding all intellectuals, prominents, and those whose next-of-kin or other close relatives had already been sent East, hoping to cull likely troublemakers from the group. The final list was comprised mostly of the elderly, although forty-eight children were also included. The group contained a disproportionately large number of Dutch Jews, perhaps because they had spent less time in the Ghetto than most of us and were not quite so wary of the Nazis' penchant for duplicity.

The transport departed the afternoon of February 5. Its 1,210 passengers were clad in the best clothes that could be found for them. I later learned that as soon as the train left Theresienstadt, the accompanying German guards began distributing food and medicine. The passengers' anxiety was further calmed when the train continued on through southern Germany, rather than turning East. On February 7, 1945, the train crossed into Switzerland, its passengers safe for the first time in years.

History reveals that this singular event was the result of Reichsführer-SS Henrich Himmler's eleventh hour decision to allow the Union of Orthodox Rabbis of the United States and Canada, and its adjunct organization, the Vaad Harsalah, to ransom Jews still alive in the KZ system. After considerable dicker-ing, Himmler agreed to accept one million American dollars in exchange for twelve hundred Jews from Theresienstadt. The funds were contributed by the American and Canadian Jewish committees and transmitted through the U.S. State Department's newly formed War Refugee Board via the American legation in Bern, Switzerland. There were plans to ransom more Jews, but in March, when Hitler learned of the initial transport and plans for future ones, he absolutely forbade Himmler to take another step. Thus, other than the release of certain Danish Jews in mid-April, no further Theresienstadt inmates managed to escape the final dismal months of the Ghetto's grim existence.

Neither Mother nor I were tempted to volunteer for the Swiss transport. I was too wrapped up in my work, too attached to 'my' children. I also was too obsessed by the earlier forlorn spectacle of Sigi, Henny and the others leaving for the East while I remained behind. Having survived our confrontation with Möhs, Mother was content to wait out the war in the Ghetto, relying on her earlier good fortune to see her through. We both were reluctant to press our luck any further.

Mother continued to work for the *Ärztelkammer*, a branch of the Health Services Administration. We continued to slowly drift apart. With the departure of Father and Paul, our family unit was hopelessly fractured. In other domestic situations, the result might have been different, as surviving family members turned to each other for support. In our case, or at least mine, the effect was to look elsewhere for comfort or to do without it. In some inexplicable way, much of my anger at my plight was

focused on Mother, driving a further invisible wedge between us. I blamed my parents for the fix we found ourselves in when our time ran out in Germany: Couldn't they have gotten us out, like Aunt Anna and Uncle Eduard and their families who, as I supposed, were at that point comfortably residing in America? Couldn't we have escaped the misery of this filthy, degrading place? I readily acknowledged that Mother had saved my life by confronting Möhs, but I wasn't even sure that I could forgive her for that, let alone thank her. My feelings, always ambivalent where my family was concerned, now were suffused by the haunting regrets of a survivor's guilt, which would forever cast its long shadow across my path. In the end, I turned inward and away, again leaving my mother behind, just as I had left her in the attic of the Hamburger Barracks more than a year before when I moved into L414 with Henny and the children, people who became my true, adopted family. Now they too were gone. Even with all my responsibilities, I was lonely, depressed and deeply angry.

In January and February, the Ghetto was rife with *Bonkes* rumors about liberation, the end of the war, the Russians advancing from the East to rescue us. I paid scant attention to them, preferring to concentrate on caring for my children, keeping them and me as far from the war as possible. It was a bitter, piercingly cold winter in Europe, one of the worst of the century. We had precious little fuel with which to warm ourselves. Most areas had small, pot-bellied stoves, with their exhaust pipes poking through holes in the windows. But we were often out of coal and had to burn anything that we could scavenge from around the Ghetto. From time to time, I organized the older girls from Henny's room into hunting parties; we would spread out in pairs across the Ghetto in the early evening, looking for anything that could be used as fuel. Scrap wood became a luxury item. Everyone was cold. It was especially hard on the youngest ones, the more so because all of us were desperately hungry, exhausted, and clad in ill-fitting, inadequate clothes. Out of practicality if not outright desperation, we now squeezed two children into each single bunk and three into each double. They then got the benefit of shared body warmth. We also arranged the bedding, mostly relatively light blankets, so that it overlapped, doing double duty for more than one sleepy child. The prized positions, the middle in a trio, went to the frailest

children, who got the greatest shared benefit. It was imperfect, but it helped, at least a little.

On some nights, our *Kumbal*, without any independent source of heat, was literally freezing, our water bucket frozen over an inch thick in the morning. Every day I blessed *Grossvater* and *Grossmutter* for my heavy old-new sweater with its high neck and long sleeves. I had scrounged a frayed pair of dark blue velvet evening gloves which reached nearly to my elbows, and an old, much-patched pair of thin brown mittens. The gloves went on first, followed by the mittens. Then I would yank the sweater's jumbo sleeves over the two pairs of gloves and down to the palms of my hands. Irma would securely tie them in place with a piece of string, my blue velvet thumbs sticking out above the string through two holes in the mittens where the thumbs had worn out and two small slits in the sweater, strategically placed there for that purpose, made like large buttonholes. As often as not, I'd pull up the neck of the sweater and tuck my chin inside the warm wool. We also cut a thin strip from our dirty grey-green blanket-rug and then cut that band in half, giving each of us a two-foot long blanket-scarf of sorts to wrap around our necks and tuck down inside our outer layer of clothing. It was a truly bizarre outfit, but it kept my discomfort to a minimum. I wasn't warm, but I wasn't freezing either. Our liberators may have been just over the horizon, but in the winter of 1944–1945 that warm glow of expectation barely penetrated the bleak leaden skies above Ghetto Theresienstadt.

Just after the Swiss transport left, another project began that was of deadly danger to us all. The *Bonkes* had it that two new construction projects were to be initiated, the building of a large space suitable for storing vegetables within the casements of the fortress, and the creation outside its walls of a new poultry farm and duck pond. When the inmates learned the specifics of the plans for these two undertakings, including the installation of airtight doors for the interior storage facility and an eighteen foot high wall, topped with barbed wire and broken glass to 'protect' the poultry farm, we rapidly concluded that these were being prepared to bring mass killing directly to Theresienstadt. In the end, the Ghetto's engineers who ran the Technical Department and the inmates who worked for them refused to continue on the projects. Fearing a mass revolt, especially after the abortive

uprisings at Auschwitz and Treblinka (which, of course, we knew nothing about), the SS finally backed down, an unlikely and life-saving victory for the inmates.

Again I heard the *Bonkes*, but didn't pay much attention. Just another set of preposterous rumors. In retrospect, however, it is clear that for once the *Bonkes'* concerns were justified. After liberation, we discovered that the SS had planned to exterminate the entire inmate population, using both poison gas and flame throwers. Eichmann apparently was dissuaded from pursuing this plan after the Soviets discovered the gas chambers and crematoria at Lublin-Majdanek, and the Nazis were confronted with the resulting worldwide outrage which stemmed from Pravda's unrelenting publicity of those atrocities. At the last moment, Theresienstadt was spared what otherwise surely would have been ghastly on-site mass murders.

One welcome change which gradually seeped into our life was a more relaxed camp discipline. Ever since the 1944 'beautification project,' coupled with the massive thinning of the Ghetto's inmate population in the fall, there was more space available for us and marginally better living conditions. Putting aside cold and hunger, the children had a somewhat easier time. Many of those who previously had been made to work, running errands and the like, were now exempted from such chores. There were some open areas for them to play in, spaces previously closed to all inmates. And the transports had miraculously stopped. We didn't know it then, of course, but the extermination camps in the East were shutting down, the gas chambers and crematoria being destroyed in a futile attempt by the Nazis to hide the tangible results of the *Endlösung* and the murders of millions of its victims. Nor did we suspect that the mournful human residue of the eastern KZs was headed at that very moment for our doorstep.

By late February, Irma and I, continuously hungry, were desperate for food, since by then the Germans weren't overly concerned about Jews in the 'Model Ghetto' getting enough to eat. In March and April, several thousand more Hungarian and Slovak Jews arrived, increasing the Ghetto population further; we had minimal rations for only half our increased number. Irma was driven to take an awful chance. She scribbled a desperate note to

her Christian mother in Prague, begging her to send food. As she walked through the Ghetto, she spotted a friendly Czech gendarme, wrapped the note around a stone, and rolled the rock and attached message to him, hoping for the best. Even under the somewhat relaxed conditions that prevailed, any attempt to send unauthorized communications to the outside was punishable by confinement to the Little Fortress, tantamount to a death sentence. She was very, very lucky that day. Not long after, she received three packages from her mother, which she generously shared with me and the ever-present Bubi. They were life-savers.

Throughout the winter, we did what we could to keep ourselves alive. I recall walking with Irma along L500, wandering in a forbidden area after curfew hours scrounging for scraps of wood or other combustibles, a measure of our reckless despair. L500 was strictly forbidden to inmate foot traffic, but many buildings and barracks that housed inmates had rear windows facing this street. As we walked past one barracks, we saw that some fortunate inmate has used his second story sill as a food storage space, never expecting anyone to see it from the street below. There sat all kinds of incredible delicacies in the cold night air, including a large piece of bologna the size of a half a grapefruit. The food cache must have been the contents of a parcel from outside that had somehow made it through. We instantly decided that anyone who had access to such treasures and was foolish enough to leave them sitting out in the open didn't deserve to keep them. With a quick boost from Irma, I climbed up and snatched the whole chunk of meat. We rushed back to L414, wolfed it down and went to bed with our stomachs full that night. Heaven!

In early February, I made friends with one of the older German women from Mainz who worked in the building where confiscated clothing was sorted and cleaned before being shipped back to Germany. There wasn't much left. Then a sudden surge of 'supplies' materialized with the arrival of the Ghetto's latecomers, the *Mischlinge* and the Jewish partners of mixed marriages from the Greater Reich. Hannah was thin and appeared frail, but she was as tough as nails. We tried to inveigle her into giving us some of the surplus clothing that had been requisitioned from the newest arrivals. She wasn't unsympathetic, but she wanted something of genuine value in return, not one but two

working hotplates with which she could stave off the cold in her own little *Kumbal* (she also had a solid electrical connection available that would support such an arrangement). In the end, it proved a relatively straight-forward business arrangement. We purloined a double-burner hotplate from the Magdeburger, with the complicity of my mother who knew where it had been hidden by the family of one of the major Ghetto factionaries prior to re-deportation in late October. It had been disassembled and concealed behind a false wall in one of the attic rooms. For once Bubi came through for us. He scrounged the necessary tools, found a length of sturdy electrical cord somewhere which he 'liberated' for that purpose, and got the contraption up and operating, all in about four hours. Where he found the nuts and bolts and wire we didn't ask. Nor did he seek any praise or compensation. All of those shared rations came back to help us in that single moment. We even scrounged a bit of communal food and I threw in my much prized but never used riding boots as a kind of bonus for Hannah. We made the trade just after 'dinner' one night: Hannah got her double-hotplate (which she carefully tested as soon as it was presented to her), a bit of bread, a tiny container of sugar, plus my boots, and we each got two small bales of clothing, ten in all. Bubi, Irma, two of the oldest girls from Henny's old room and I made the exchange on a particularly cold and blustery night, when we knew there'd be little likelihood of detection as we hustled between barracks just before lights out.

It was a strange variety that we brought back to L414: a few pairs of children's shoes, a large number of socks and warm woolen stockings for the older girls, underwear, especially tops for many of the children, a much prized pair or two of mittens for the young girls, and a man's light cotton vest, which was awarded to me as the leader of the expedition. Mother got a quite nice sweater-vest too. Camp discipline was so lax by then that there wasn't much chance of getting caught as long as we were careful and kept our mouths shut. But we only attempted it once. The penalty for 'looting' was a trip to the Little Fortress. Still, it was worth the effort: many of our kids survived bitter cold wearing three and four pairs of underclothes under their shabby outer attire. Layering that way tended to trap and conserve precious body heat.

In early March, the Ghetto was shaken by yet another unforeseen development, the arrival of what came to be known as the 'death march survivors.' In December and January, the SS began the brutal process of moving masses of prisoners from the massive *Lager* system of the East to concentration camps in the Greater Reich, mainly in Germany proper, such as Buchenwald and Bergen-Belsen, Sachsenhausen and Ravensbrück. Inevitably, however, some of these tormented souls ended up at Theresienstadt, since the Ghetto was in the direct line of march from Poland to eastern and southern Germany. During March and April, some arrived in open cattle cars and trucks. There were many, many others on foot, having marched hundreds of miles in unrelenting bitter cold, lacking both food and proper clothing. By the time they reached us, the survivors were less than human in appearance – stinking, filthy, and starving, their clothes in tatters, with little will to live, and their exposed skin so badly and repeatedly frozen that they looked like severe burn victims. Many were suffering from terrible illnesses, particularly typhus, in addition to the multiple effects of long-term starvation and exhaustion. Some of those in the open trucks and cattle cars were dead on arrival, standing or sitting stiffly in place, their sightless eyes frozen open. Once they began to arrive, it didn't take long for us to learn all we needed to know about the fate of our families and friends who had been sent East. It was even worse than we had imagined.

As the first groups straggled into Terezín, they were brought into the Ghetto and housed in separate rooms in one of the larger barracks, one which had been cleared of its other residents. We old-timers were in shock. We now knew what became of the *Abtransporte*. These barely human remnants were the lucky ones. As the trickle swelled to a stream, then to a flood (a number which the record books say eventually exceeded 15,000 at Theresienstadt alone), it was soon evident that they couldn't be housed within the Ghetto proper for fear of spreading the dreaded typhus. Accordingly, a sort of camp-within-a-camp was established on the Bastei, an elevated plateau atop the ramparts, a bit outside the original Ghetto confines, but still within the fortress. Volunteers from the Ghetto administration cared for these refuges as best they could, trying to house, clothe and feed them. There was practically no medicine to fight their multiple

diseases, so many who stumbled into the Ghetto succumbed within days, sometimes within hours. I have no idea how many of the thousands of death march *Muselmänner*, as they were known, the 'near-dead,' survived at the Ghetto. Not many. Several of their caregivers succumbed also, victims of the disease which the death marchers carried with them.

As their numbers grew, the presence of the *Muselmänner* began to unnerve the established residents of the Ghetto. The new arrivals weren't interested in anything but food, food, and more food. Even before their appearance we had experienced a dramatic reduction in rations; now new means had to be found to take care of our new, half-dead inmates. I recall a day when one of my girls, age ten or eleven, was carrying her bowl of soup across the yard. One *Muselmann* reached out as she walked by and put his skeletal hand into the bowl, fishing for a sliver of carrot or potato. She shrieked, dropped her bowl, and ran away as fast as she could, frightened out of her wits. The *Muselmann* abruptly fell to his knees and began licking the ground before the soup became lost to the frozen dirt.

In retrospect, there was little difference between the *Muselmänner* and the pathetic containers of ashes which we had dumped into the river. There was nothing human about their appearance, no life inside. For most, hope was long extinguished. There wasn't much to be done for them, except to make them comfortable and allow them to die in relative peace. As their bodies accumulated within the Ghetto, we caregivers found ourselves wandering through an endless morgue, looking for the remains of loved ones, almost praying that we wouldn't find them.

I volunteered to help feed the new arrivals, hoping that I might find someone who knew what had happened to Father and Paul, perhaps even finding them among the returned, a thin bit of hope still flourishing in the arid wastes of my inmate mentality. I never discovered a trace of them among the survivors. We did stumble across Rena Alder, however, who somehow had managed to survive Auschwitz. She was in terrible condition, but we took care of her as one of our own. We were even able to smuggle her away from the others and visit with her for a brief time in a small room in one of the barracks. It was then that I found out about Henny's fate. I was engulfed by sadness. When it became clear to me that Rena had kept her distance from

Henny during the Birkenau selection, and remembering that it was Rena who had stolen my precious stockings that first night in Henny's room, I became irrationally angry with her. I don't know what I expected: my stockings back, perhaps, or her apology for surviving when Henny had chosen to die. I was so desolate I couldn't think straight.

Rena also told me about the end of another friend, Lotte Kahn from Wiesbaden, who in 1937 had been shipped as a laborer to work in Berlin. She and her entire group of young workers from the Siemen's project were deported to Auschwitz. She and Rena met there after Rena's arrival in October 1944. When Lotte told Rena she was from Wiesbaden, Rena mentioned my name and they realized that they knew someone in common. As the winter wore on Lotte finally gave in, one day ending her misery by embracing one of the electrified fences which ringed her personal hell. I would later learn that her younger brother, Leo, who had escaped to Holland in an early *Kindertransport*, had been recaptured by the Gestapo. He too perished at Auschwitz. The losses, my losses, were mounting . . . mounting . . .

One evening I was working behind a table on the Bastei with a freshly arrived trainload of death marchers, ladling out thin soup from a large kettle. The men in front of me carried a horrible smell, the stench of death, covered as they were by running sores and their own excrement. Many of them were barely alive, scarcely human, "living hunger," to borrow an apt description later coined by Primo Levi. Suddenly, the entire crowd rushed the food table. We and the food must have appeared to them as some kind of apparition. I was unhurt but they scared me so badly that, try as I might, I could never bring myself to volunteer again. Their appearance left me with recurring nightmares about what might have happened to my father and brother, wondering whether they were 'alive' in the condition of these poor souls, almost hoping they were not.

At about that time, the SS burned all the Gestapo's central files which had been stored in the Sudeten Barracks. For days, pieces of ash and small bits of paper drifted down over the camp, the bonfires burning continuously. How many thousands of broken lives were described in those specks of burned records, whose personal stories and suffering floated by on the tiny bits of ash which settled everywhere in the Ghetto?

Early April also brought another visit from the International Red Cross, preparatory to the IRC taking over operation of the Ghetto. Again, it appeared that we passed with flying colors, although absent much of the hypocritical, murderous duplicity of the previous summer. The SS simply didn't have the means to pretend that the 'Model Ghetto' was any more than what it was, a hellhole rapidly filling with human refuse who had escaped even worse places in the East. On April 10, a few days before the IRC visit, Adolf Eichmann visited his Theresienstadt office for the last time. It was then that he was alleged to have made the observation, "I shall gladly jump into the pit knowing that in the same pit are five million enemies of the Reich." In Jerusalem at his trial in 1961, there was considerable argument as to whether he said "enemies" or "Jews."

The sight of war planes and sound of air raids was also a new phenomenon. The alarm sirens weren't for the benefit of the prisoners, but to alert our guards. As during our days in Wiesbaden, there were no shelters for Jews. For all I knew, the only bunkers available for that purpose were the beating cellars in the *Kommandantur*. We didn't much care where the bombs fell, since there was nothing around us that we didn't hate and despise, including our own lives. Now we could only hope for a successful outcome to the raids, the destruction of the Ghetto perhaps, taking our accursed tormentors and us with it, or the demolition of the surrounding Czech countryside, filled with people who we perceived to be Nazi collaborators, beneficiaries of our forced labor, supporters of our tormentors. A pox on all their houses; if we were going to die with them, so be it.

When the planes appeared and our guards ducked for cover, we would sit in the outside arcades of our barracks and wave to the pilots, all far too high to see us, not knowing whether they were friend or foe, whether they would drop their bombs on us or not. We were testing the waters of freedom for the first time, thinking that, finally, "this must be it." How different was our reaction to the sight of Allied bombers from that of our fellow citizens of the Reich, many of whom to this day complain of the havoc which fell from the skies as the British and Americans destroyed one German city after another. "Hooray," I thought, "Kill them, kill them all."

On May 3, 1945, a senior representative of the International Red Cross, Paul Durant, took over administration of the Ghetto

and the Little Fortress. Two days later the last of the SS garrison retreated from Theresienstadt. On May 8, Red Army troops marched past Terzín on their way to Prague, officially 'liberating' KZ-Ghetto Theresienstadt. Most of the Soviet troops pushed on, but a scattering of officers and their men remained behind.

The first night was exciting, but frightening too. I looked everywhere for Irma, but she was nowhere to be found. I was concerned about the children so I instructed them to stay inside L414, where they would at least be protected by its sturdy walls if not by its full cadre of caregivers. I thought of my mother, but didn't want to share the moment with her. As in those strained moments after the departure of the train carrying Father and Paul East, I couldn't be her confidant. Despite our unity of purpose in confronting Möhs, or perhaps because of it, I had severed my ties with her. I wasn't close to the remaining L414 caregivers either and didn't want anything to do with Frau Klinke or Meyer. So I ventured out into the street by myself, looking for a stranger with whom to share my first night of freedom. On that night, as on my first in the Ghetto, I was alone.

We had no instructions; I didn't even know if it was forbidden to leave the building. As I looked up and down the street, there wasn't an SS uniform, Czech Gendarme or Ghetto policeman in sight. The street was teeming with prisoners shouting, yelling, and embracing one another. Most were Czechs. As always, I was an outsider, but as opposed to that first night in the Hamburger attic, trying desperately to get directions to the toilet, I did understand the language and was accepted as an adopted member of the Czech inmate community. I didn't have Irma with me to validate my identity, but I was sufficiently sure of myself to join the throng. Little by little, the younger, more vigorous Czech cadre detached themselves from the remaining inmates.

Arm in arm, in groups of four or five abreast, we marched along the streets, ignoring barricades which marked the Verboten areas. There was no wild hysteria, just a palpable sense of relief. Soon, the yelling and chatter gave way to song. I didn't know the lyrics, mostly in Czech, Hebrew or Russian, but I sang along anyway. They liked me and I liked them; we were in this together; we had survived together. The rancor, the disputes, the residual ill will would come later. That first night it was one for all and all for one. Shoulder to shoulder, we stopped ever so

often to dance the horah with out-stretched arms touching one another, as if in mutual support. It went on for hours. We quite literally reclaimed the streets, but none of us even thought about stepping outside the Ghetto itself. Those imposing boundaries remained to be confronted.

It was a moment of joy, mixed with relief, sorrow and regret. There also was a vague uneasiness as we began to consider what we would do now. We knew that we had made it, but after all those years of persecution, humiliation and imprisonment, no one knew what freedom would mean or where it would take us. We had little solid news, although the *Bonkes* machine was running in high gear. We did know that the world of our past lay in ruins. With the joy and relief also came a liberal dose of anxiety and confusion.

Irma did not come home to our *Kumbal* that night, but I was neither surprised nor worried. I correctly assumed that she had voted with her feet, leaving the Ghetto immediately to join the Soviets, looking for action. For her, the Ghetto, the years of imprisonment, past alliances and friendships, Gideon Klein, Bubi, me, instantly all were a thing of the past as the Red Army troops marched by Terezín. She was now in Prague, participating in the fighting, reclaiming her Czech citizenship, loyalty, and birth-right. As she marched towards Prague she had taken her accumulated experience of the past three years and dumped it next to the scrap heaps of abandoned and destroyed German weapons and equipment she passed en route. Instinctively, I knew what was happening, long before it was confirmed by Irma. How I envied her. That morning, in the cold light of day, I took over the care of her children as well as my own. It was all very matter-of-fact, totally accepted by the kids, all of whom knew me anyway. I simply told them "Irma is not here right now," and let it go at that. No one thought to ask where she might be. "Fighting the war," I would have told them.

That same morning as I stood in the bread line, I rather nonchalantly collected Irma's ration. This was not unusual, since roommates frequently shared their food communal style. Back at my *Kumbal*, I eagerly ate both rations. She wasn't there, I was starving. A few days later, when bread was again being distributed, I casually tried the same gambit. Frau Klinke was outraged. By then no one had seen Irma for several days. They'd also noticed

that I had taken over the care of her charges. They didn't express concern or appreciation that I was doing double duty, but Frau Klinke objected to my pretense that Irma, not I, would be eating the extra portion. Blushing with embarrassment, I lamely explained that I thought Irma was staying with Bubi, but everyone knew I was lying. Frankly, I couldn't understand Frau Klinke's reaction. There was nothing unusual going on here. Like every day spent in the Ghetto, I was beyond hunger. Our freedom may have been at hand, but I certainly wasn't beyond claiming someone's rations. Freedom was fine, but you couldn't eat it.

Needless to say, Irma saw the Ghetto differently than I did. She was a Czech, it was her country that was being liberated by the Soviets. She wanted out and she wanted to help. Later, she proudly showed me the street in Prague where she had helped other young freedom fighters heap cobblestones to hamper the movement of German vehicles. For the moment, however, I remained trapped in the Ghetto, both by circumstances and my sense of responsibility to my children.

Within a day or two, a Soviet major was placed in charge of our barracks and a neighboring building, supervising Frau Klinke, Frau Meyer and other administrators. A new Sigi, but wearing a Soviet uniform. How bizarre! He spoke neither Czech nor German, but his body language was fluent and his spirit gentle. We could have done much worse.

We now received official letters from the Magdeburger Administrative offices, urging us to stay on the job and take care of our charges, at least until arrangements could be made to transport them out of the Ghetto, a task which would take several months in the chaos that ensued at the end of the war. While there were a few Russian, Swedish and other foreign supervisors and Red Cross personnel in the Ghetto, there was no operational cadre of caregivers, other than us prisoners who had occupied these positions at the moment of liberation. If all the able bodied inmates had simply picked up and begun the trek home the moment that the Ghetto gates swung open, there would have been chaos inside the walls. Fortunately, many of the caregivers remained until the Ghetto was finally emptied of all its prisoners in late summer 1945.

One early evening several days later, I heard loud noises coming from one of the Czech girls' rooms downstairs. When I

arrived, I found the place crawling with Soviet soldiers, clearly intent on molesting some of our older girls. Frau Meyer protested so forcefully that they backed off. When the Soviet major arrived, he angrily promised that there would be no repetition of this incident. It didn't happen again. We heard a rumor that two of the soldiers, the ringleaders, were executed by firing squad later that night at the Little Fortress.

Theresienstadt was a changed place. Discipline was relaxed and we could pretty much do as we pleased. There were no searches, food rations increased a bit, some medicine was available where there had been none before, and the Red Cross was confirmed as being in charge of the Ghetto's day-to-day operations, under the nominal supervision of the Soviet authorities. In no time our liberators, mostly Russians, and the Czech Gendarmes had found girlfriends in the Ghetto. Street L400 became something of a lovers' lane, where young couples would stroll arm-in-arm in the evenings, parading their new-found alliances, showing off Russian and Czech uniforms where only tattered prison clothes had been seen before. It was a spectacle for all the rest of us to ogle, to contemplate. How rapidly life can change. I saw Rena Adler walking along, happily on the arm of a Czech gendarme, sporting some new clothes, having discarded some of mine that I recently had shared with her. She seemed quite happy, an entirely different person from the ghostly Death March apparition who had appeared on our doorstep just a few months before.

Several weeks later, Irma returned to see me. Always self-sufficient, she'd prospered. She now had a Russian soldier as a boyfriend, a senior NCO, and was in close touch with the Czech freedom fighters in Prague, who were trying to help newly released political prisoners. She had been assigned a handsome, fully furnished and equipped *carçonnrière*, a small apartment which had been hurriedly vacated by a female German Army functionary. She had also appropriated that woman's supply of food, clothing and other necessities. She returned to Theresienstadt to recover some of her own possessions, as well as to retrieve Gideon's manuscripts, which she had hidden in the attic next to our *Kumbal*, along with his other possessions and those of his sister. When Elisabeth returned a bit later, having survived

her further imprisonment in the East, Irma gave her Gideon's priceless manuscripts containing many now-famous compositions. To this day, Elizabeth Klein, who lives in Israel, is her late brother's principal spokesperson and the informal cultural ambassador and unofficial curator of the memory of the many martyred members of Theresienstadt's artistic community.

Having found what she came for, Irma invited me to return to Prague with her, "to see the sights" she said, as a guest in her mother's home. It took some persuading, since I would temporarily be abandoning my young charges, but I finally talked myself into the adventure, thinking it would be my only chance to see beautiful Prague. Also, it presented me with an irresistible chance to escape from within the Ghetto's walls. We had to rush to make the train, so I didn't have much time to ponder the situation. I simply sent a brief message to my mother for delivery by one of my children, and left word for the L414 administrators, saying that I would be back in day or two. Little did I know!

Irma and I strolled out of the Ghetto with only the most casual glance from the Russian soldiers on guard. The Ghetto was still under official quarantine, but no one tried to stop us. It was one of the strangest, most heady moments of my life. We walked down the road to the railroad station at Bauschowitz as if we didn't have a care in the world. Still, I furtively kept looking over my shoulder, expecting at any moment to see a Czech gendarme or SS soldier to come chasing after us.

As we walked along, past overturned trucks and other destroyed equipment abandoned by the retreating Wehrmacht, we saw a forlorn German soldier coming towards us. Irma was wearing a small, improvised Czech flag on her blouse, indicating her status as a Freedom Fighter. I tried to persuade her to remove it, but she wasn't having any of it: "He's more afraid of us than we are of him," she said, pointedly ignoring the rifle which was slung over his shoulder. Admittedly he wasn't exactly in an aggressive stance, but it wasn't possible that he was more afraid of me than I of him. I was terrified. We marched past him with heads held high, as he slithered off in the opposite direction. It was at that moment that I knew that the war was over, that truly we were free. Later I learned that Irma was carrying a confiscated German Luger hidden in her clothes. She told me with complete conviction that if the soldier had reached for his

rifle, she'd have pulled out the pistol and emptied it into him at close range. She hinted that he wouldn't be the first German she'd killed since leaving the Ghetto. I was terrified, compulsively envious, and couldn't stop shaking at the thought.

Irma and I took the train to Prague, free of charge. I knew that such things cost money; after all, we had been made to pay our own train fare from Frankfurt to the Bauschowitz station two years before, but Irma assured me that as recently liberated KZ prisoners we'd be entitled to many such amenities. She explained that this was one way in which the outside world, especially her country, wanted to express its regret at what had been done to us. Ha! And to think that I believed her!

I spent the first night sleeping on a makeshift bed on the living room floor in her tiny flat. When I awoke the next morning, I was violently ill. I had a high fever, some pink blotches on my upper torso, and was too weak to move. Irma ran out and found a Czech doctor who made the diagnosis of scarlet fever, no doubt the legacy of my contact with the *Muselmänner*. He called an ambulance and arranged to admit me to the already grossly overcrowded Bulkowka Hospital.

As the battered, old ambulance clattered along the cobblestone streets of the ancient city, its bells ringing and lights blinking feebly, I was enshrouded by a horrible thought: I was so contaminated by the bleak atmosphere at Theresienstadt that I could not survive in the fresh air of freedom. For me, at least, liberation in any dose was doomed to failure, indeed might be fatal. I needed to return as quickly as possible to the Ghetto in order to get well. I struggled to get up, but was held firmly in place by the leather straps that bound me to my stretcher as we bounced along past barricades and over shell craters.

I was delirious, of course. I would remain in hospital for the next eight weeks, one of hundreds who survived while thousands more perished there in the wreckage of the summer of 1945. In early August, I returned to Theresienstadt to be reunited with my mother, who was moving heaven and earth to secure my release, whether sick or healthy. We made our way back to Wiesbaden together. Aside from several dozen members of mixed marriages and various *Mischlinge*, we were two of only four of the city's former assimilated German-Jewish community who made it back. A fifth appeared about a year later.

Even as this is written, I have never completely escaped from KZ-Ghetto Theresienstadt, which has become the hometown of my memory and my emotions. I left far too much behind there to think that I ever escaped, that I was truly liberated. It isn't exactly a prison that I've carried with me for the remainder of my long life, but rather a frame of reference against which everything else, good or bad, happy or sad, safe or perilous is measured. Theresienstadt became my metaphysical rule of thumb, against which all else is calculated. In her marvelous trilogy, Auschwitz and After, one of Charlotte Delbo's fellow survivors observes in quiet desperation, years after returning to France, "I died at Auschwitz and no one knows it." I didn't die at Theresienstadt, but in some compelling way it became my permanent domicile. A part of me, my youth, my past, still resides in that little *Kumbal* in the attic of Barracks L414, kept company by the ghosts of loss. There, more than anyplace, I am both comforted and comfortable. I am not afraid of my memories; indeed, I embrace them. They are the reality that is me.

Aftermath

Nearly everything following Charlotte's return to Wiesbaden in August 1945 was anti-climatic to the twenty-year prologue that preceded it. Yet the real pain of rejection was still to come. As Charlotte observed to me in the spring of 1996:

"As I arrived back in my hometown . . . I was strangely, disconcertingly alone. Of course I wasn't attached to my mother, or even under her care or supervision. I'd been on my own far too long for that. But I was overwhelmed by our return, lonely and desolate. Despite the fact that I'd spent seventeen of my twenty years in Wiesbaden, as we drove into town the feeling was as unnerving as had been our arrival at Terezín: I didn't know what to expect, I wasn't sure what was expected of me, I was frightened and impossibly alone. . . .

* * *

"I realize that by the time we returned to Wiesbaden I'd already begun to disconnect from my past, perhaps from my present as well. When I'd last seen Wiesbaden I was still a child, still a German, still a Jew. Now I was none of those. Sadly . . . circumstances and my own compulsion to separate myself from my past have defined me as I remain today, a survivor. . . . I didn't want to be a German, because like the Czech prisoners at Theresienstadt who didn't much differentiate between their German oppressors and their fellow Jewish inmates who also happened to be German, I threw all Germans into the same box and refused to distinguish among them. As for Jews: all of them were victims and I was tired of being a victim. So out went the Jews, as well as the

Germans. Somehow I thought I could just be me, Charlotte Guthmann, not a German, not a Jew, just a young woman who hoped get on with her life, who wanted to leave the past behind, who only wished to be normal. Even today, that's all I want.

"I've tried in vain to recollect my thoughts as we drove into Wiesbaden that day. Justice maybe. Equity to be found beneath the rubble. Humanity. A fantasy that my friends would run into the street to greet us, to hug us, to tell us how happy they were that we were alive and how sorry they were that we'd been victimized in the first place. As to those who'd done this to us? Justice, I thought, surely there would be justice. On almost every count, I was wrong."

Although Charlotte and her mother rapidly reestablished themselves and basked in the glow of the extra attention accorded them by the American occupation troops, most of whom had a special affection for concentration camp survivors, Charlotte never grew comfortable with her circumstances. Everybody wanted something from everyone else: survivors needed shelter and food; displaced German citizens needed the same; former Nazi functionaries needed people to vouch for them, and no reference was so valuable as one coming from a local Jewish survivor of the camps. It was a highly valuable, tradable commodity. Her mother, still clinging to the misbegotten notion that her husband and son would one day return, moved with an unrelenting vengeance to reclaim all the Guthmann property, beginning with the house at Bahnhofstrasse 25. Although damaged, it was restored, if not to its former glory, at least to an entirely habitable residence. Charlotte promptly found a variety of ways to be useful. Ultimately, she became an employee of the Americans, supervising an informal but formidable personnel screening/hiring service for German citizens seeking American employment. Not surprisingly, she found legitimate entrée into the American compound, including the highly desirable dining hall and Post Exchange. As at

Theresienstadt, she made a life for herself, one that in the relative terms of post-war Germany was comparatively comfortable. But she couldn't abide the sidelong looks she got from her fellow Wiesbadeners: "What's she doing back here? She's supposed to be dead. How did she survive? What has she got in store for us if she gets the chance?" were the unspoken thoughts she imagined she could hear. Unlike her mother, who was driven by an unrelenting demand for retribution, right down to the last pfennig, Charlotte lacked the emotional armor that such single-minded hatred provided.

So, within a year, on the second refugee ship departing from Bremen, she headed for America. Distant family she didn't even know, well connected cousins in Utah, made the necessary arrangements (through Lt. General Walter Bedell Smith, Eisenhower's chief-of-staff, not someone to be argued with over an emigrant visa application, nor to be denied the jeeploads of food and building supplies that he arranged one of his junior officers to regularly deliver to the Guthmann household as it was being rebuilt).

Then came the next great disappointment. When she arrived in New York, eventually to be reunited with her uncle Eduard and his family, she realized that they were embarrassed by her presence ("What's she doing here, she's supposed to be dead?"). They, uncle, aunt and cousin, had escaped through the efforts of Berthold and *Grossvater* Guthmann, now long gone with Paul, *Oma* and *Opa*. She then traveled to Philadelphia to be reunited with her Aunt Anna, her newly minted husband, Siegfried Hirsh, and her two cousins, where she received an even frostier reception. Again, they had escaped only with the active assistance and financial support of Berthold and *Grossvater*, who'd even gone to the trouble of finding and securing (literally) a Herr Hirsh as a new husband for widowed Anna and her two children. As Charlotte remembered it: on the first evening, after the reunited family sat down to dinner, Charlotte helped herself to an admittedly generous portion of butter to spread on her bread. Herr Hirsh promptly and harshly berated her seeming greediness: "What do you think you're doing Charlotte. Butter is still rationed here, has been for years." Charlotte calmly stared at him for a full thirty seconds before carefully scrapping the butter off her piece of bread and replacing it on the dish from whence it had come. "Oh, excuse me," she said, "I didn't know

that there'd been rationing here in America too. I thought that just went on in the camps, where we had nothing to ration." From such experiences, Charlotte learned to sink deeper into herself, to trust only her own instincts.

Charlotte settled in as an informal ward of extended family in Chicago, who treated her well and took good care of her. But she forever remained the outsider. Her presence likely caused less discomfort than she thought, but she was acutely aware that she was 'different.' Eventually she managed to change that. She became reacquainted with and then married a fellow Wiesbadener whom she'd known in her youth, himself a hidden half-Jew from an otherwise distinguished Rhine family. He had obtained a post-war grant to study at Northwestern. They married in the early Fifties, raised two daughters whom Charlotte deeply cherished, and were finally divorced in the early Eighties, ending a long-fractured and unhappy marriage.

During most of her married life, Charlotte lived abroad with her family. Her husband was fluent in English and worked regularly for U.S. automakers, then bent on establishing or rebuilding post-war European markets. The family lived mostly in Switzerland, France and for a time, a very unhappy time from Charlotte's perspective, in northern Germany. She and her husband assembled a practiced and impenetrable altered persona as semi-displaced Protestant German war refugees. Their Jewish background was never disclosed. Charlotte's time in KZ-Ghetto Theresienstadt was a deep, closely-held secret, even from the children. I remain uncertain even now how much detail her husband ever knew of her time in Terezín; I suspect not nearly as much as do the readers of this little book.

After the divorce, Charlotte moved permanently to Houston to be near to her much-adored younger daughter, Diane. When I first met Charlotte, she was making a thin living working as a sales clerk for Macy's, selling, as she ruefully put it, "overpriced, oversized dresses to women who could afford them but couldn't properly wear them." She eventually obtained a teaching position at Houston's College of the Mainland, where her considerable language skills could be brought to bear. Although she never did obtain her *Abitur*, her much prized high school diploma, she was well educated in the classical European tradition. Fluent in at least three languages (Czech not being one

of them; she completely lost it once she left Terezín, as my wife and I discovered to our grief during a trip to the Ghetto and Prague with her in May 1996) and very well-read, she easily could pass for the academic that she was not. She never, ever called herself “Doctor Opfermann,” but on the several occasions at various conferences and like venues when I heard her addressed that way, I never heard any correction either. She’d simply smile and ever-so-slightly nod her head in apparent acknowledgment.

In the concluding portion of the final chapter of our second draft, Charlotte and I composed the following. I believe it belongs here too:

“As I stood on that pier in New York City in June 1946, my old life came to an end and a new one began. Fifty years later, I understand that the lines between the two always have been blurred, that today I carry with me the intimate memories of those distant episodes from my youth, events that forever changed me. As I now look back over the intervening decades – marked by marriage and divorce, the births of my children, my various business, educational, social and cultural pursuits, a mélange of good things and bad, happiness and sorrow, the sweet and the bitter – off in the far distance always looms my time at Theresienstadt. It was the worst of times, and yet those twenty-three months encapsulate the best, most useful moments of my life. I suspect that within the tattered memories of many of the survivors – beyond the terror, pain, grief, mourning and guilt which inevitably attach to the Holocaust experience – are treasured moments worth remembering, instances of caring, usefulness, selfless fulfillment, of a kind of enduring love, moments which don’t exist in times of normality, only in seasons of great distress. I am reminded that I was a caregiver in a time when ‘caring’ was at a premium.”

“What is written here then, explains why, when I look back across my time to what happened to me during the Third Reich in that terrible place known as KZ-Ghetto Theresienstadt, I can say, truly and without rancor or regret: ‘It was the defining moment of my life; I wouldn’t trade it with anyone for anything.’”

Such is the crucial reality of survivorship. Those of us who have not experienced it can never hope to understand the densely cohesive intensity of that sentiment.

Epilogue

Charlotte's narrative, her tale of nearly two years as a prisoner at KZ-Ghetto Theresienstadt, is about courage, hope, will and the capacity to endure. It also involves luck, persistence, sacrifice and a primal sense of self-preservation, an animal instinct to survive, to be willing to live indefinitely at the subsistence level. Fortunately, she was born with the instinctive, intuitive ability to cope and to adapt.

Early at Theresienstadt, she recognized survival dictated that her life not be static, that she couldn't simply drag herself from day to day, night to night, 'merely' existing. She understood that hope rested in her acceptance by those in power, that young cadre of Czechs who ran the day-to-day operations of the Ghetto, especially those with the greatest influence over youth activities. So she began by using her time standing in the endless food lines to meet people and, in the process, to learn how to communicate with the Czechs. KZ-Ghetto Theresienstadt was, after all, constructed by Czechs for Czechs. The other prisoners from Germany and elsewhere in Western Europe, the 'prominents' and their reluctant entourage of dependents and hangers-on, were an afterthought. While they eventually comprised a substantial portion of the Ghetto's inmate population, most of them always remained on the fringe, powerless.

Charlotte understood that power and privilege, as they were narrowly defined in that crowded hellhole, came from within the inner circle. Two things allowed her to make the transition: first, her determination to learn at least enough of the language to be conversant, if not fluent; second, her winning personality, a capacity inherited from her father. Charlotte didn't use sharp elbows or cunning to gain entrée. Rather, she walked through the front door, using her natural charm, her willingness to work, her eagerness to be helpful. It didn't hurt that she was bright, attractive, relatively strong, pre-conditioned to dealing with harsh circumstance by the years in Wiesbaden working with her father who was in constant contact with the enemy, the local Gestapo and the others whose jobs were to harass, humiliate and impoverish the local Jews. She was stunned by the organized, institutional misery that confronted her and her family when they arrived at KZ-Ghetto Theresienstadt, but she

was already a hardened veteran of abuse. She had an extraordinary capacity for accommodation. Her mother didn't have it, her father's aptitude for it was utterly exhausted by the time he was deported, her brother's version had much more to do with temper and quick fists (based on the very little that Charlotte ever told me about Paul). If Charlotte wanted to be liked, to be accepted, then she knew how to accomplish that end. It was a gift, one that contributed mightily to her survival, not just as a Jewish victim of the Nazi racial state, or as an inmate at KZ-Ghetto Theresienstadt, but also during the sixty years that followed.

Trauma is around all of us, all the time: psychic, physical, emotional, sometimes all three. But few are condemned to experience trauma for extended periods. True, almost by definition those who fall prey often suffer from its residual effects for indefinite periods, sometime until the end of their lives. But to experience 'it,' the infliction of the trauma, to be inside a horrifying automobile accident or drowning incident that continues on and on, uninterrupted, for months or years, is the stuff of nightmares. It was also the stuff of the Holocaust for those who managed to survive. Post traumatic stress disorder is usually the consequence of involuntary trauma, everything from auto accidents, to witnessing the unintended (or at least unnecessary) death of a loved one, to becoming a victim on the battlefield when in uniform, or perhaps to be the one responsible for inflicting the traumatizing casualty. Trauma hurts, even disables, but its source isn't necessarily malign; the extended consequences aren't usually deliberate.

Not so for those who somehow lived through the victimization of genocide, of calculated, institutionalized, unmitigated, relentless brutality and loss. For those survivors there's also an added element – the disquietude, even panic of knowing that somewhere, sometime, someone intended this result. If not death, then the unrelenting residual effects of dehumanization. Think of an adult who was determinedly abused throughout childhood and adolescence, and you will have a picture that approximates the torment of a survivor of the *Sho'ah*. The effect continues, even when the cause is mitigated or removed altogether.

Then there are the accessory aspects of uncompromised regret and guilt: the sure suspicion, even the positive knowledge that for everyone in the camps who lived, someone else perished in their place, sometimes even an identifiable 'someone.'

In Charlotte's case there was the implacable certainty that had her name not been removed from those caregivers in L414 subject to re-deportation East, someone among the departed, perhaps someone she knew and cared for, perhaps even Henny, went to their death in her place. She would speak about such things only with great reluctance, usually late at night, by telephone, she in Houston connected to me in Santa Fe. Then she would inevitably try and find a way to take back such admissions against her own interest, or at least to dilute them. It hurt too much, even five decades later.

Like most survivors of sustained trauma and abuse, Charlotte was severely damaged by her experience. But she remained functional; she never to my knowledge retreated into madness or gave way to despair. (Well, perhaps once, decades after liberation, but this was little more than a fleeting exception to prove the general rule.) What she did do in order to cope, to continue life, was to swallow hard and often and to live most of the remainder of her life, from about 1950 until 1987 or 1988, in a state of self-imposed denial, a willing exile from reality. She accomplished this at the expense of her own emotions, especially her capacity to trust, which in turn implicated her ability to love. She possessed a broad emotional range also, but one tightly controlled and disciplined, seldom spontaneous or impulsive. It wasn't until her final years, from the early 1990s until her death in late 2004, that she began to breathe freely again. Even then, she maintained her firm embrace of mistrust, albeit keeping it tactfully out of sight. But with her reconnection to her past, with her determination to set the record straight, the sharing of her experiences with others, her emergence and acceptance as a natural spokesperson for the Holocaust, came a measure of relief. Her aptitude as a reliable, energetic, even vivacious storyteller of the *Sho'ah*, not so much in its historical context as framed by her personal connection with it, was extraordinary. Her first-hand introduction to inhumanity was, due to her quiet genius as a storyteller, a communicable experience, as useful as it was precious. Her power was maximized by the apparent lack of evident emotion with which she would articulate her familiarity with evil. As mentioned elsewhere, even in the most severe circumstances I never saw a suspect tear. If she did cry, it was by herself, in the middle of the night, alone, while the rest of the world slept.

I deeply regret that we never published her full autobiography. She had much of value to share with those interested in learning from her life. Her great asset was her capacity to teach not by using anything resembling formal lesson plans, but rather to tell stories, true ones, often at her own expense. Teachers of that sort are born, not made. In her final years, she did much teaching. It was her last and final gift to herself, and to Henny and Sigi, her own teachers from whom she learned so much.

Finally, there is the disconcerting paradox of her time at KZ-Ghetto Theresienstadt, those twenty-three months from 10 June 1943 until about 25 May 1945. There is no question that it forever remained the pinnacle experience of her long lifetime. The first four months or so, living in the Hamburger attic, were horrible and horrifying, although I don't believe that she ever came close to succumbing to the terror and misery that surrounded her. Life in L414, from the time she was released from the Ghetto hospital and taken into Henny's room in mid-November 1943 until the October 1944 re-deportations that cost her just about everyone in the Ghetto whom she loved and admired, were by her own repeated admission the happiest, most fulfilling moments of her life.

It was a time when, thanks to the intervention of the Fleischers, she was placed in an environment in which she was entirely free to make her own way. It was more than fortuitous that she finally came to rest in Henny's protected domain; but even elsewhere within that building I am convinced that she would have found what eluded her most of her life, real need and support and, yes, love. It ran in both directions: she to Henny, Sigi and the children, them back to her. It was a complex formula, but at its heart were trust and unqualified caring; in the case of Henny, unconditional love and acceptance too. Charlotte never, ever, even when she finally reached that point of self-accommodation with herself, when she knew better, quite forgave herself for the loss of Henny. She certainly never stopped loving her and cherishing her memory, and that of Sigi and her fellow caregivers.

The quality of her inmate life following November 1944 until liberation in May 1945 was less comforting than what had preceded it. Yes, she was her own person, now charged with the welfare of at least 35 or 40 young children and a handful of older

adolescents. But the magical spell of wellbeing was broken when the last *Abtransport* left for Auschwitz-Birkenau in late October 1944. She was alone again. As congenial as was her relationship with Irma, as much as she did for 'her' children, L414 changed from 'home' to being a comfortable refuge, the kindness, caring and camaraderie of her earlier days lost in the flame, smoke and ash of Birkenau, its former pleasant warmth smothered by the mounting regrets that surrounded her for most of the remainder of her life. I am convinced that she loved the ones she lost there as much as she loved her own flesh and blood, including her father and her own two daughters, who were the other great treasures of her life.

Her lingering attachment to Theresienstadt was reinforced by the persistent rejection that followed her 'liberation,' first in Wiesbaden, then New York and Philadelphia, and finally in America at large. As she once admitted to me, sitting over a cup of tea in my study, 'It hurt like Hell' to discover that no one cared. It was only in the aftermath of the war that the hopeful spirit that had sustained her through her long travail deserted her. It was only then that she turned her back on her memories of truth and began to live a self-imposed second life, one essentially built around a lie.

At her request, her remains now rest in the Opfermann gravesite in Mainz. I am not in the least surprised that she wished to return to Germany and I am not taken aback that she chose not to be buried next to her mother and the monuments to her long lost father and brother in Wiesbaden. The fact is that if her spirit resides anywhere, it is back at KZ-Ghetto Theresienstadt, either among the willows by the river Eger or somewhere in the vicinity of L414. She never really left the place of her eternal torment and greatest joy. If Charlotte ever had a real home, it can be found somewhere inside the thick walls of Terezín. If she never left, how could she not be there now? Home is where the heart is, and Charlotte's heart forever remained in L414 and among the teeming streets of her memories of the Ghetto.

Wherever she may be, I hope that she has found peace and a comfortable place for herself, somewhere near the loved ones who preceded her and who will one day follow. The memories of the victims of atrocity, especially of genocide and in particular the *Sho'ah*, deserve to combine and mingle with those of

their fellows, to find their own quiet ground upon which to sort out the inexplicable that they endured. Among them all, those victims who also were caregivers for the sick, infirm, elderly and especially the young deserve a singular place. They actively fought the Beast; even if in the end they didn't win the fight, they surely did not lose it either.

A Personal Postscript

One of the most chilling sentiments from the Holocaust was made forever notorious by famed Nazi-hunter Simon Wiesenthal in his much acclaimed book, *The Murderers Among Us*. It is cited by numerous survivors elsewhere and it is the keynote quote in the Preface to Primo Levi's final book, his ultimate summing up of the *Sho'ah*, *The Drowned and the Saved*. The words purportedly come from a group of SS soldiers, taunting prisoners at Auschwitz late in the war:

However this war may end, we have won the war against you; none of you will be left to bear witness, but even if someone were [sic] to survive, the world would not believe him. There will perhaps be suspicions, discussions, research by historians, but there will be no certainties, because we will destroy the evidence with you. And even if some proof should remain and some of you survive, people will say that that events you describe are too monstrous to be believed; they will say that they are the exaggerations of Allied propaganda and will believe us, who will deny everything, not you. We will be the ones to dictate the history of the Lagers.

It has been a privilege to join with my erstwhile friend and colleague, Charlotte Guthmann Opfermann, in helping, even in a small way, to rebut and repudiate the savage cynicism of the perpetrators. My role is only secondary, perhaps even tertiary, and my experience remains largely vicarious. But thanks to my time with Charlotte, I have my own memories of the *Sho'ah*, personal to me, as improbable as that may sound.

None of us can reasonably claim that we remain untouched by the cataclysmic evil of the *Sho'ah*. It provided a deplorable opportunity for the Nazis and their minions to expand the definition of 'atrocious' beyond any concept heretofore recognized in the annals of history. Ultimately, the Final Solution knew no limits; indeed, that was the precise source of its power. This was not

a spasm of spectacular barbarism. Rather it resulted from a reasoned confluence of decisions made by well-educated men to dispense with humanity in furtherance of their Aryan totalitarian ambitions. They invented and refined a fully functional mechanism of aberration; they found the proper time, place, methodology and targets. Due to their malevolent genius, for an extended period Goodness succumbed to the malign eccentricity of institutionalized Evil. They reshaped mankind's capacity to accept the unacceptable, even to embrace it (and perhaps in some quarters, to yearn for its return).

Cambodia, Rwanda, Darfur, among dozens of other post-war tragedies, incontrovertibly demonstrate humanity's capacity to pick up where the Nazis left off. I believe, as did Charlotte, that the impulse for Evil is ever-present. Its implacable and rapacious capacity to contend with Goodness is caught succinctly by Blaise Pascal in a mere seven words: "Evil is easy, and has infinite forms." Slogans like 'Never Again!' are absurdly inadequate to protect us. Only memory can provide us with a measure of security, slim though it may be. If we lose sight of the *Sho'ah*, we will have lost the single most pertinent benchmark by which to measure the extended capacity of Evil about which Pascal warns. If we lose sight of the Holocaust and its universal impact across our shrinking civilized world, we will be near to losing control once again. Only secure and well-tended memory can save us from ourselves.

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Santa Fe, New Mexico
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*Robert A. Warren & Charlotte Guthmann Opfermann
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