

The Layers Within Her:  
The Development of a Holocaust Survivor's Voice  
by Ashley Reichelmann

On the outskirts of Lawrenceville, in her beautifully situated home, an empty coffee cup and two half eaten cookies sit before me. As our interview is coming to a close, I realize I am out of questions. "Okay. I think that's all I have. Can you think of anything else or do you have any questions for me?" She speaks softly, yet firmly, "Well, how are you going to organize this material? Do you need to record that?" I quickly reply, "Well, I mean I will leave it running just in case something else comes up."

I have never written an ethnography before...My understanding is that it is the study of a culture but in our instance it's through the eyes of one person. So how I hope to organize it is through your development into who you are today. A lot of people are doing it on the idea of memory or religion or faith, different instances or even family relationships, but I want to take a different role...To me the story is about how you've grown into who you are today because of what happened. Because I think that my idea is as you grow, your development is like an onion: one layer on top of another, one new piece to add to the foundation (10/25).<sup>1</sup>

*Layer One: Maternal Grandmother says, "I would rather hear good news from far away than discontent from nearby."*<sup>2</sup>

That was all Margit Burger needed to hear. She needed her mother to tell her it was okay to leave Uzhorod, her hometown in Hungary. On January 26<sup>th</sup>, 1926, Margit married a young man who had long sought her: Emil Herman. At the age of ten, he told his best buddy, who was Margit's brother, that he was going to marry her someday. Although Margit was only a witty five-year-old at the time, her life quickly became

---

<sup>1</sup> All quotations cited with a numerical date are from interviews with Vera Herman Goodkin at her home in Lawrenceville, New Jersey.

<sup>2</sup> Interview. September 27, 2007.

intertwined with Emil's. The same year he realized he found his future wife, Emil left his house to live with his maternal grandparents in order to attend school and become something more than a farmer. At the age of seventeen, he excommunicated himself from his family when his mother passed away. Emil was the oldest of eight boys and, since he was already a medical student, he knew enough to realize that his mother could not carry twins at the age of thirty-seven. At twenty-eight, Emil's father no longer mattered to him because Emil was about to start his own family with Margit. By this time, Emil already had his medical license and a well-established relationship with his wife's parents.

Right after they married, the voice of Margit's mother still lingered in her mind. The newly married couple packed up and moved to Hradec Kràlovè, one of the most important and historical cities near the Karpathian Mountains in the Bohemian section of Czechoslovakia.

It was a small...very modern town. Wonderful schools. Lots of parks. Age old trees. When we went back three years ago, maybe it was almost four years ago, I went to the [Jiràskovè Sady] park that my mother kept describing [as] the park where she was wheeling me and people stood in line to take a look at her most beautiful baby. I sat at a bench with those age old trees, with tears running down my face because I saw young mothers like the one that my mother described pushing their most beautiful babies in the world (09/27).

Vera, the soon-to-be daughter of Margit and Emil, paused, almost in tears, and said, "And they didn't know what was going through my mind. It was a wonderful peaceful town and it was a very happy life" (09/27).

She is the voice I hear as I write. Hers is the story I tell.

On Friday, June 13<sup>th</sup>, 1930, Czechoslovakia was a thriving country, and Vera Herman was a thriving baby girl who knew little of the world. She describes her entrance into the world as, "I used to tell them that they took one look at me and they didn't want

another” (09/27). Vera became the only child of a close-knit upper middle class family, with a father who was a physician, mother who was his assistant, and even a nanny to care for her. She grew up quickly in a house of only adults with diverse views on life. All four of her grandparents were Jewish, and her parents raised her to be a reverent follower. Her father was a social democrat and an extremely socially conscious man. Her parents wanted her to become fluent in many languages; therefore, she was only allowed to speak Czech to her father, Hungarian to her mother, and German to the nanny. Before school every morning at 5:00 am, Vera would accompany her parents to play tennis as their ball boy. The three of them did everything together and never imagined something could ruin the idyllic life they lived.

During her childhood, Hradec Královè showed no traces of anti-Semitism. Even though she was a member of only one of the three Jewish families, she fit in with all of the other children and most of her friends were non-Jewish. One of her earliest memories is from the special treatment she received as a part of the upper middle class: luxurious clothing.

If you could afford it, you didn't have to put it together yourself, but you could go to a seamstress, go to a salon. I can remember my mother taking the fashion magazines and saying to the designer, to the seamstress, “Well I like this skirt from this and I like the top from that and I like the collar from the third one.” And they did it. But even I as little as I was, [they] had little smocks that the women made and you had to go and have fittings. So even for a little dress for me I had to have at least one fitting and that meant that you stood there as quietly as you could at that age. And there were pins you know, straight pins. So I would always look for the pins. And so, sometimes when the finished products came they forgot one or two pins. So I get this new dress and we went to a park and I could feel something sticking me and I thought, “Darn it. There is something gnarling there,” and I thought it was a pin. But it wasn't a pin; it was a wasp. And I guess by clamping down, it really encouraged the wasp to let the stinger go. And so I wasn't a happy camper and my father was so sweet. He ran down the alley. He came back and on his palm was a dead wasp. He said “I took care of it for you” (09/27).

Due to her father's prospering medical practice, Vera's family received luxuries that the poor of Czechoslovakia could not. However, Emil's work never impeded upon family time and even the not so fond memory of a wasp exemplifies the love and friendship that Vera had with her parents.

Many of her memories illustrate the privileged and happy childhood she lived. Whether riding the horse-and-buggy to her grandparents' house when they went for visits or sitting under the sun lamp eating chocolate and apples with her friends, she had opportunities that some young Jewish children did not. The memory that truly sums up her childhood is when one day her mother asked her what she wanted for her fourth birthday:

First of all, I was an only child and I was an overprotected only child because I was always sick, every Monday, Wednesday, Friday, I was sick. I had bronchitis, I had pneumonia, I had constant tonsillitis. Ohh, I was just a mess...[but] I prized my independence. So when I was four, I was asked what I wanted for my birthday, and I said I wanted to go down to the park by myself...so she [my mother] said, "Yeah, go to the park." And her friends at first came up and asked "What'd you get her for her birthday?" So she would draw the drapes open and she said, "All year long, every day she gets what she wants, and this is what she wanted for her birthday" (9/27).

Even as a child, Vera valued her will power and the freedom her parents offered. She had many adventures on her own, but none would prepare her for the journey of independence that lay before her.

One exhibition of her independence was at school. In Czechoslovakia, children went to school six days a week and had off on the Christian Sabbath. But since Vera was Jewish, her Sabbath was Saturday, a school day. To celebrate the Sabbath, her mother would dress her up in her elegant whites with ever so obvious matching white stockings, which any child, including Vera, hated:

So I went to school on the Sabbath and kids would look at me and they would say, “Boy, you come from a strange house. You know, you wear your Sunday clothes on a Saturday.” But there was no malice; they were just a little confused. “Can’t you tell what day of the week it is?” (9/27).

A sign of independence, yet also a sign of acknowledging differences. Here began the time when Vera stood out, not for something good, but for something that others acknowledged as bad.

*Growth of Voice: “I had an idyllic existence and I was an only child, a pampered only child. There wasn’t anything in this world that I wanted that I couldn’t have, that I didn’t have, but mostly, I had my parents undivided attention and love and my mother and I always clicked. It’s in a way unusual with mothers and daughters because it’s a lot of emotional baggage, but we were friends. As a matter of fact, I guess I was about eight or nine and I responded to her in a way that she didn’t consider respectful and she called me on it. And I said, ‘Well okay. Do you just want me to be your obedient daughter or do you want me to be your friend?’ ...To her credit she said, ‘I want you to be my friend.’ I saw the love that she had for her mother, the closeness. Even though we were far away, we were twelve hours away by car, by train; we would see my grandparents two, three times a year. And I adored my maternal grandmother. I think she was the wisest, the most wonderful person and she had a great deal of influence on me.”<sup>3</sup>*

Grandmother is a woman who is not afraid to speak.

*Layer 2: Maternal Grandmother says, “You know Germany isn’t that far from here. These German Jews see the handwriting on the wall. Don’t you think that you and your family ought to find a safe haven?”<sup>4</sup>*

Between 1933 and 1936, the small town of Hradec Králové became a stop on what would be known as the underground railroad for German Jews. The town was not an official stop, nor was the town known in Holocaust history to be a part of the railroad.

The only proof of its use is Vera’s memory as a child:

And so these people would come, they would come through Czechoslovakia and many of them ended up in the United States. Some of them stayed in England, some went to Scandinavia, some went to Canada, some went to Australia and New Zealand and they started new lives. But they had nothing but the clothes on

---

<sup>3</sup> Interview. October 18, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Interview. September 27, 2007.

their back or maybe in a little overnight case and they didn't have any money. So there was sort of an underground railroad that people would arrange for them to stay in the homes and ours was one of the homes. I was too young to even ask a question when these strangers came through the house. They came, they went and then they were replaced (09/27).

Vera does not remember anything about these people, just that they did not stay for very long. She no longer remembers any conversations, any differences, only that they were searching for safety from the Nazis in Germany.

But the Nazi boots quickly became a reality in Czechoslovakia. On March 15, 1939, they marched in. Vera was home from school that day, because as usual she was sick. When she saw them, her first reaction was tears. She was nine and no other reaction seemed appropriate. "I cried because they, they just looked so otherworldly, you know with this goose-stepping and the foot extended and coming down like thunder. Ahh, I cried and I said, 'They're going to kill us.'" To this day, she has no idea where the thought came from. She was home from school that day, "so I got to see the show"—the show that altered Jewish existence more than the rest of the world wanted to acknowledge (09/27).

After the Nazi boots arrived, the anti-Semitism that was non-existent quickly emerged. As a second grader, Vera knew she was Jewish and she knew the other children were Christian, but she never thought anyone looked at her in any way other than normal...until a little 7-year-old taught her differently:

Two weeks after the Germans came in just before we were kicked out of school, I came in and one of my classmates, my second grade classmates said, "There's a dirty Jew." I remember that, and I remember that because she followed that by saying, "And she's a Hungarian too." Because my mother had a Hungarian accent in Czech and the Czechs didn't like the Hungarians...But she [my mother] couldn't help it; she sounded like a Hungarian in Czech. So I had two sins against me. My mother was a Hungarian and I was a dirty Jew, but I said, "I bathed" (09/27).

By then, the humor could not alleviate the tension. Nothing could ease the apprehension that had risen since the Nazis arrived. Not even a heroine who came to her rescue could accomplish the task, but Vera vividly remembers the young girl who stood up and said, “That’s not right. My mom and dad say everybody is the same” (10/25). The young girl was non-Jewish and an only child, and it now appears that the issues of prejudice were spoken about at home. After the war, Vera and her parents went back to offer gratitude to the young girl and her family, but she was out of town. Her last memory of the young girl was when she acted as Vera’s defender.

The same memory was Vera’s last school memory in Czechoslovakia. She was removed from school by the third grade due to the newly enacted Nuremberg Laws. As Michael Berenbaum, author of The World Must Know, describes it, “For the first time in history, Jews were persecuted not for their religious beliefs and practices, but because of their so-called racial identity, irrevocably transmitted through the blood of their grandparents” (29). Although the restrictions of the Nuremberg Laws had been practiced in Germany since 1933, they did not become official in German-occupied lands until 1935. The Jews in Czechoslovakia saw the restriction as a sign of what was to come. The lives of Jewish people changed drastically. They were not allowed to walk in groups of three, not allowed to go to bars, to theaters, to hospitals, to work. They were not allowed to live any type of life that would be classified as normal and acceptable in our time frame (Berenbaum 28–30). Most of her memories were of mixed emotions. Vera has a fond memory of the last movie she saw in the theater: *Snow White*. But the memory becomes sour, when she remembers that, due to the Nuremberg Laws, her parents were

not allowed to accompany her. A non-Jewish family willingly took an Aryan-looking Jewish girl to the movies, as a fun outing—one of her last in Czechoslovakia.

After the movie, no other happy memories could be recalled. As a child, Vera never had any encounters with the Nazis in her town, but she often feared it would happen eventually.

One of the most frightening experiences I remember was, I guess, I was out and it was the holiday. Kosher slaughtering was not permitted, kosher slaughtering of meat, and besides we didn't have any ration cards and we didn't have meat. Somebody got hold of a goose and geese were a delicacy on high holy days. And I was chosen to take this poor animal to a man who did ritual slaughtering, who put his life on the line because if anyone ever found out that he did it, he would have been dead. But to him that was an article of faith. As for me, I was carrying this live bird in a bag and all I kept thinking about was how this bird could make a noise, and I could be dead. And I don't know why my parents took a chance (09/27).

But her parents did take the chance in the fall of 1939, as did many Jewish families who refused to lose their religion in the face of prejudice. Sometimes religion appeared to be the happy memory that could remind them of the life they used to have—the life where they had choices and were treated as humans.

In 1939, her father applied for visas because the family was ready to leave as quickly as possible. They now realized that Czechoslovakia would not save them from the Germans; the family had to save themselves. In a last minute effort, the family actually received a quota number on the end of the United States, but the Czechoslovakian government would not willingly allow the emigration of any Jewish people. Since her father was such a law-abiding citizen, he would not illegally cross the border. The family waited, and waited, and waited, and waited. But the borders closed; no numbers were being offered and no Jews were leaving legally. Her father did,

however, have their furniture legally sent to the US. The inanimate objects made it, but the living people would not for many years.

In late 1939, just after the family received news about the closure of the borders, they heard a knock at their door. When her father opened the door, the people outside said, “You don’t live here anymore; we do” (09/27). Quickly they packed whatever they could carry and they left. As soon as the family became homeless, the hiding began. But other Jewish couples in the town made different decisions:

Actually, our only Jew, well there were two couples that were friends, really close friends of my parents. One of them was a mixed couple, she was Jewish and he was not. He went to a concentration camp...for her. They had a son and I guess he [the father] had enough connections to get himself imprisoned and her kept out to be with their son. She survived and he survived and we saw them after the war. And the other was an elderly couple who...I mean they were there when we started hiding and when we came back they were not there (09/27).

No one truly knows what happened to the elderly couple, but many assumptions can be made, and none of them are optimistic.

As for Vera’s family, they were not going to wait to find out. In late 1939, they began hiding in Vera’s hometown Hradec Královè, Czechoslovakia—“the most prosperous and democratic country in central Europe” that had quickly turned unpleasant (Berenbaum 42). A colleague of her father had a retreat in the woods that was empty, and he allowed them to stay there for about six weeks. Six weeks was generally the time limit for all places of hiding because any longer and the loaners became overly anxious and worried. The Hermans did not blame them. The transition between the first and last hiding place of the family consisted of false walls, attics, empty cottages and dirty barns. For Vera and her family,

fear and uncertainty became a way of life...and each time we were close to being discovered, we would go to the next one, the next one, the next one. Until we got

to Slovakia where we were discovered and we had to run again. And then in Hungary we were actually imprisoned (10/18).

At the last hiding place in Slovakia, the family received fair warning that they were to be on the next transport to Auschwitz. The family was hiding in a closet sized structure and all they had with them were a few pairs of clothes, boots, and a doily-like tablecloth, which covered the small table the host offered. One day in November of 1943, there was a knock at the door—the fated knock—and it was a group of four men, working under the name of the “Committee of the Confiscation of Jewish Property”. The four men were comprised of a local betrayer, an SS officer, a local Slovakian officer, and a Jewish lawyer who was dragged along to draft up the forms. The Committee took the doily tablecloth and there was really nothing else they wanted, except her mother’s pretty boots. But her mother, an outspoken woman, would not give them up. Margit argued that the shoes she was wearing were not sufficient for the outdoor weather and she needed the boots to survive. Her mother’s persuasive argument worked and the Committee left with only the doily. And the family now had an important decision to make.

*Growth of Voice: “And I must say that my father had had it up to here, and he was just about willing to be a sitting duck, you know, already. But my mother, maybe because a woman with a child has that much more will, she started going from door to door trying to find a way to get away. And she had heard that there was an organization, something like the underground railroad for slaves, that would help you escape in a very specific way. By that time, deportation had taken place in all of the central European countries. There was one city where the Jewish community was persecuted, but still intact, and that was Budapest.”*<sup>5</sup>

Grandmother and Mother are women who are not afraid to speak.

*Layer 3: Vera says, “And he did not want to be caught with us. So without saying a word he turned on his heels and started walking away from us. And as I tell the kids when I tell the story, I still have a physical recollection of how exhausted I was, and I really didn’t care much anymore. I was twelve and I was scared and I said to my mother, ‘I am just*

---

<sup>5</sup> Interview. October 18, 2007.

*going to lean back here.' Meanwhile it was pouring, 'I am just going to lean back here against this tree and take a little nap.' ...I thought maybe I was having a nightmare and when I woke, everything would be okay. And if it wouldn't, I didn't care very much to wake up...but she [my mother] wasn't impressed. Instead, she started running in that mud. My father and I just watched with our mouths open and she is screaming in the darkness: 'You have children of your own; are you going to let this one die?''<sup>6</sup>*

Vera remembers the moment like it was yesterday. The feeling of physical exhaustion. The pouring rain. The mud and having to extract each foot by hand to shake it off and take yet another step. Each feeling remains with her today. But also, just prior to the heroic scene, she herself felt like a hero. After her mother made a connection by knocking door to door in Slovakia, Margit learned of an underground railroad run by farmers who lived on the border of Slovakia and Hungary, where Budapest served as its capital. Finally someone trusted Margit, and told her to take her family to the local train station and board the next train to the village just before the Hungarian border. The family was to leave all luggage behind along with the remnants and loose threads of their Stars of David. They received specific instructions to get off the train and look left, where a young man would be standing by a certain description. The Hermans were to follow him at a reasonable distance and he would house them until leading them across the border.

Night had fallen by the time they arrived at the young man's house, which was a small barn that protected three generations, including the visiting grandmother who was a Nazi sympathizer. It was quiet and dark. He placed a ladder that led to the overhang of the barn. He asked them to please be quiet and the next time he propped the ladder to return in the same manner because they would be leaving. They climbed the ladder and lay down to rest. It was then that Vera's heroic and innocent actions were remembered:

---

<sup>6</sup> Interview. October 18, 2007.

We got up there and in a little while we realized we actually were not all alone. The rat population of the farmhouse was in the attic with us...Great big fat rats, and I remember being so frightened, not for myself but for my father because he was losing his hair. You know, male pattern baldness, the patch up here...so I took the scarf I was wearing off my head and I put it around him because I was afraid that when he laid down on the ground, they might get curious and start nibbling at his scalp. I felt very brave (10/18).

The innocence of a child went a long way especially in the ideals of hope and faith during the Holocaust. Her youthfulness brought a type of exuberance that only a child could hold during a time of turmoil. For her parents, this brought optimism. In return, Vera trusted her parents in all of their choices and, even as the rain poured outside, when the ladder arrived, she trusted them enough to descend and try crossing the border.

Here, she learned the essence of a true hero from her mother:

By the time we got to the bottom of the ladder, we were soaked to the skin. And then we started walking and it was almost impossible. I mean he [the farmer] was equipped and he was a strong young man. We would sink into the mud up to here [Vera points to her mid-thigh] and then we literally had to extract our feet with our hands, kick off the excess mud and take another step. This was a labor-intensive process and we were not watching for anything else, but he was. He saw a flicker of light at a distance in a place where he was not accustomed to seeing it, and he figured quickly they may have changed the guard and a new guard may map out a new route, a new patrol route (10/18).

At this point, the man turned and walked back. Her mother's quick reaction and unbelievable courage to run after him taught Vera about what it means to never give up, to never lose faith, to never lose her voice.

The man took them back to the barn again and the next night they safely crossed the border where they took a train immediately to the capital city. In Budapest, they still had to hide, because they were illegal Jews in the town. But here, hiding meant registering with the police station every afternoon. Vera says, "There we were, but there we weren't" (10/18). Here in Budapest, Admiral Horthy allowed the illegals to remain;

he found the middle ground with the Nazis. He pretended to be allies with Germans, but actually did his best to protect the Jewish because his daughter-in-law was Jewish.

Legally anything that happened to the Jews would happen to her as well.

Admiral Horthy, the Hungarian regent, was “a member of one of Hungary’s most aristocratic families” (Werbell 13). After serving in the Navy with distinction during World War I, he was named to the regency. Although Hungary was supposed to be a monarchy with a royal family, Horthy accomplished his powers in a similar manner to Hitler: “Horthy had persuaded the parliament to vote him considerable powers, particularly over the security forces and army” (13). Regardless of his “personal dislike of Hitler,” Horthy expressed many anti-Semitic thoughts and actions, and at the senile age of seventy-six, he led Hungary to take part in the Nazi’s “Final Solution of the Jews” (13). On October 14, 1944, he declared an armistice and the Arrow Cross party, “a pro-German anti-Semitic party led by Ferenc Szalasi” assumed power (“Arrow Cross Party”).

Due to Horthy’s discussions with the Nazis, the move to Budapest allowed the Hermans two more months of freedom. In early January of 1944, the hiding ended. The Nazis came with megaphones and called everyone all Jews, Hungarian or foreign, out of the buildings with anything they could carry. For those who choose not to come out or walk down the steps, they were shot on the spot. Vera says, “It was not an assumption; it is first hand knowledge” (10/18). After everyone was accounted for, the Nazis forced the Jews to march three or four miles toward Tolonc, a medieval fortress on the outskirts of Budapest.

The march crossed a moat and there were so many people in the fortress that they had to sleep outside standing up that night. The next morning, two thousand people inside

the fortress were sent to Auschwitz. Room was cleared to allow for all prisoners standing outside, including Vera's family, to enter the fortress. On the morning of March 14<sup>th</sup>, the fortress held no beauty or resilience as it had in the past. At the entrance of the fortress, the men and women were separated. For the first time, the Hermans would be divided, a thought they could never imagine when Vera was a young child. Now Vera was 13, a young woman, who would walk side by side with her mother. And, in February of 1944, before seeing Emil again, Vera and her mother were transported to Kistarcsa, a transit camp nine miles from Budapest. Here they spent two months awaiting the next choice of the Nazis, but suddenly a neutral diplomat altered that fate.

*Growth of Voice: "Hiding affected the person that I am now. I suppose I react in a feminine way, but I think that it would affect men probably in the same way. And it can go one of two ways: either you become very bitter or you learn to savor life and believe very deeply in the fact that love is stronger than hate...And to the Holocaust. I mean I am a woman. I react like a woman. So perhaps, I am a little more sensitive, a little more hair splitting." <sup>7</sup>*

Mother is a woman who is not afraid to speak.

*Layer 4: Mother says, "If you slept in anything resembling a bed, and if you ate anything resembling food, then I have no right to hold onto you." <sup>8</sup>*

In the middle of the day, April 1944, all of the women and children were called outside to speak with three men from the Swedish Red Cross. In some capacity, maybe through threats or bribery, these three men convinced the commandant, Istvan Vasdenyei, that Kistarcsa was unsafe for children. Convincing Vasdenyei was not extremely difficult, as he was known for being "humane and...[doing] whatever he could to ease the plight of the Jews under his control" ("Kistarcsa"). Therefore, for any mother who was

---

<sup>7</sup> Interview. October 25, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Interview. October 18, 2007.

willing, the Swedish Red Cross would take their children between the ages of 5 and 14 to a safer place. Vera later recognized that,

Most mothers didn't let their children go...They couldn't. Partly because they didn't believe these men. And the other was it was just too painful to give them up. You know by this time, these women had no parents, no siblings, no husbands. The only semblance of their existence was their child (10/18).

However, her mother felt differently. She gently pushed Vera forward and passed out because of the weight of the decision. When Vera turned to help her mother, the three men picked up the child and quickly carried her out. While placing her in the car, they quietly revealed that they “really don't work for the Swedish Red Cross. [They] work for a Swedish diplomat whose name is Raoul Wallenberg” (10/18).

The story of Raoul Wallenberg streams back slightly before the moment that Vera first heard his name—a name she never forgot. Berenbaum describes him as, “a Swedish aristocrat, the scion of a distinguished banking family, and an architect who had been trained at the University of Michigan” (166). When President Roosevelt established the War Refuge Board in 1944, Wallenberg became somewhat of its right hand man and was chosen as the 2<sup>nd</sup> secretary of the Swedish Embassy in Budapest. Besides the excitement and adventurism of a young man, Wallenberg's thoughts of his grandmother drove him to become a voice and protector for the Hungarian Jews. His maternal grandmother, in whose home he was raised, was one-fourth Jewish, and if she lived in Hungary, she would have been deported (Werbell 24). Wallenberg arrived in Budapest on July 9, 1944, four months after the Hermans were placed in holding camps and the night after all the Hungarian provinces besides Budapest had been “dejewified,” as Eichmann would say (26).

Wallenberg was not discouraged by his late arrival, but on the contrary, worked quickly to begin saving the Jews in any way he thought possible. He created Swedish protective passes, or Schutzpasses, which stated, “The Royal Swedish Legation in Budapest confirms that the above-mentioned person will travel to Sweden in the course of repatriation as authorized by the Royal Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs” (Werbell 34). Due to his backing by the War Refugee Board, Wallenberg was restricted in his rescue efforts. “There were approximately 175,000 Jews in Budapest, and Wallenberg had permission to save only 4,500” (38). At first, the Legation, headed by Wallenberg’s colleagues, established rules; passes would first be distributed to long-standing business or family ties in Sweden. But it was too painful for Wallenberg to turn people away. He felt, “if he worked hard, people lived; if he was lazy, people died” (47). Eventually, Wallenberg found other ways to push him and his staff to the limit of what would become acceptable in intervention by a neutral country’s diplomat.

When the Arrow Cross threatened Wallenberg’s life and stole his car, all of his workers went into hiding. He borrowed a woman’s bicycle and rode around Budapest searching for his staff and urging them to return to work (Werbell 68). At this point in October of 1944, Wallenberg and “Section C”, the name of his secret production line, offered passes to anyone menaced by the Arrow Cross or SS, regardless of their connections to Sweden or qualifications for the pass. On October 15, Baroness Elisabeth Kemèny arrived on Wallenberg’s doorstep. She was married to Baron Kemèny who worked with Eichmann, but she was mortified by her husband’s actions and pledged to help Wallenberg in any way possible. Through his words and the Baroness’ mouth, she convinced her husband to honor all the protective passes that had been distributed.

Because the Baron adored his wife, he went against Eichmann's proposal to march all Jews out of Budapest, and announced that the protective passes would be acknowledged (Werbell 77). Between October and December, many attempts were made on Wallenberg's life, but he still worked to save approximately 100,000 Jews. Whether on a train platform, a death march, or in a cattle car, he appeared as the "Angel of Budapest" and spoke like he was sent from a higher being. Due to his precise and powerful German tongue and his exceptional confidence, he was able to fool Arrow Cross and SS officers to release Jews holding both official and unofficial protective passes, and in some cases holding no passes at all. Many times he even put his body between a Jew and an officer. Even with a gun pointed at him, Wallenberg remained calm and collected, and almost always walked away with the Jews and his safety.

The Wallenberg's three men dropped Vera off at a Swedish children's home where she met twenty-six wonderful children whose mothers had also given them up at other holding prisons. For two weeks, they did their best to create some semblance of a normal life, and at night, Wallenberg would come to play with the children. At the end of the second week, Vera became very sick, and was diagnosed with Scarlet Fever. She said good-bye to her new friends and was quarantined in a hospital for contagious diseases. She was one of the last Jewish children to be accepted by a non-Jewish hospital. Vera remained for six weeks and rested until she was deemed free of disease.

Later, Vera found out that the Arrow Cross, the pro-German governmental party that is represented by a mock swastika, took the lives of all twenty-six children with whom she had become friends. Although the Arrow Cross had taken an oath to never touch the Wallenberg houses due to its diplomatic immunity, one night some got drunk

and thought it would be fun to break into the children's home. They killed twenty-six children that night. For the time being, 13-year-old Vera did not know; all she knew is that she was being taken to an orphanage, and although that was not a soothing thought, it was one she quickly learned to accept.

*Growth of Voice: "Disbelief in the Holocaust cost a lot of lives."*<sup>9</sup>

Mother and Vera are women who are not afraid to speak.

*Layer 5: Vera says, "When I was discharged from the hospital, I was picked up by someone from the Swedish Red Cross and they took me to an orphanage...And I never asked too many questions. I was sure I was an orphan and I thought that was a reasonable place for me."*<sup>10</sup>

While Vera was becoming accustomed to referring to herself as an orphan, her mother remained in the Kistarcsa holding prison. Two thousand women from the prison, including her mother, were loaded onto cattle cars and the next transport to Auschwitz began. The story tells that one woman, out of the two thousand, was never supposed to be on a transport. The daughter-in-law of Admiral Horthy was allowed in holding cells, allowed to perform forced labor, allowed to be abused, but she was never allowed to be sent to a death camp. Admiral Horthy's thought was if he kept her on Hungarian ground, he could control her fate. Auschwitz is in Poland, where Horthy had no voice in the decision making process. The specific event in history was so important the attorney general at Eichmann's war crimes trial brought it up:

What happened? Horthy stopped the deportations. Eichmann sent off a train from the Kistarcsa transit camp with the intention of sending them to Auschwitz. The Jewish representatives went to Horthy, used their connections and influence, and Horthy ordered the Hungarian authorities at the border to stop the train (The Nizkor Project).

---

<sup>9</sup> Interview. September 27, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Interview. October 18, 2007.

On July 15, 1944, just before the train crossed the border, it was derailed to the last holding prison on Hungarian soil (“Kistarcsa”).

However, the women in the cattle cars did not know what was going on. The darkness had enveloped their bodies and souls for more than two days. The younger women who had a little more energy lifted themselves to the little barred windows. They did not recognize where they were going. They were still in Hungary. Suddenly, the train stopped and the doors opened. Although the Germans were efficient at keeping death records, they did not keep track of who was in which cattle car. Therefore, all had to be removed from the cattle car—all two thousand to find one person.

As Margit was forced from the cattle car, she saw a man she recognized, but then he disappeared. Minutes later, he was walking toward her. She recognized him. It was her husband. It was Emil. But she did not want to make a commotion, nor did he. He brushed up against her, dropped a small bottle into her hand. He whispered into her ear, “Take this.” Without even thinking, Margit swallowed the liquid, and immediately lost consciousness.

Emil, the prisoner physician at Sàrvàr camp where his wife had arrived, wanted her to pass out. He wanted her on a stretcher and out of harm’s way. He wanted to be able to care for her. Because she was out of consciousness, she escaped the Germans’ solution to the problem of a train off course. When the Germans found out about the detour, they said they no longer wanted two thousand bodies instead the authorities should just kill all passengers right outside the prison gates. The authorities shot and killed 1,996 people. The only survivors of the transport were Admiral Horthy’s daughter-in-law, two people who hid and Margit, Vera’s mother.

When Vera's mother awoke, she was in a women's section of the prison. She did not see Emil again for three months until late October of 1944 during the Sàrvàr prison uprising. In the mist of the chaos, Vera's mother and father managed to find one another and grasped hands. They snuck through a crack in the fence and began walking, still holding hands. And from that moment, they never let go. They walked for three weeks from the Hungarian – Poland border to Budapest. On the way, they foraged for food and slept in burnt out farmhouses on the destroyed lands of Hungary.

Upon their return to Hungary on November 30, 1944, Emil, Vera's father, went to visit "a legendary Swed who does wonderful things for Jews"—Raoul Wallenberg (10/18). When Emil arrived at the Embassy, Wallenberg shook his hand and said, "I have Schutzpasses for you and your wife, which are Swedish protective passes, but you know what? We also have your little girl" (10/18). While Vera's father went to get her mother, Vera was picked up from the orphanage. When she saw her parents, life started again. They spent ten weeks in the cellar of a Swedish protective house until the Russians liberated Budapest block by block. On January 16<sup>th</sup>, 1945, the Russians liberated the street Vera's cellar was on, and for once, she could breath with a sigh of relief because at that moment she knew the war was over.

But while the war was over for some, Wallenberg, on this very day, worked to save 70,000 Jews in the Central Ghetto and he succeeded. The next day, he began another battle with the Soviet government. After speaking with Per Anger, his beloved friend and colleague, Wallenberg set out in an attempt to get food and medical supplies for the post-war Hungarian Jews. Anger and him both wondered whether Wallenberg was going as a "guest or as a prisoner" (Werbell 158). Both the Swedish government and his friends

quickly realized, Wallenberg went as a prisoner when they never saw or heard from him again. “When he left Budapest on January 17<sup>th</sup>, he left behind the largest Jewish community in Europe to have survived the Nazi domination” (Werbell 159). As Wallenberg headed toward the Delrecen, Vera, no longer a child, now fourteen years of age, held onto her mother’s hand as they walked backed to Czechoslovakia to start life over. And she never let go.

*Growth of Voice: “Well, as I said in my book, I thought they [my parents] were a mirage [when I was reunited with them]. I couldn’t let them go. I couldn’t...I was physically holding onto them until I believed that they were there in the flesh.”<sup>11</sup>*

Vera Herman is a woman who is not afraid to speak.

*Layer 6: Vera says, “I was 15 ½, almost 16, going on 55.”<sup>12</sup>*

When Vera and her family arrived in the United States in 1946, they had survived an event that had not even been named in many cultures. Her parents had literally aged throughout the process. Immediately after their arrival, her family attempted to lead a normal life, and left behind their language and parts of their history. Her paternal grandmother used to say, “where you eat the bread, you speak the language” (09/27). Therefore, the family only spoke English outside of the home. After her family got settled in Mount Vernon, New York, Vera began attending Davis High School. Here she received two reactions: mascot—because she was the first Eastern European and Holocaust survivor—or weirdo—because she was different than all the students who grew up in America.

---

<sup>11</sup> Interview. October 18, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Interview. October 25, 2007.

Coincidentally, a young woman named Helga Honig arrived shortly before the end of her last semester in high school. Helga was also a Holocaust survivor, but had lost both her parents in a death camp. Vera befriended her and from the relationship, she realized how lucky she truly was that her and her parents survived and found one another: “I count myself among the fortunate because when you survive as a family unit, reconstructing your life was a lot easier...you have someone to validate your existence” (10/25). Over a year and a half, her English improved immensely and, in 1948, she graduated high school to receive a full academic scholarship to New York University. Her life appeared to be that of a normal teenager.

During her freshmen year, she met a young man named Jerry Goodkin and they began a serious courtship. But at the end of her first academic year, her father passed his medical boards and received a position on the New York State Department of Mental Hygiene. Her family quickly relocated to Utica, New York where she attended Syracuse on full scholarship for the completion of her Bachelor’s degree. Jerry did not give up that easily though; he commuted from the Bronx to Utica for three years. After they both graduated college, Vera and Jerry married on August 31, 1952. They both pursued their masters at New York University, he in chemistry and she in French Literature. After she completed her masters, Jerry decided to apply for Ph.D. programs and the search led them to Troy, New York.

In 1954, a semester into his Ph.D. program, Jerry was drafted into the Korean War. Luckily he was deathly allergic to fish and iodine so he could not be placed in Korea. Instead, Jerry was placed in Germany, where Vera joined him shortly after for his thirteen month stay. This would be Vera’s first time returning to Europe and, of all

places, Germany. She said, “I must have been head over heels in love because that was truly traumatic” (10/25). Long before this time, Jerry knew of Vera’s background because she felt “if he was going to hitch his wagon to mine, he needed to not just know where I came from but also where I was coming from” (10/25). The first room Jerry found had hot/cold water and a toilet, a rarity, but Vera “could smell the [landlady’s] hostility for the occupying forces” (10/25). Even though the landlady did not know they were Jewish or that Vera was a Holocaust survivor, her discontent with Americans was enough for the couple to search for a new living quarters. Eventually, they rented from a woman whose husband had died in the Stalingrad mission, where he was sent for refusing to join the Nazi party. Together, they spent thirteen months in Germany living off the economy and sleeping on a straw mattress. Vera spent most of her time in the living quarters or taking part in Jerry’s military life on base; therefore, there was no necessity to ever reveal that she spoke German or why she spoke it. When they had time to travel, they journeyed through France, Sweden and Italy, but Vera could not go back to her beloved home of Czechoslovakia. From 1954 to 1989, Czechoslovakia was a communist country and anyone could be arrested at any time for any reason.

When they returned from his military duty, Jerry finished his Ph.D. program and accepted his first job as a chemist in Baltimore from 1958-1962. During this time, Vera’s father applied for a position on the Pennsylvania State Department of Mental Hygiene, because in New York they required that doctors retire at the age of 70. He received the position and became the director of the York unit in York, Pennsylvania. However, his career came to a swift end when he had a diabetic stroke and could no longer work, causing him to retire. At that point, the Hermans rented an apartment in Trenton, and,

shortly after on October 29, 1972, Emil passed away at the age of 72 ½. Margit remained strong and lived in the apartment for twenty-three more years, spending her spare time as a hospital volunteer. She managed the gift shop well into her nineties and, in 1995, passed away at the age of 93. By now, the Hermans had blended in rather nicely and Margit had created a wonderful life for her family in the United States.

However in the daily lives of the Hermans, their history was never truly left behind, but instead it remained in each of their personalities and became a portion of their identities. When the family moved to the United States, her father “shut the door” and would not talk about the Holocaust. He had an extreme change in personality: where a cheerful person once was, a reserved and private man had taken his place. Her mother, on the other hand, showed signs of survivor guilt. Her personality remained the same, except for when she thought of her parents. At these moments, she would begin to feel guilty about leaving her parents behind. All the family members invited the Burgers to come into hiding, but the parents did not want to go, and due to this, they did not survive. Both grandparents perished in Auschwitz in June of 1944, along with Vera’s Aunt Bella and her cousin Dolly.

The only change that occurred in Vera’s life was the life she lived in her dreams. They are dreams that she remembers more currently. “But I wish I didn’t because I guess when I slept more soundly I would know that I was dreaming, but in the morning I wouldn’t remember what they were. Now I do” (10/25). She has one constant recurring dream, the one that many young children fear most: losing her parents. The loss is never the same. The story is different each time, but the outcome never changes. Her mind plays tricks. One night her parents are crawling from graves; the next they are in

Auschwitz. Her dreams are only a part of her night personality, but they make the Holocaust ever more real in her daily life—a life that for so long she tried to leave behind.

*Growth of Voice: “Once I started talking, I never shut up.”*<sup>13</sup>

Vera Goodkin is a woman who is not afraid to speak.

*Layer 7: Vera says, “Once I spoke, I realized that I had a duty to speak. I owed it to Wallenberg. To those who did not survive to speak. And above all, I owed some knowledge and understanding to the young people growing up today.”*<sup>14</sup>

In the meantime, Vera and Jerry had started their own family. They had two beautiful, but very different, girls, Kathy and Debbie. Kathleen Suzanne was born on February 22, 1958 and Deborah Ann on November 16, 1960. Vera hoped to raise her children to be “tolerant, and sensitive, and loving and perhaps less materialistic” (10/25). She wanted to offer them values from her hometown and from their own in the United States as well. Her children grew up knowing she was a survivor of the Holocaust. Her oldest Kathy did not learn until she was nine “and then I think I told her too much all at once because, she is a very sensitive person, and she would hear an anecdote here or a remark there, and she finally sat me down one evening and said, ‘I want to know. I want to know the whole story’” (10/25). Her mother told her daughter the whole story and at 3:00 am the next morning, Vera was sitting beside Kathy’s bed listening to her cry. However, they were tears that Vera could not dry. Kathy’s reaction determined when her younger sister Debbie would hear her mother’s story. Vera chose to tell Debbie after she had already had background courses from her synagogue school. Since Vera was not the

---

<sup>13</sup> Interview. October 25, 2007.

<sup>14</sup> Interview. October 25, 2007.

survivor of a death camp and did not marry another survivor, her children were not affected by the Holocaust on a daily basis. For this reason, “half of their family—and Jerry had a big, large, extended boisterous family—was perfectly normal” (10/25). Although telling her children was hard, eventually she knew the time would come to tell her grandchildren.

Revealing her story to her grandchildren was a much more difficult task than telling her children. Debbie has two children: Jacob Aaron and Margaret Sarah. Jacob was born on May 6, 1994, and Margaret on July 2, 1996. Kathy gave birth to William Ronald Hirsch on June 19, 1998, and he has since been diagnosed with autism. Vera “never really faced them [her grandchildren] one on one” (10/25). She was invited to Jacob’s Hebrew School when he was in fourth grade. He heard the whole story as part of his classroom, and since has shown much interest in reading biographies about Wallenberg. Margaret is much more outgoing and Vera can feed her small pieces of her experience at a time. William, at the age of nine, has just developed functional speaking skills. “It is a big thing for him to be able to say, ‘I love you mommy and daddy’” (10/25). So if he can ever fully comprehend the story, it will take a long time. Not telling her grandchildren early was for both the benefit of the grandmother and her grandchildren. “I think that American children of privilege mature much later. I did not want them to not understand, misunderstand or be burdened with something they weren’t ready for” (10/25). But each grandchild receives as much as they would like to know and each will carry that portion of the story with them for the rest of their lives.

For 37 years, no one but her family knew that she was a Holocaust survivor. Suddenly, late in the summer of 1983, she received a phone call. The man on the other

end of the line said, “An organization is putting on a commemorative event to celebrate the second anniversary of the honorary United States citizenship given to a Swedish diplomat, Raoul Wallenberg. Do you know who he is?” Vera laughed, “If I didn’t know who he was, you wouldn’t be talking to me today” (10/25). The first time she told her story was before 600 people at Rider University for Wallenberg’s anniversary celebration on October 5, 1983 and it was all due to a phone call on behalf of the man to whom she owed her life.

After she began speaking, Vera’s activism became instrumental in the development of her voice as a mother, a grandmother, a speaker, a survivor. She became a regular lecturer at Rider University, Mercer Community College, Richard Stockton College and The College of New Jersey. Vera later became Dr. Goodkin when she received her doctorate of Education in English at Rutgers University Graduate School. Dr. Goodkin accepted a teaching job at Mercer County Community College where she taught English and French Literature for thirty-four years. She became extremely involved in working with Paul Winkler and the New Jersey Commission on Holocaust Education. Most recently, she has written her family memoir entitled In Sunshine and In Shadow: We Remember Them.

*Growth of Voice: “We have come full circle. When I first started talking to kids, I went to see a seventh grade class in Ewing of gifted kids. I try to keep my presentation age appropriate. Perhaps I have gotten better with the years. Even then I would try not to scare young kids. It just doesn’t serve any purpose. When I was finished, one of the little hands went up, a pudgy little hand, seventh grade boy and he said to me, ‘do you think it could happen here?’ You could knock me over with a feather. I was looking at him and I said, ‘you know what? I am going to be a coward and I am going to throw this question back at you. What do you think?’ And I will never ever forget what he did. He said, ‘My heart says no, but my head says yes.’”<sup>15</sup>*

---

<sup>15</sup> Interview. October 25, 2007.

A woman who is not afraid to speak.

*Layer 8: Vera now says, “Keep in mind that we are all human beings first. Only then do we have gender roles, only then do we differ economically, educationally, intellectually, whatever. Because that is the commonality. And if we remember that which unites us, our differences won’t make that much of a difference.”*<sup>16</sup>

On the outskirts of Lawrenceville, in her beautifully situated home, an empty coffee cup and two half eaten cookies sit before me. As our interview is coming to a close, I realize I am out of questions, but I also realize the answers I am searching for most do not exist. The questions of what if, why, and could it happen again cannot be answered. As I sit before Vera, I realize how quickly her story has become my own, how we have converged into a woman together—a single voice. She through watching me develop as she told her story, and me through watching her develop throughout the story. I have learned through the interviews, I can help to fulfill the path of Dr. Goodkin’s life, as her story has become mine – one which I shall forever carry on as a survivor of her. The traumatic event of the Holocaust shaped Vera’s identity. It is not her identity, but it has drastically affected it. Just as her story is not my identity, but it has affected who I am now and who I shall become as I develop with her story.

She exposed to me a past I could not find, but one that I knew existed. She offered me a voice—her voice—one that comes not from the tragedy, but from the women who survived through her. We are survivors: her of the atrocities of other humans, me of the aftermath generation. I am her layer nine and she is my layer one. She is maturing, as I am developing. She is the survivor, and I will carry on her memory: the voice of her grandmother, the voice of her mother, and her voice—the voice of Vera Herman Goodkin.

---

<sup>16</sup> Interview. October 25, 2007.

*Growth of Voice: Ashley says, “You never lose what’s behind you. And as much as some people try to lose it, it can’t be lost. Because as much as it’s a story of when you were a child, it’s a story of who you are right now. And it’s a story of who you are as a person. So for me this course has been a main turning point. Like this course, being able to sit with you and have this conversation helps me to understand that a lot of my history, which isn’t specifically my history, but my human history, that I didn’t know before. So I hope to piece that into the story too, because this is a story about you, but” ... Vera says softly, “Seen through you.” I quickly reply, “But a lot of your story feels like it has come into me. Yours is a story that I will carry with me and hope to be able to share with as many people as possible because to me it’s important to the future of our world. From the stories I have heard, like sitting in a prison and listening to some of the women talk, your story is completely separate from theirs, but to me it is especially a story worth carrying on, just as their stories are. Because like you said there’s not many people who are carrying on the stories that need to be shared. Even if I help your story grow a little bit or I share it with one person, then it was a worthwhile thing. Then I made a difference. Then I carried on your voice.”*<sup>17</sup>

We are women who are not afraid to speak.

---

<sup>17</sup> Interview. October 25, 2007.

### Works Cited

- “Arrow Cross Party.” 1990. Museum of Tolerance Online Multimedia Learning Center. New York. 10 Dec. 2007. <<http://motlc.learningcenter.wiesenthal.org/>>
- Berenbaum, Michael. The World Must Know: The History of the Holocaust as Told in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Washington, DC: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1993.
- Goodkin, Vera Herman. Interview. September 27, 2007.
- . Interview. October 18, 2007.
- . Interview. October 25, 2007.
- “Kistarcsa.” 1990. Museum of Tolerance Online Multimedia Learning Center. New York. 10 Dec. 2007. <<http://motlc.learningcenter.wiesenthal.org/>>
- Linnea, Sharon. Raoul Wallenberg: The Man Who Stopped Death. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1993.
- The Nizkor Project. “The Trial of Adolf Eichmann: Appeal Session 3 (Part 8 of 9).” 2005. State of Israel Ministry of Justice. 10 Dec. 2007. <<http://www.nizkor.org/hweb/people/e/eichmann-adolf/transcripts/>>
- Werbell, Frederick E., and Thurston Clarke. Lost Hero: The Mystery of Raoul Wallenberg. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982.