REMINISCENCES

PORTRAITS & INTERVIEWS BY MIKE STONE

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SURVIVORS OF
NAZI SLAVE LABOUR

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SURVIVORS

This work was first presented in the exhibition "Perpetrator & Victim" at the Wiener Library, London, in Spring 2026. It is shaped by a contradiction, both historical and personal.

During the Nazi period, German industry relied on slave and forced labour. Companies supplied the regime with optics, chemicals and precision tools while drawing on deported civilians and concentration camp inmates as a disposable workforce. Leica sits within that history: the firm used forced labour at its Wetzlar factory, including hundreds of young Ukrainian women, yet under Ernst Leitz II it also helped Jewish employees, dealers and their families escape through what became known as the Leica Freedom Train.

Perpetrator & Victim approaches this tension through contemporary portraiture. It focuses on survivors shaped by forced labour in Nazi and allied industries, and on others connected by the same conflicted materials. Some sitters were not slave labourers, yet their links to displacement and these instruments bind them within the same field of memory. All share histories in which "work" and "tools" are far from neutral.

For 30 years I have worked as a portrait and documentary photographer, moving between corporate commissions and long-form projects with minority communities. In the late 1980s I assisted Peter Jordan, known for his photograph of Steve Biko's open coffin and his work for both Time and Newsweek. Jordan's pared down style, Leica's, a few lenses, and minimal lighting, taught me to treat the camera as a tool rather than an object of prestige.

Another influence was Erich Salomon, pioneer of candid political photography, distantly linked to my family through a Dutch aunt. Salomon used the Leica to expose power at close quarters, slipping it into conferences and courtrooms. Murdered at Auschwitz in 1944, he embodied both the freedom the Leica promised and the destruction of those who wielded it. Jordan showed me what the camera could do in the present; Salomon showed what had been possible and lost before 1933.

A commission about the Wannsee Conference led me to ask what it would mean to photograph survivors with Leica cameras. Frank Dabba Smith's research on the Leica Freedom Train deepened this question: how could one object be implicated in both forced labour and rescue, and how might survivors wish to see it used today?

My methodology is my response. Portraits are made on a Leica iiia from the late 1930's with period lenses once used by Salomon and, on the other side of history, by Heinrich Hoffmann Hitler's photographer. Negatives are exposed on ORWO UN54 film stock and developed in Rodinal; materials whose origins lie in 1930s factories later absorbed into IG Farben. The entire image chain of camera, film and chemistry would have been familiar to Salomon.

I photograph sitters in their homes during brief, conversational sessions. The portraits draw on August Sander's unembellished style, attentive to posture and gaze, to place survivors within a pre-Nazi visual tradition rather than nostalgia.

Cameras and chemicals do not redeem, but continuity matters. Tools once embedded in exploitation are here turned, with consent, toward those who endured that system. Optics made on Nazi factory floors now record survivors and descendants whose histories pass through the same instruments: a shared act of looking that crosses generations.

These portraits do not attempt a full history of forced labour or any single company. Instead, they ask: what does it mean to industrialise human beings? How do we view firms that combined persecution with rescue, and what responsibility falls on photographers and viewers when the materials of culture and persecution are entwined?

Mike Stone
London
March 2026

Chaim "Harry" Olmer

Hell on earth. Wind on the Clyde

Mill Hill, September 2025

Harry Olmer is sitting in his front room in Mill Hill, surrounded by ghosts. They stare out from the frames lining the walls; a crowded Polish wedding from 1940, a young man in a white coat, a girl in Vienna, a granddaughter in cap and gown. A few weeks from now he will be gone. But on this afternoon he is sharp, fretting more about the reflection on his glasses than about the camp numbers and anniversaries that have been hung on his name for decades.

I am here with a camera, two lenses, a light, and the sense that whatever I do will be inadequate. I haul up a light and warn him it might be bright. He shrugs and waits patiently while I wrangle an old Leica into action. He has done this before. The wall behind him proves it: a lifetime of images, from a Polish shtetl to a Scottish country house. A university graduation, a synagogue wedding, his granddaughter's degree ceremony delayed by a pandemic. The pictures are not decoration. They are a map of all the ways the world tried to erase him and failed.

I tell him, by way of small talk, that I've just driven through Cardross. It's a throwaway line, the kind of thing photographers say when they're buying time before the first frame. For once, it lands like a stone in a still pond.

"Cardross?" His face opens. "We stayed there. A big house. On the way to Helensburgh." I'd gone there for Hill House, Charles Rennie Mackintosh's masterpiece sitting in its cradle above the Clyde. I wasn't thinking about Jewish boys from Poland or cattle trucks or slave labour in a munitions factory. I was thinking about architecture. Now, in Mill Hill, the geography folds over on itself: my detour through Cardross rubs up against the fact that for Harry, that same stretch of road was the first place he began to live again.

"We stayed there a year," he says. "Then Glasgow." The camps, he implies, are filed away elsewhere. "My story is well written," he tells me, as if the forced labour and the transports and the disease belong to some other Harry. He says it almost apologetically, as if to save me the trouble of going over the horror again. What he wants to talk about, on this late day in his life, is Cardross. Glasgow. Germany after the war. Dentistry. The British Army and Volkswagen.

Harry was born Chaim Olmer in 1927, in Sosnowiec, Poland. He was a schoolboy when the Germans came. By his mid teens he was a number in a system designed to convert Jewish teenagers into explosives and smoke. In the munitions factory at Skarżysko Kamienna, he filled shells with picric acid until it burned his skin and lungs; he watched men die from the poison in the air while the Nazis calculated output. He called it "hell on earth," not poetically but as a technical description of a worksite. From there came Płaszów, Buchenwald, Schlieben, Theresienstadt. Somewhere along the way he lost his father and younger sister. Somewhere along the way he learned that his mother and older sister had been deported to Auschwitz. The industrial logic was straightforward. You work until you fall; when you can't work, you are transported again or killed where you stand. And yet here he is, in Mill Hill, worrying about lens flare.

The first photograph he shows me is not of a camp. It is a group portrait taken in Poland in 1940 or '41: a wedding. He struggles up from his chair, takes my arm, and leads me to the wall. His finger finds a woman's face in the crowd. "This is my mother," he says. "This is the only photograph I have of her."

Harry's mother and sister attending his cousins wedding in Hungary 1944

She managed to leave the ghetto briefly to attend that wedding, his mother's brother's daughter marrying a Hungarian. The Hungarian connection meant some protection, the young couple went to Hungary, but in 1944 when it was almost over, the Hungarian Jews were rounded up and sent to Auschwitz. His mother and sister disappeared into that machine. The wedding photograph survived by accident, carried through the war and the camps of someone else's life, turning up in Hungary, then later in Israel. In 1953, when Harry travelled to Israel, he found it. Or it found him. He is telling me this while I stare at the tiny black and white faces, the grainy pattern of a dress, the way the light falls on a group that has no idea what is coming.

I am a photographer. I spend my life thinking about light, about the relationships between people in a frame. I know that photographs are time machines but watching his finger trace his mother's face, knowing that this single sheet of paper is his entire visual archive of her, I feel something deeper. We talk so easily about "never again" and "keeping memory alive," and yet it often comes down to this: one salvaged print and an old man in Mill Hill patiently explaining to yet another visitor who is who in a picture from a world that doesn't exist anymore.

I ask if I can photograph the photograph. He smiles and tells me I can take anything I like.

On the opposite wall, the narrative shifts. Here is Harry in a white coat, a young man with the posture of someone who has worked too hard to be where he is. "My graduation," he says. "Glasgow University. Dentistry." Another frame: Harry and his wife on their wedding day, under a chuppah in a synagogue. Below that, his granddaughter in mortarboard and gown. "She postponed her graduation because of the pandemic."

Between the wedding photograph from 1940 and the graduation photographs lies Cardross, and a bus ride that changed everything.

In July 1945, a group of nearly 300 Jewish children arrived at a former RAF convalescent camp by Lake Windermere. They were skeletal, traumatised, tattooed, and officially orphans, though some had family members who would later be found. They would become known as "The Boys," although they weren't all boys, and they weren't all children. Britain guiltily took them in under a special scheme and parked them in the Lake District. As if fresh air might undo what had been done.

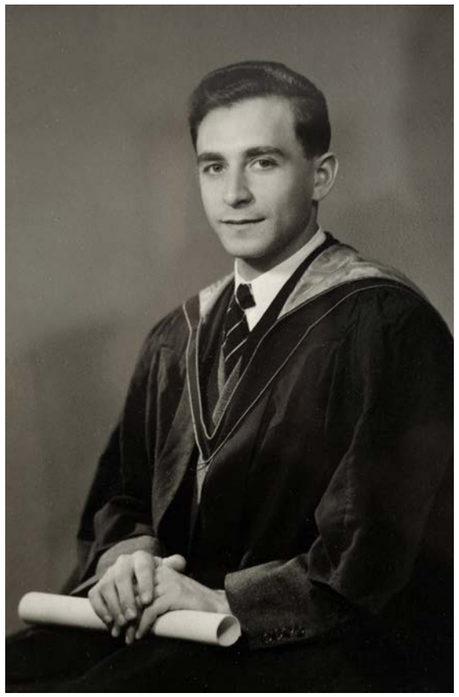
Harry was among them. After Windermere, some of the boys were moved to a big house in Cardross, near Helensburgh, on the north bank of the Clyde. This is where our worlds intersect.

When I drove through Cardross the previous week, it was a sleepy strip of road on the way to an architectural icon. When Harry arrived there in 1945, it was a liminal space between annihilation and whatever came next. He remembers the house, the long drive, the year he spent there. He believes the building is in bad shape now. "It was very windy," he says of Scotland, but there is affection in his voice. He stayed in Scotland from 1945 until 1953. Cardross, then Glasgow.

Glasgow in the late 1940s was no paradise. This was a bomb scarred, ration book city, but it was also an opening. Harry learned English, studied, found work. He trained first as a dental technician. He applied to Glasgow University and, in 1948, was accepted to study dentistry properly, on one clear condition: he had to become a British subject. It took five years. Bureaucracy has its own tempo, even for people who have already been counted and recounted by far more lethal administrations.

Once qualified and with that British genius for irony that borders on the psychotic, he was called up. The Army. National Service. Uniform. A country that had taken in a handful of broken teenagers from the camps now decided that one of them should help enforce the post war order in Europe. Harry served six months in England as an army dentist, then eighteen months in Germany. He was attached to a camp that served five regiments and he worked on soldiers' teeth, on schoolchildren, on army wives, the domestic fringe of a military occupation.

He tells me about a Volkswagen factory, about the British Army's role in keeping Leica alive. He mentions Wetzlar and Braunschweig, German place names that for him are layered with older meanings. The same country that once turned him into forced labour now depended on his professional expertise to keep its troops functioning. He did what he'd always done. He worked.



Harry on his graduation

I'm struck by the way he talks about it. There is no drama in his voice, no bitterness. It is all technical: the length of service, the number of patients, the geography of bases. He speaks like a man describing a particularly busy clinic rota. Perhaps that is how you survive the loop of being sent back, in uniform, to the country whose railway sidings once determined whether you lived or died.

Back in Mill Hill, there is another photograph: Harry in his army days, his wife at his side. He met her in Germany. "She was in Vienna," he says of the little girl in one of the older photographs. The story of how she got from Vienna to the post war Germany where they met is another line on the map, another set of ghosts. His wife appears several times on the wall: as a child, as a young woman, as his partner on their wedding day, as an older woman sitting where he now sits. He gestures to her picture and says, "This is my wife. She was eight years old there." The understatement is devastating.

We talk about cameras. He acknowledges the Leica and tells me how, after the war, the British Army's presence kept the Wetzlar factory going. Without the occupying forces, he says, Leica might have died along with everything else. The history of twentieth century photography, Cartier Bresson, Capa, the whole mythology of 35mm, hangs partly on this slender thread: that a company whose cameras had documented both the rise of Nazism and the war that destroyed it survived thanks to an army dentist and his comrades needing their kit serviced.

The irony isn't lost on me. I am here with Leica equipment, resurrected for a portrait project about survivors of slave labour in Nazi camps, shooting a man who once lived a few miles from the factory that made them, as part of an army sent to occupy the country that tried to kill him. History likes loops.

The actual session is slow, as it should be. I move the light; he waits, patient. I ask him to look at the camera, then the window, then back at the wall of photographs. He jokes about reflections on his glasses. I reassure him and hope the negatives will back me up. At one point, I ask him to look up at the old family photographs. He does, and something in his expression shifts: a mixture of pride, sorrow, satisfaction, and the everyday concentration of someone doing a small job properly. It's not a grand gesture. It's a man looking at his own past.

Harry is far from a passive subject in this encounter. He has spent decades telling his story, to schoolchildren, to groups marching through Auschwitz on educational trips. He knows how to calibrate detail and silence. When I fish for the big moments he waves them away. "It is written," he says. What he offers me is the connective tissue: how windy it was in Cardross; how long it took to become a British subject; the exact year his granddaughter finally had her ceremony after Covid; the fact that his mother appears only once, in a wedding picture taken by a photographer whose name no one remembers.

This suits me because what this is, in the end, is a kind of resistance. Not a heroic, cinematic resistance of partisans with guns, but the quiet refusal to be reduced to a single narrative. Harry is not content to be "a Holocaust survivor." He is a dentist.

Harry on his wedding day

A husband. A father and grandfather. A Scot by choice, a Pole by birth and an Englishman by naturalisation. A man who served in the British Army and then spent his later years returning, voluntarily, to the sites of his trauma to teach teenagers why those places exist. The slave labourer in the munitions factory became a professional obsessed with repair.

I think about my own route into this room. My father from Glasgow. My recent pilgrimage to see a modernist house in Helensburgh. The way Scotland has threaded through my life as a backdrop for art and family, not survival. For Harry, Scotland was both refuge and proving ground. Cardross and Glasgow were where he learned to live with what had been done to him and to make something else out of it. I'm conscious, sitting in Mill Hill, of how obscenely lucky my Scottish family's journey was compared to his. The ability to drift through Cardross without feeling the weight of history. Meeting Harry rewrites that landscape. The next time I drive that road, I'll see a group of boys stepping off a bus, sucking in the cold air of Argyll and wondering, maybe for the first time, if they are going to be allowed to grow old.

At the end of our session, I begin to pack up. The room grows darker as I break down the lights. I apologise for the time I've taken. He waves it off. "I am not doing anything," he says. "You are doing the work." It doesn't feel like that. It feels like I've been given more than I can possibly repay.

On the way out, his wife's presence, in frames, hovers. She died before him, but the house is still hers. The photographs of her as a child in Vienna, as a young woman in Germany, as his partner across decades, give the room its particular atmosphere: not just survival, but companionship; not just trauma, but the ordinary business of building a life from the rubble. On the bottom row of the wall is his granddaughter's graduation picture. A third generation in a gown. A century on from the world that produced the wedding photograph with his mother in it. You could call that continuity. You could also call it defiance.

When I look at the negatives from that day, what strikes me most is not the history written into his features, though it's there. It's his alertness. The way he is always, even at ninety eight, slightly ahead of the camera, aware of what this encounter is and what it is for. The Nazis designed a system in which people like him were meant to be turned into ash and absence. Instead, he ended up in a room in Mill Hill, calmly directing my attention from a grainy wedding in 1940 to a Scottish landscape in 1945, to his granddaughter's ceremony in the 2010s. The line doesn't run straight. It zigzags through camps and factories and barracks and surgeries and living rooms. It runs through Cardross and Helensburgh and Glasgow. Occupied Germany and Mill Hill.

Here is the real story of Chaim "Harry" Olmer. Not just the boy in the cattle truck, but the man who spent a lifetime fixing other people's pain, hanging his own ghosts neatly on the wall, making sure that when people came to ask him, yet again, to tell them what happened, he could point to a face in a faded print and say, "This is my mother," and know she would still be seen.

Harry's wife, aged 8 in Vienna

Agnes Kaposi

Three Acts and a Circle

By the time I walk into her north London back room with a 1937 Leica in your hand, Agnes has already outlived two dictatorships, a ghetto, child labour camps, a revolution and most of the men who raised her. She looks up from the table, clocking the old camera, and says she's five years older than it. Then she corrects herself: ninety two and a half at the time of your visit; born 1932, Debrecen, Hungary.

I'm using film made in an ex Agfa plant in the old East, emulsion that hasn't really changed since before she was deported; she likes that. "Similar ideas are used in the Imperial War Museum," she says. "These are just nuances."

I give her a précis of the project; Leica saving some Jewish staff while using Ukrainian slave labour and she nods, unfazed. She's had cameras pointed at her before. "It's because I'm such a freak, you see," she says, not unkindly. "I'm still alive. And that makes me famous."

She wants to know how many frames you get on a roll. Thirty six. "You won't notice them," you say, lying a little. You're very aware of each frame. She asks what photogenic means. You give her the technical answer about symmetry; she offers the better one: "Someone is photogenic if they look better on the picture than in reality." One daughter was photogenic and one wasn't, she says. The pretty one died young. "I think one was no prettier than the other."

You get her to look up from the book on the table, her own, Yellow Star – Red Star and settle into the light. She jokes about being uncomfortable in front of the camera even after all these years.

Then the book falls open on a page she's clearly been sitting with, a neat summary of what she calls "the Hungarian Holocaust", a drama in three acts.

Act one is the forced labour battalions, Jewish men in Hungarian army uniform without weapons, digging trenches and clearing mines on the Eastern Front from 1941 onwards. "It lost a generation of young men," she says. Some went to Bor, the copper mine in occupied Serbia where around 6,000 Hungarian Jewish labourers worked and almost none survived. One of them was Miklós Radnóti, "Ronaldi," she calls him, the poet beaten to death by Hungarian soldiers because he wouldn't stop scribbling; his last poems were found in his pocket when his body was dug out of a mass grave.

Act two is the provinces. In the spring and summer of 1944, with German occupation formally in place from March, Hungarian authorities and Eichmann's team manage to deport almost 440,000 Jews from the countryside to Auschwitz in just 56 days. "A great achievement of the transportation system," she says with acid precision; she's about to give a talk at the Wiener Library about how train timetables became murder weapons.

Act three is Budapest. For a mixture of diplomatic, military and bureaucratic reasons, the Jews of the capital aren't all shipped out. Instead, the Arrow Cross shoot around 30,000 into the Danube and march thousands more west towards Austria on foot. Her Aunt Rózsi is among those shot on the riverbank, at the stretch now marked by the "Shoes" memorial. "We lived about three hundred

metres from where the shoes are," she says. "Had we not gone back to Debrecen, we would have been there with her."

She remembers before all that, too. "I remember back to before I was three even," she says. "Very clear memories." Her parents are Jewish and socialist, exposed leftists in a country sliding right. Nineteen days before she's born, Hungary gets its first openly racist prime minister in Gyula Gömbös; antisemitic laws aren't far behind. Her father, one of the founders of the workers' co operative movement in Debrecen, loses his job almost immediately. "Debrecen was like Manchester," she says. "Second or third city." He ends up unemployed by law, with Greek, Latin and Biblical Hebrew instead of forints, looking after a baby in what she calls "abject poverty".

The poverty is material. No toys, no holidays, too many people in too little room. The wealth is intellectual. All the men in the family are professionals forbidden to practice, so they stay at home. She's an only child, and they become her playmates. Doctors, lawyers, engineers sit on the floor with her and explain the alimentary canal before she turns six. When a surgeon tells her they're going to "investigate your alimentary canal" before an appendectomy, she complains, correctly, that it's empty because she's been fasting. "How do you know about the alimentary canal?" they ask. "My uncle told me." She learns early that knowledge is power, and that the right question is a kind of weapon.

At eight, all those uncles disappear. The Hungarian army calls them up for forced labour, sends them east with shovels and yellow armbands. Almost none come back. "That is what I grieve," she says. "The loss of them. The worst aspect of the Holocaust for me." Yellow Star – Red Star has sketches of them: playmates with professions and opinions; her book has, as she says, a historian's voice, Dr László Csősz, running alongside her own memories, and it turns out those memories line up almost perfectly with the archives.

She is eleven when the ghetto comes. Her family is forced from their flat into the fenced off streets of Debrecen, then later transported in cattle trucks to Austria. She spends months as a child labourer in agricultural and armaments camps, doing farm work and factory shifts in her early teens. She is liberated by the Red Army in 1945 and gets home on 1 May; on 2 May she's at school. "Hungry, without hair, without clothing, without a book, a pencil or a pen, I was at school,"

Her father's influence is everywhere. One day she tells him, "You know everything." He corrects her with an image that will shape her engineering and her ethics. "Imagine you stand in the middle of a circle," he says. "The size of the circle is what you know. The more you know, the bigger the circumference. So you know more and more what you don't know." She quotes that to you, eighty years on, and smiles. "It stayed with me."

The Nazis are gone, but Hungary doesn't become a democracy. A Stalinist regime rolls in instead. She grows up under portraits of different tyrants, wearing a yellow star for one and a red one for the other. University, when she finally gets there, is a negotiation with a party that wants engineers more than physicists. She would have liked to be a meteorologist but the Communist bureaucrats tell her to study electrical engineering instead. "Meteorology might have been fun," she says later. "But so was engineering.

She graduates in 1956 from the Technical University of Budapest with a degree in electrical/electronic engineering, part of the first post war cohort of women in the field. The Party assigns her to EMG, a firm building oscilloscopes and instruments for the Eastern Bloc. It isn't what she chose, but it turns out to be fascinating, sampling oscilloscopes, multichannel television, the beginnings of what will become digital infrastructure and for six months she thought that would be her life.

October 1956 brings the Hungarian uprising, Soviet tanks on the streets, the brief hope of change crushed in a week. Amid the chaos, she and her husband John, also an engineer, decide to leave. "We joined 180,000 others who fled Hungary and left the country illegally," Once in Paris the British consulate turns them down, on the technicality that asylum was only available to Hungarians still in Austria; Eventually, after more than 150 job applications, they finally got offers from Pye in Cambridge, which unlocked work permits.

Britain in the late fifties is cold, ration scarred, and institutionally polite. British Jewry is polite too, in its own way. Her father, an old man with Parkinson's, Biblical Hebrew and no English, thinks he might want to join a synagogue. John takes him to a Golders Green shul for Rosh Hashanah. The shammes asks who they are. John explains: refugees from Hungary, penniless, sick, hoping to find a community. The rabbi says you need two sponsors to join. "We don't know two Jews in the whole country," John replies. The rabbi tells them to come back on Saturday; there will be hot soup at kiddush. "That's British Jewry," Agnes says. "He didn't say no. But he didn't say yes either."

By then she is already on a path that will make her, quietly, one of the people who wired up the late twentieth century. She works at Pye on colour television circuits; at EMG she helped build the Hungarian TV network, now she's tangling with its British cousin. She moves into computing when it's still an odd little corner of telecoms, designing embedded computers for Rank Xerox, radar systems for Plessey, kit for the Admiralty and BT. Later she teaches at Kingston Polytechnic and consults across Europe, eventually, the third woman ever elected a Fellow of the Royal Academy of Engineering.

None of that is what she will tell you first. "My main achievement is to be alive," She only becomes a "Holocaust educator" by accident, drafted in after she retires from active engineering in her mid seventies to care for John when he becomes seriously ill. Until then she has kept her story largely to herself; she is suspicious, as a scientist, of drawing conclusions from a sample of one. "A sample of one tells you nothing," she says. "Why should anyone be interested in my story?"

It takes a granddaughter to crack that, by asking too many questions to ignore. The Holocaust Educational Trust brings her onto its books; she becomes the woman in the PowerPoint slide in a hundred assemblies, the voice that makes the Debrecen ghetto something more than a bullet point. In 2021 she gets an MBE for services to Holocaust education and awareness; by 2025 she is booked two years ahead, still taking trains up to places like Bangor to talk to undergraduates about forced labour and oscilloscopes.

When you prod at the ethics of all this, at your own queasiness about "using" Holocaust survivors in art or education, she doesn't let you off easily. She understands exploitation; she's had her own story cut and trimmed to fit other people's formats often enough. She has also seen what silence does. One of her closest friends, Eve Broseau, grew up in post war London with parents who had survived by accident; in Britain on honeymoon from Kraków when the war broke out, told by their families not to come back. They refused to talk about any of it.

Everyone else at school seemed to have grannies and cousins; Eve had no extended family and no explanations. Every time she asked, her parents deflected, and she spent her childhood convinced she was unloved because she was unlovable, "really quite severely affected by the silence of the family," they diverted every question. So, she thought it was her fault."

Agnes's own daughter Anna gives a different verdict. "Growing up with a hidden child father and a ghetto and camp mother, she says, you had no hang-ups about it. It was not forbidden, nor was it forced upon us. If we asked questions, you answered. And if we didn't, you didn't. But it was always in the air." The air includes small things: never wasting a crust, folding and re using paper, wearing the clothes of dead relatives because they feel better on her skin than anything bought new. Trauma expressed as thrift.

The engineering mind never really switched off either. She worries about the science of memory, about the statistical weight of single lives. Sitting with you, she toggles between her uncles in the labour battalions and the grandchildren of Nazis now teaching Holocaust studies in Munich. She is writing a book with one of them, Professor Anja Ballis, and a British computer scientist, Ian Pyle: Harmage and Hope: Anecdotes on Exclusion, Prejudice, and Harm.

"Harmage," a new word she's coined, names the total harm caused by any kind of prejudice; because you wear a hijab, because you're gay, because you're fat, because you're a Jew. She builds a model of how that harm accumulates, from petty slights to pogroms; Ballis writes the education chapters about how you might teach your way out of it.

She insists that in some ways the descendants of perpetrators have it harder. “It’s always the innocent who suffer,” she says. “I have nothing to be ashamed of. They carry the burden of shame. Anja is the granddaughter of a Nazi. She lives with the shame of that. I have nothing to be ashamed of. So, who is better off?

Religion doesn’t interest her much. When you ask if her experiences affected her faith, she says they didn’t, because there was nothing there to affect. “I am totally without religion,” she says. Her parents were socialist, anti clerical, too poor to pay synagogue fees. Later, when you tell her you identify as a Jew but fight with the faith every day, she is sympathetic but unmoved. “I’m not frightened to talk about anything,” she says. God included.

What she cares about is questions, and the right to ask them. That, she thinks, is the Jewish home environment at its best, but she rejects the easy generalisation when you float it. For every family like hers or Peter Lantos’s, the “distinguished medical professor” whose memoir Parallel Lines she buys because she’s fascinated by what a five year old remembers, there is another where curiosity is shut down. Once again, the pattern matters more than the single anecdote.

By the time you’re rewinding the last roll, she has taken you from Debrecen to Bor, from EMG oscilloscopes to Kingston Poly, from the Danube shoes to a German professor weeping over her grandfather’s SS file. She has shown you the family portrait by a young photographer, Freddy Aranda, that won a prize because it holds three generations of grief and defiance in one frame; she has pointed out the small picture of her dead daughter in the background that they didn’t even notice on the day of the shoot.

She has told you that every group portrait is really about the photographer’s own biography whether they admit it or not. You tell her that, amongst others, Picasso said every portrait is a self portrait. “Oh,” she says. “Yes.”

When I pack the Leica away, she asks you to slam the outer door, not the inner, so she knows it’s properly locked. She has things to get on with: emails with Anja in Munich; a draft chapter on Harmage. Before you go, you tell her she is the first person in this project you’ve photographed. She laughs and says if all your films come out blank, you’re welcome to come back and start again.

I step out into a London street that looks like every other London street and wonder, not for the first time, how much history any one semi detached can be expected to hold. Debrecen was “like Manchester”; I grew up a long way from Debrecen, in suburban South Manchester, but the community around my grandparents’ table was thick with refugees from ’56 and before; for me, Hungarians were never an abstraction but, honorary aunts and uncles.

Now the circle has widened again. An old woman who once stitched fuses in an Austrian armaments plant goes on YouTube to tell Swiss teenagers why hatred harms the hater as much as the hated. A girl who sat at her grandfather’s knee and asked why there were no uncles, grows up to press her into writing a memoir; a Hungarian co op founder’s daughter explains sampling oscilloscopes to British undergraduates and calls herself an “outsider who changed the system”.

She will tell you, stubbornly, that her sample of one proves nothing. Then she will walk into another school hall with Yellow Star – Red Star under her arm and talk about three acts and a circle that keeps getting bigger, and you realise that sometimes one is exactly the sample size you need.

The Equipment

Leica iiia camera with 5cm Summar Lens

ORWO Original WOlfen UN54 35mm Film Stock

Leica 9cm Elmar Lens

Angela Schluter

Nazi father, Hockney in term time

There's a tube strike and I'm running on borrowed parking meter time with a 1937 Leica over my shoulder and enough film to shoot the Godfather. Angela Schluter opens the door.

If you didn't know the backstory, you'd clock her perhaps as a retired academic, someone who has spent a lifetime translating chaos into order, not an art-world veteran and colleague of Hockney. Yes, that Hockney. "My friend David," she says lightly, as if we're discussing some-one from the bridge club rather than one of Britain's most in-fluential living artists.

What you wouldn't immediately see is this: she may have been the only Jewish baby born in a Nazi hospital.

Her mother was Edith Hahn; Viennese law stu-dent, forced labourer, underground fugitive, acci-dental Nazi wife, and ultimately one of the most improbable survivors of the Holocaust. The part that sounds like surrealist theatre is true: Edith survived by assuming a false Chris-tian identity and marrying a Nazi Party member who knew she was Jewish. Angela is the liv-ing proof of that contradiction. And contradiction is the whole point.

Munich, 1942.

Edith Hahn is in hiding under forged Christian papers, living as "Gretel Denner." She's exhausted from forced labour, first in the asparagus fields, then a paper factory. She sits down on a bench at an exhibition. A young man sits beside her and starts talking about how won-derful Hitler is. She says almost nothing. He doesn't notice.
His name is Werner Vetter. He works for Arado. He's a card-carrying Nazi. Confident, blonde, the kind of man who walks into a room and assumes the oxygen belongs to him.

He falls in love. He writes letters, sends tele-grams. He takes Edith to the Haus der Deutschen Kunst, Hitler's temple to approved art and asks her to marry him. She bends forward and whis-pers in his ear: "I'm a Jew. And I'm living under a false identity." He freezes. "It doesn't matter." Of course it mattered. But he married her anyway.

Angela grew up with a paradox most of us would run from: her father loved her mother enough not to betray her to the Gestapo. He also believed Jews were racially inferior. "He never stopped be-lieving it," she tells me. "Not really." He later sent her a 28-page letter at-tempting to prove Jewish blood "taints" Aryan blood.

He protected Edith. He hit Angela so hard at six-teen that he dislocated her jaw. Both are true, An-gela's story doesn't give you the luxury of straight lines. Her father was a charismatic, vio-lent, ideo-logue. Married seven times and a Nazi to the end. "He was a stranger to me," she says, " but without him, I wouldn't exist" It's a history that argues with itself.


Gemeinsame leibliche Kinder der Eheleute,
deren Eheschließung auf Seite 2—5 beurkundet ist: Erstes Kind
Geburtsurkunde
E1
(Standesamt) Brandenburg (Havel) Nr. 659/44
Maria Angelika Vetter
ist am 9. April 1944
in Brandenburg (Havel) geboren.
Vater: Werner Vetter Maler
evangelisch
Mutter: Margarete geborene
Denner evangelisch
Änderungen der Eintragung:
Brandenburg (Havel) den 17. 4. 1944
Der Standesbeamte
(Siegel)
In Vertretung

Angela's Nazi birth certificate

Werner Vetter in his Wehrmacht Uniform, Spetember 1944

London, 1948.
After the war, Edith fled the K-5, East German secret police, and landed in London with a four-year-old Angela and almost nothing. They lived in one room in Notting Hill, back when Notting Hill was still a slum. “One room,” Angela says. “Smaller than this.”

In Austria her mother had been a judge; in England, she cleaned houses. Angela changed her name from Angelica; Germans weren’t popular in 1948. She grew up speaking German at home and English at school. Jewish, but not religious. Austrian by blood. German by birth. British by survival. “I was very angry when I found out,” she tells me. “I’d lived with her for fifty-two years and she hadn’t told me everything.”

You can see why she was drawn to art, where ambiguity wasn’t a flaw but the point. At the Royal College of Art in the 1960s, she found herself among a generation determined to tear down the polite myths of post-war Britain. Hockney was there. So were others who would go on to define British culture. It was an electric, rule-breaking, cigarette smoking, ambitious RCA.

It was a time when colour returned to a country that had known too much grey.

“I went straight to the Masters,” she says. In another era, her career might have unfolded dif-ferently. Angela was there, but she was a woman in the 1960s art world. “Three meals a day mattered” she says. Practicality won out. Teaching paid the bills, but the artist never left.

When I move through her home, there are canvases, small works, objects carefully placed. An eye trained at the RCA doesn’t switch off.

If Edith survived by instinct, Angela survives by structure. When her mother handed her a briefcase of “a few letters,” Angela almost missed the magni-tude. Inside were over 300 documents: slave labour correspondence, deportation orders, Ge-stapo paperwork, love letters written in pencil. It is now the largest single person Holocaust archive in the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Angela took it to Sotheby’s. It sold for $140,000, four times the estimate, and was donated.

That decision feels very RCA. Understand the value. Control the narrative. Place the work where it will outlive you. Memory, for Angela, is not sentiment, it’s composition. It needs to be framed correctly.

I ask her to sit by the window. London light is soft but unforgiving, it reveals structure. She settles, not poses. There’s something architectural about her face. Not fragile. Not bitter. Alert. We talk about language. Forced labour versus slave labour. “Forced’ is too soft,” she says. “It was slave labour,” accuracy is her resistance.

She talks about German bureaucracy, Jews taxed on wages in camps, pension contributions deducted from people scheduled for extermination. The surreal neatness of genocide with bookkeeping. This is not trauma performed for sympathy. This is analysis, the artist looking clearly at what others prefer to blur.

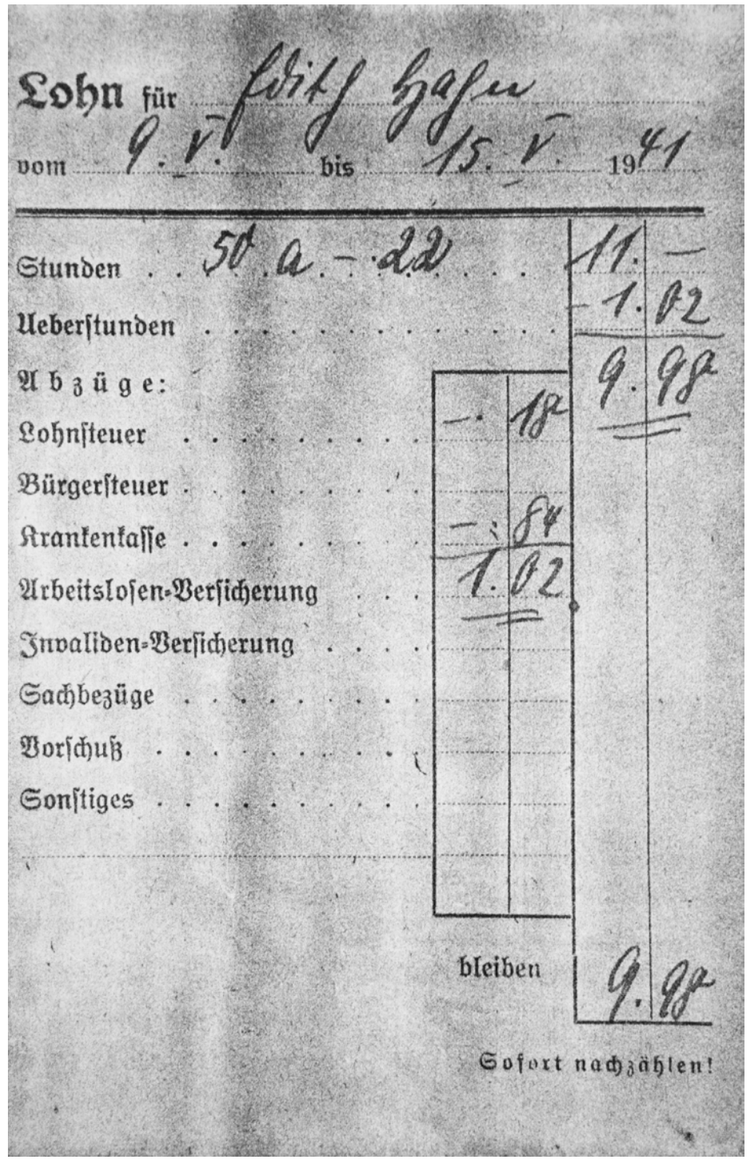
We live in a binary era. Hero or villain. Victim or perpetrator. Cancel or deify. Angela Schluter doesn’t fit. The Jewish daughter of a Nazi.

A contemporary of David Hockney. Heir to one of the most significant personal Holocaust archives in existence. Angela Schluter doesn’t fit.

When I pack the Leica away, she asks for prints. “I want to send them to my children,” she says. “Look how beautiful your mother is.” That’s her line. Not ideology. Not spectacle. Family.

Her history isn’t abstract. Angela inherited survival, she studied art in swinging London with Hockney and grew up to make sure her mother’s paperwork outlived her father’s propa-ganda As we wrapped up, she reflected on what it meant to grow up inside a story historians call unique.

“I didn’t think of it as history,It was just my life.”



Edith's wage slip (Lohnzettel) for her forced labour, with the grimly ironic inclusion of standard deductions like health and unemployment insurance.

Eva Klein

Not My First Hurdle

The first thing Eva Klein tells me is that her nephew might ring from New York while I'm photographing her. "He usually FaceTime's every afternoon," she says, matter of fact, as I shift a lamp and apologise for moving her furniture. If he calls, we'll stop. He was three when he was deported; they were together then, in Vienna, and they're together now on a screen that fits in her hand.

She has lived in this sheltered flat in north west London for four years. "Quite a few days, you know," she says, smiling at the understatement. The kettle, the family photographs, the half read paper on the table, it could be any London pensioner's place. Except most London pensioners don't talk quite so calmly about learning to chop firewood as a teenage slave labourer, or dodging a bullet that a German soldier aimed at their head.

I ask her, as I do with everyone in this project, if I can move a lamp. "You can do everything," she says. I get her to sit where the window light falls. She watches me with the Leica, amused, and then, forgets about the camera and begins.

Eva was born in Debrecen, eastern Hungary, in May 1929, the youngest of four children in an Orthodox family. Her father died when she was very young; her mother ran a grocery shop and raised four kids without help. Debrecen was a big provincial city with a tight knit Jewish quarter. "I didn't travel," she says when I ask if she knew much beyond it.

The Germans occupied Hungary in March 1944. In Debrecen, as in a hundred other towns, the steps came fast: yellow stars, a small ghetto, then a larger one, then the brick factory on the edge of town where Jews waited in the mud for the trains. Eva was fifteen.

She remembers one bucket of water for eighty people in their wagon. The destination was meant to be Auschwitz.

Allied bombing changed that. Somewhere along the line the train turned back and was diverted into Austria. Eva and her family ended up in Strasshof, a forced labour camp outside Vienna that took about twenty thousand Hungarian Jews from the summer transports and scattered them as work details across the region.

"For fifteen year old me, it meant I was lucky," she says. "I could stay with my mother and my brother. Many people were not so lucky."

Work, at first, meant shifting school benches from one side of a building to the other in a requisitioned school near a cemetery. Later she was moved to what she calls the Holzlagerplatz, the wood store, cutting and stacking logs for other people's stoves. "I was fifteen," she shrugs. "Old enough to do it." Ten months of that. Then the front moved closer.

In April 1945, with the Red Army pushing towards Vienna, the guards emptied the camp. "They emptied the lager where we were, and we started marching towards Mauthausen," she says. When they left there were eleven in their little group: eight adults, three children.

One of the kids was her nephew, about four. His mother, Eva's sister in law, had another child in her arms. In the dark they came to a shed and ducked inside, the way hunted people have always done.

My brother had already been beaten by Hungarian Arrow Cross men and could hardly walk," she says. "He said, 'If I can open the door and I'm not coming back, you follow me. It means that we can all hide there.'" They squeezed into the shed and waited. In the middle of the night her sister in law made the calculation no parent should ever have to make. "She said, 'You're heavy enough. We can't go with three children. We have to hide.' And we said goodbye. Let's hope for the best."
In the morning the hiding place was discovered by the Volkssturm, the Nazi people's militia. The group was put on another transport, not north into the killing fields but north west again, to a camp Eva had never heard of. "We were taken to Theresienstadt," she says. "We didn't know much about it."

Theresienstadt / Terezín was the grim marketing brochure of the Holocaust, a "model ghetto" the Nazis showed the Red Cross. By the time Eva arrived, in the spring of 1945, death and disease were everywhere and the pretence had worn thin. She turned sixteen there. The Red Army was at the gates.

Two days before liberation, on 6 May, she and the other children in her barrack received little parcels from the Red Cross. "It was my birthday," she says. "We had a piece of chocolate. That was my birthday present."

The real present came on 8 May. "They said, the Russians are here, the war is over, the Germans are retreating. If you don't believe me, go to the window." Eva scrambled onto the nearest bed and craned towards the glass. "We were on the third floor. I jumped up on the bed near the window to see what's going on in the street." On the street below, a German soldier looked up, saw a teenage girl in a barrack window and raised his rifle. "He was aiming at me and pulled the trigger," she says. "I lowered my head and the bullet went just above my head into the wall under the ceiling." Liberation and murder were literally centimetres apart.

Decades later she went back to Theresienstadt twice, trying to find the hole the bullet made. "We couldn't even get into the yard of this building," she says. "It was in such a state. I never managed, and I will never see it again." She says it without drama, the way you'd talk about never making it back to a childhood swimming pool.

After the war she and her mother went back to Debrecen. The city was different; almost everyone was gone. Her brother Miklós, the older one, an artist, had one clear project. "He said the world had to see what they did," she tells Nadine Wojakovski in the article she shows me. "The way they tried to kill the Jews, from the beginning to the gas chambers."
He carved sixteen woodcuts that told that story in black, slashing lines: round ups, beatings, selections, chimneys. They were printed as a limited edition in 1946, signed "Ben Binyamin" in honour of their father. Miklós made aliyah to Israel in 1957 and died in 1965, never knowing that seven of his prints had found their way into a DP Haggadah produced by the US Army for survivors and liberators at a Passover seder in Munich. "Before Lanzmann's Shoah and Anne Frank, it was my brother who told the story through art," Eva says in that piece, not boasting, just stating a chronology.

Her own path out of Hungary was more tangled. In 1956, after the failed uprising against Soviet rule, she and her husband, László, left again. "We had to leave Hungary and leave everything again," she says. They walked across the border into Austria. "It wasn't difficult," she says dryly. "I was only pregnant."

In Vienna her luck turned again. The pregnancy failed; what followed was eight months in and out of hospital. "I had to give birth to the foetus," she tells me, matter of fact, then repeats it to make sure I've heard. "From Sunday until Thursday." Then the long convalescence. "Coming here, it wasn't just like 'and we are here'," she says. "But I'm still here."

By then her mother, brother and sister in law had gone to Israel. Former pupils of her brother, who had been a high school teacher, urged him to get Eva over too. One of them, now a gynaecologist, offered to look after her. "If she is so ill, why should she be ill in Vienna?" he said. "Let's try it." So she went alone to Israel, learned Hebrew, found work. László, meanwhile, took a job as a shoe designer in a factory in South Wales that had advertised in Austria.

For a while they lived on different sides of Europe, she in Israel, he in Ebbw Vale. Her mother lost patience. "She said, look, what do you want? Do you want a divorce? Do you want to carry on? You have to decide." Eva decided. With letters from László's factory vouching that he had "a good job and is reliable" – and that his pay would soon rise to the dizzying sum of £2, 2s a week, she secured the paperwork from the British consulate and in 1959 came to join him.

They moved first to South Wales, then later to London, where she worked for Jewish organisations in Piccadilly and raised a family. By 2020, Eva had been in London for sixty years. She'd lived under the Germans, the Soviets and the Austrians; the idea of being told to stay inside by a virus did not impress her. "The virus was not my first hurdle in life," she said. "I take each day as it comes. I've lived under the Germans, the Soviets and as a prisoner.

I ask how she coped with lockdown. "On my own, thank God," she says. Then she laughs at my face. "No, I have friends here. And I have the phone. And my nephew on FaceTime." That nephew is the little boy from the Vienna march, now in New York, who calls his aunt most days.

The organisations catch up with her too. AJR Refugee Voices record her; the Imperial War Museum bring her in for an audio interview. School groups come to hear about Debrecen and Strasshof and the bullet in the wall. This is not something she ever set out to do, but once she starts she doesn't stop. "If I can help with any project, I'm willing," she tells me as I'm packing the camera away. "I have the time. I'm a time millionaire."

At one point in our conversation, she describes something that happened in 1945 that sounds like the beginning of a fairy tale and is, in fact, just another example of a child refusing to accept that she will never see anyone again.

After liberation, when they are still in Theresienstadt, she hears people in the camp talking Yiddish. "They mentioned a place in Czechoslovakia where my relatives used to live," she says. "I'd never been there, but I heard the name so many times." The talk is about a Jewish soldier from that village who has joined the Czechoslovak army. Eva asks his name. It's her cousin's.

Before the war he had been a driver in Debrecen, planning to go back to his village in what was then Czechoslovakia. "My mother begged him not to go, because Czechoslovakia was already in German hands," she says. "He said, 'Don't worry. As soon as I can, I will escape."

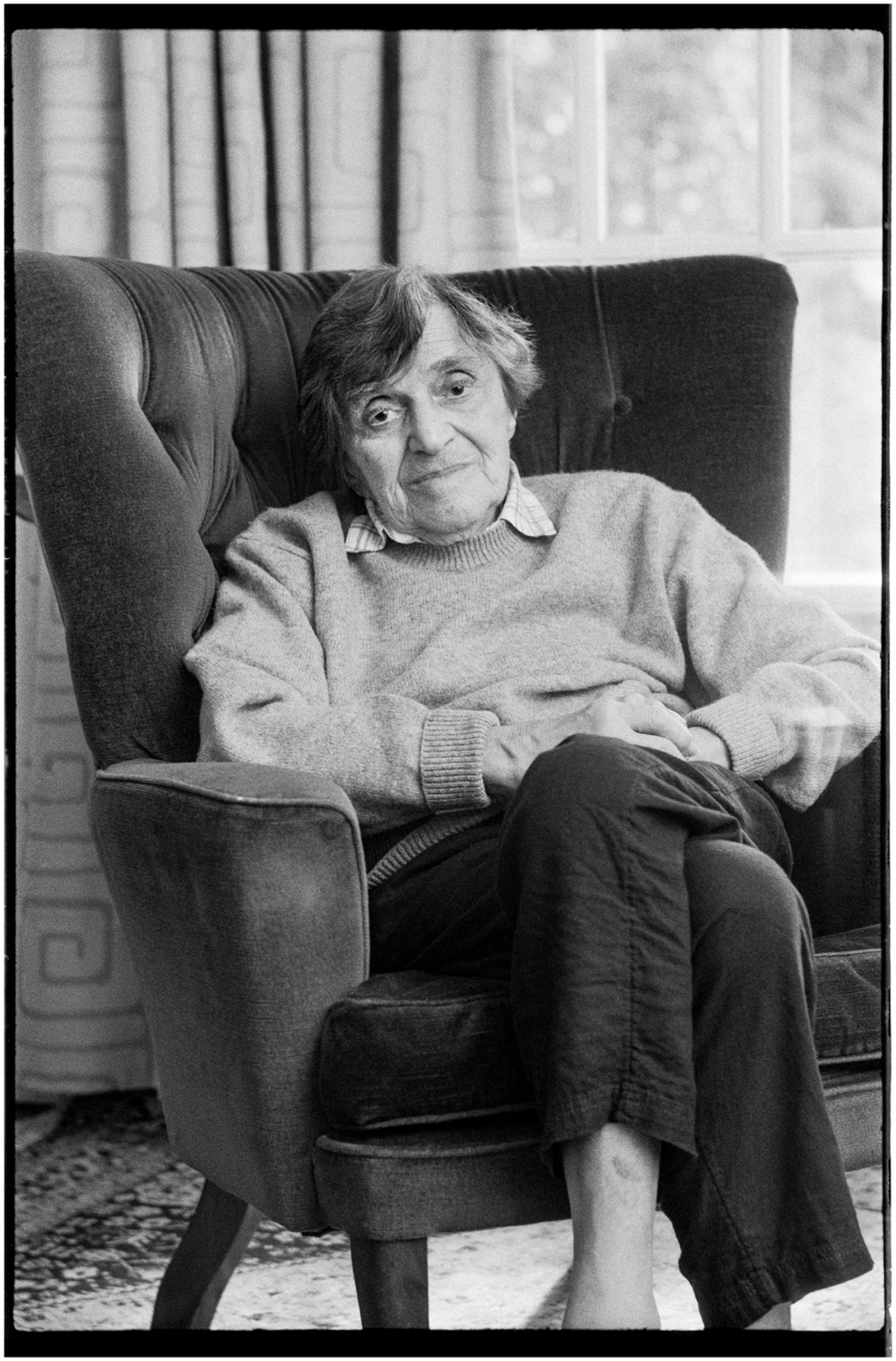
In Theresienstadt she borrows a scrap of paper and writes him a letter in Hungarian. "I wrote that I am so and so, my mother, brother and sister in law, we are here in Theresienstadt," she says. She gives the letter to the woman going to see him. A week later her cousin appears in the camp, in uniform, looking for her. He takes them to Prague. "The rest is history," she says, and smiles.

The rest of that history includes grandchildren, work, anniversaries, griefs that have nothing to do with Germans or Soviets. It also includes these odd afternoons when strangers come to rearrange her lamps and ask her to look out of the window "for just one more frame".

I find myself thinking about that other window, the one in Theresienstadt in May 1945. About the bullet that is still in that wall, and the girl who ducked at the right moment. About how she has spent the rest of her life not quite ducking, staying visible, telling the story, even when it means going back in her mind to a brick factory in Debrecen, a wood yard outside Vienna, a shed in the dark.

When I'm done and the film is rewound, I tell her roughly when the exhibition will be. "Please God," she says. "If I'm still here." Then she grins. "I think I will be. I have a few more hurdles left in me." "I didn't even dream of being alive at ninety one," she said. "I take every day as it comes."

There are worse guides to survival.



Maria Janik

False Papers, True Life: A life in Disguise

By the time you find her in Surbiton, her name has worn three different faces and a couple of nicknames. On paper she is Gela Stern, born in Lwów on 31 August 1926, the child of assimilated Warsaw Jews who moved east for work and modern life. In wartime, she becomes Maria Wysocka, a Polish Catholic girl with a forged birth certificate. In England, she is Maria Janik, wife, mother, teacher of English, the woman everyone on this street knows simply as Maria. And her family still calls her Lucia, the everyday name from a city that has been Polish, Soviet and Ukrainian since she last lived there.

At ninety nine, the multiplicity still makes her neighbours blink. A few weeks previously, her daughter Anna threw a small tea for her birthday. Old Surbiton friends who have known her as Maria for decades watch her family drop “Lucia” into the conversation and look faintly panicked, as if they’ve turned up at the wrong house. “That’s the problem with a false identity,” she says half joking. “Double identity.” She laughs and shrugs. “They’re very confused.”

The woman you meet sits in a light, neat back room, a roll up screen on the wall from the days when her husband projected slides of holidays. She is small, sharp and amused. Ask about life before the war and she doesn’t start with politics; she starts with holidays.“It was good,” she says. “Lovely long holidays.”

Her parents are comfortably off. Both from Warsaw originally, they have made a life in Lwów/Lemberg/Lviv, depending on who holds the map, where her father runs a business with his brother and the family lives in a flat opposite the park. “It was really lovely,” she says. Lawyers’ chambers upstairs, trees outside, the feeling of being in the middle of a modern city. There’s a maid because “you had to have a maid,” Anna teases, and Maria counters that the people who were maids didn’t have maids.

They are Jewish but assimilated: a brief spell at Hebrew school, a father who prays every morning but doesn’t run the house as a shtetl. Her father’s Warsaw clan is a tangle of extremes; pious brothers sitting on rabbinical courts, socialist sons in politics, tradition and revolt under one roof. “How do you manage a household like that?” Anna asks now. “She died very young,” Maria says of her grandmother. “You have to ask yourself why.”

On 31 August 1939, she turns thirteen. The next day, Germany invades Poland. “My birthday coincided with the outbreak of war,” she says. “On 1st of September, war was declared.”The city holds its breath, then exhales in the wrong direction. People cluster around radios; when Britain declares war a few days later, she remembers crowds cheering, convinced this will somehow make it all go away. At thirteen you don’t know better; everyone thinks, yes, great, it'll all be over soon.

What Lwów gets first is the wrong liberator. Under the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, the city falls into the Soviet zone. Red Army troops roll in; the clocks jump to Moscow time; portraits of Stalin go up where Polish eagles had been. For two years, life rearranges itself under a different occupier. School timetables change. Russian becomes the language that matters.

The terror runs on class. "Enemies of the people" are taken at night not because they are Jews but because they are rich, or educated, or both. Families like hers, visibly bourgeois, feel the pressure. "The Russians we hated," she says without drama. There are prison murders when they panic and retreat; people vanish into the Soviet interior with less paperwork than it takes to buy bread.

In June 1941, the pact collapses.

Hitler turns on his ally. The Germans come. The city changes hands in chaos: one army running, another roaring in behind it. When the Wehrmacht arrives, there are corpses in the prisons the Russians have just abandoned; then the cold, practised rhythm of Nazi policy. Her birthday that year is under German occupation.

They don't go into a sealed ghetto overnight. First comes the enforced move from the "lovely" flat by the park into what she calls an "open ghetto", a poorer district where Jews are herded but the walls are not yet built. Her mother's younger sister comes from Warsaw to spend the holidays and ends up stuck, living with them as the screws tighten. The cafes and jokes of Soviet Lwów are over. Now there are Aktionen.

She tells you the story of her mother in a flat voice. One winter morning, January or February 1942, she thinks, her mother pops next door to a little makeshift shop in the building to buy food.

She is gone too long. Thirteen-year-old Lucia tells her aunt she'll go and see what's keeping her. Downstairs she finds her mother with three or four other women and two men who may or may not be in uniform; she can no longer swear whether they wore armbands or caps. The men tell her to stay.

After a while they march the women out, down the street, to Brygidki, the prison not far away. She walks behind her mother, who isn't even dressed for the weather. It is dirty snow cold, the sort of day when you wrap a scarf twice around your neck. Her mother has no scarf.

At the door, the women go in. As Lucia steps forward, a hand grabs her by the back of the neck and shoves her hard enough that she stumbles. The door slams in her face. That, she tells you, is the last time she sees her mother. At first she assumes it's an arrest, that there will be a fine and a release. For three or four days, she and her aunt bring food to the prison and hand it in; once, a note comes back on the label of a liqueur bottle, her mother asking after "Rushenka", a concern that underlines how ordinary a woman about to be erased can be. Then, one morning, everyone is gone. "I'm sure they didn't take them to a camp," she says. "This was early days. Probably to the nearest little forest, where they were shot."

Her father is still alive, working at Janowska, a railway station turned labour camp on the edge of the city, shovelling coal. They are moved again, this time into a closed ghetto behind more solid lines. Aktionen now mean round ups in the street, raids on flats, people driven to squares and sidings. One of these falls around her sixteenth birthday in August. It is hot. Her father knows an action is coming and tells her to stay in; if she's seen, she'll be taken. He hides her in an empty oil tank, a metal drum in some back yard, and closes the lid.

She spends three or four days in that drum while the city is scoured. Time collapses into thirst and the sound of boots and shouting outside, the occasional crack of a shot. At one point another woman and her daughter are pushed in with her. "They were nice," she says. "Because I was in it for about four days." Her father slips back when he can with food, listening for the moment the noise outside ebbs. When things "cool down", he eases the lid off and she crawls out into air that doesn't smell of rust and fear.

Soon after, he produces the piece of paper that will change the rest of her life. "False papers don't materialise from nowhere. 'I don't know how my father did it,' she says now, 'but he somehow obtained a false birth certificate, even though there was very little money left, we had already tried to buy out my mother.'" The new birth certificate says she is Maria Wysocka, Catholic, Polish, not Jewish. At sixteen, she takes off the little necklace her uncle gave her, a medallion with Moses and the Ten Commandments. "I remember being very sorry," she says. "I said to him, I'll keep it. He said, what do you think, you can go with it? Leave it." She leaves it. Identity becomes something you wear or take off according to what might get you killed.

In the ghetto she has become close to a girl from western Poland, Rysia Horowitz, who lives in the same building with her mother. Rysia is engaged, "sort of", to a boy from a wealthy chocolate making family; his people have money, connections, plans. One day Rysia hints at a scheme but gives no details. Then she and her mother disappear. Later, astonishingly, Rysia reappears, slipping back into the ghetto to find Lucia and whisper an invitation: they are in Dęba, it's safer for the moment, they're working in a German office, a Lohnstelle calculating wages. "I think you may come and stay with us," she says.

So when her father gives her the Catholic birth certificate, she has somewhere to point it. She leaves Lwów with that scrap of paper in her pocket and the memory of the oil drum still buzzing in her nervous system. "I remember thinking, don't worry about me, I'll be all right," she says now, slightly amazed at her own teenage bravado. "Looking backwards, you see how dangerous it was. But looking forwards, you don't really know the bigger picture."

In Dęba she lives for a while with Rysia and the fiancé. There is a flicker of almost normal life: a bed of her own, work that isn't hiding, evenings when talk is about wages and rations instead of transports. She rents a little room nearby. Then the temperature rises again: rumours of new round ups, names on lists. One day Rysia and the man are gone. Maria stays a few days longer, feeling the walls close in, then decides she can't.

Back in Lwów she doesn't dare go near the old flat. Instead she goes to the only address she can risk: the nanny who once worked for the chocolate boy's family, whose street she remembers from Rysia's stories. The nanny lets her in and tells her the news: the boy has been taken; Rysia has been grabbed, "taken from my hands", because she "didn't look Jewish." They are both gone. The nanny hides Maria in her tiny flat, so thoroughly that she only creeps to the lavatory at night. "I stayed with her for quite a few days," she says. From this cramped safety, they plan the next move.

Now survival comes through official channels. The German labour office, the Arbeitsamt, is recruiting Polish girls to work in the Reich. The nanny takes her there as Maria Wysocka, a good Catholic with flawless Polish and a Lohnstelle employment paper. She is accepted. "I got a job in a place called Tuzig, which is in Bavaria," she says. Tutzing, on the lake near Munich: she leaves occupied Poland for Germany as an "official" worker. No cattle car, no striped uniform. Just a girl with a suitcase and a name that fits her papers.

The Arbeitsamt sends her first to Café Kameloper in Tutzing, then on to Weilheim, a town on the road to Munich, where she works in a café that still exists under the same name. She is maid, cleaner, waitress, dogsbody; whatever the others don't want to do. "The other maids didn't want to do it, but I was happy," she says. There is hard work, food somewhere in the building, a real bed. "I never really physically suffered," she says later. "I was hungry, but not the way people in the camp were."

The war, though, is always in the room. The café in Weilheim sits under the flight path of bombers heading for Munich. "When they were coming through to bomb Munich, they would fly past," she remembers. "And I just had to keep a straight face." The customers around her may be Wehrmacht soldiers or party men; she brings coffee to people whose uniforms would kill her if they saw the wrong document.

Liberation arrives as noise. Near Weilheim is Murnau, where a large camp of Polish officers, an Oflag, is held. As the Americans approach in 1945, she hears a huge roar from that direction: thousands of Polish voices shouting "hurrah" as the guards melt away. "That really was dramatic," she says. She drifts towards them and is "adopted"

by the Poles, pulled into the intense little community forming around the freed officers. "They were very nice," she says. "Of course, I was married in this old camp," she adds, half joking, half signalling that this is where she met the man she will follow to England.

"After" means more choices. General Anders and the Polish forces under British command urge Poles to stay in the West. Communist propaganda pulls the other way. "Many people didn't live to regret it," she says of those who go back to a Soviet dominated Poland. For her, the calculation is simple. In Poland, everyone is gone. In Paris, there may still be an aunt, her mother's younger sister, who left in the 1920s for dressmaking work and never came back. So, she moves with Anders' people towards Italy and the British.

A Polish girls' school, originally in Bari, has been set up for the children of deportees and soldiers. When those pupils are later allowed into Britain, the school follows. Maria never sees Bari, but once on British soil she joins the school. "I wanted to go to school, because I was so uneducated," she says; the years in the ghetto, café and DP camps have blown a hole in her education.

Her route south is as improvised as everything else. Polish lorries run to the Austrian border; before the Brenner Pass, passengers get off and walk the last stretch, crossing on foot from one exhausted Axis country into another. "We had to get off the van and walk over the Brenner," she says. "Then we were in a camp in Italy." In Italy she helps on trains transporting Poles because a friend under the wing of a Polish major has been given a job. The exact geography blurs. What matters is the direction.

Her passage to Britain is arranged under yet another borrowed relationship. A scheme allows Polish soldiers who fought with the Allies to bring "family". Everyone understands that some of this family is fiction. On paper, she becomes the niece of a Polish army cook she has never met. "He never saw me, I never saw him," she says. "But it was on his papers that I came to England."She travels by train and boat, she can't remember the route, only that she crosses the Channel "of course" and ends up in a camp near Liverpool, arriving in the country she once cheered from afar when it went to war with Germany.
England in 1946 is grey, rationed, bomb scarred; it is also, safety. The British relationship with the Poles is skewed: grateful for their contribution, especially in the air, but nervous of upsetting Stalin. Poles are kept off VE Day parades even as they're quietly allowed to stay. Her husband never forgot watching that parade and seeing no Polish uniforms, because "the English didn't want to upset others". Maria feels the irony: the country that saved her can't bear to advertise who helped it fight.

Who she is in England is not an abstract question. In one camp she befriends a woman, Ada. One evening Ada says, "I have to tell you, I'm Jewish." Maria tells her she is too. Ada later reclaims her Jewish surname, Willemann. Maria does not. "I wasn't very nice," she says of that time. She means she was careful. Aside from Ada, she tells no one. She stays Maria, not Lucia or Gela, and when things get serious with the Polish Catholic who will be her husband, she insists on telling him. "I felt that he has to know the truth," she says.

She writes him a letter. He turns up on his motorbike and says, "What is all this about?" Then he stays.

She also pulls one more thread from the wreckage: family. Her cousin David, whose father had the sense to put him on a Kindertransport from Berlin in May 1939, is somewhere in England. She knows he exists, knows roughly that his mother's brother owned a cinema. Through fragments of address and persistence, she finds him. His children and grandchildren, the little Stern diaspora in Britain, grow out of that search.

In Surbiton, she and her husband construct a life that, from outside, looks ordinary. They speak English at home with their daughter, send her to a local church school because integrating seems more urgent than reliving pre war fault lines. They are not religious. "We just kind of got on with life," Anna says. "Here we were in Surbiton." The backstory; Lwów, Janowska, Tutzing, Murnau, Bari. It is there, but it doesn't dominate; it leaks out over decades in fragments rather than monologues.

Anna, like a certain slice of that second generation, finds herself drawn to the Jewish strand without wanting the religion. She does a kibbutz stint, reads, listens. She always knows her mother's story is different from everyone else's on her street. She mostly keeps it to herself. It becomes private ballast.

Later, she leans into it. A first trip back to Lwów in 1990 with her parents is "a very sad visit", the city shabby and exhausted after decades of Soviet neglect. You didn't just casually go there then. Years later she finds Philippe Sands' East West Street, devours it in a weekend, then goes to a talk and tells him about her mother. "Go back," he says.

So she does, with her own family in 2017 and again with Maria in 2018, flying direct now that Lviv has become a weekend destination. This time they find a city restored: cleaned facades, open cafes, students in the squares. "They really did wonders," Maria says of Ukraine, before Russia's latest war throws that work back into doubt.

Through all of this, Maria's relationship to Jewish communal life stays deliberately modest. She doesn't join boards or committees. What she does, quietly, is volunteer at the Surbiton synagogue's lunch club, serving meals, chatting, washing up. "That is the nearest," she says, to belonging to a formal Jewish structure. Once a week she is just Maria, the woman who helps, not a witness wheeled out for effect. It suits her.

Ask her how she feels about the world now and the decades fold. She talks about Ukraine again, about tanks rolling over borders she knows in her bones, about how Poland, once carved up between Hitler and Stalin, is now the haven for Ukrainians and a pipeline for weapons going east. She talks about Gaza and Israel, about the daily drip of casualty figures, about not seeing an "answer" that doesn't involve more civilians on slabs.

She is angry and bewildered, certain that what is being done is terrible and equally certain that hatred runs deeper than any current front line. "You have to put that behind you at some point," she says of national grudges. "You can't… anyway." The sentence dies off. Some things are too heavy for one line.

What I carry out of the house, along with my camera bag, is how little she has allowed the worst chapters to claim the last word. She insists she is "nothing special", that she didn't suffer like those who went through Auschwitz, that her story has "no high drama". You know that isn't true. Hiding in an oil drum while an Aktion rips through your street is drama. Walking into Bavaria with a forged identity and serving coffee to men whose uniforms mean they would have shot you is drama. Crossing the Brenner on foot, landing in England as the niece of a stranger, reinventing yourself as Maria from Surbiton: all of this is drama.

But in her telling, the centre of gravity sits elsewhere. In the fact that she had, in the end, a "lovely, very good husband and a daughter who is not too bad". In Sunday lunches, grandchildren, shifts in the synagogue kitchen, trips back to Lwów when flights still ran. In the way she can look at the 1937 Leica in your hands, machine from the world that tried to end hers, and say, with a small, appreciative nod, that your light is flattering. "My husband was a keen photographer," she adds. "Could be a pain in the neck. You had to wait till the sun was in the right place." She watches you fuss with your tripod and says, dryly, "Dad would approve of this."

She will be a hundred soon. Sometime not long from now, this woman who has lived three names and two occupations, who has moved from Lwów to Bavaria to Murnau to Bari to Liverpool to Surbiton, will reach a birthday no one queuing outside Brygidki prison in 1942 could have imagined for her.

Maria, Lucia, Gela, sitting in her armchair under her husband's projection screen, letting yet another camera fix her in the light before history moves on again.

Kurt Marx

Broken Glass, Cut Diamonds

Kurt Marx sits in his Stanmore flat telling you he still knows his own name. The room is warm, the blinds half drawn against a fickle London summer, and somewhere between the light stand, the Leica on its tripod and the small electric fan ticking in the corner, he is measuring out the distance between 1939 and now in the small, unhurried anecdotes of a man who has spent a century refusing to let one story be the whole of him.

He was born in Cologne in 1925, an only child in a city that thought of itself as respectable, nothing like the places where history was supposed to happen. His father, Siegmund, managed a men's clothing business, the local agent for a big menswear firm; his mother, Irma, had de-signed dresses for a fashion house before she married. There were Sunday walks by the Rhine, a flat in a decent part of town, holidays, cousins with a Leica good enough to be considered a status symbol. They were, as he likes to say, "proper Germans" who happened to be Jews.

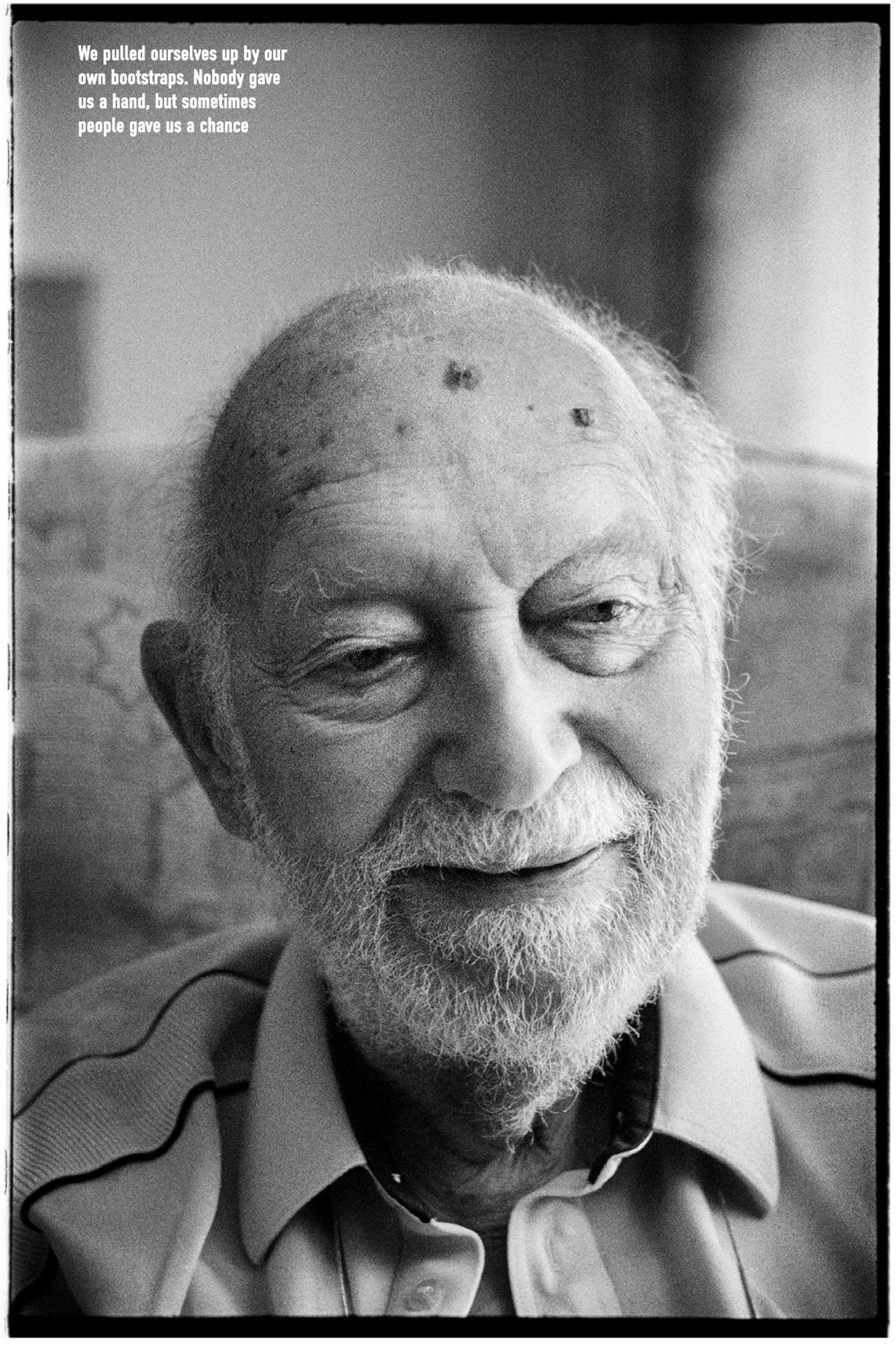
The world shrank in small steps before it shattered. First came the move from a Protestant pri-mary to the municipal Jewish school. Then on to Javne, the Jewish reform grammar school, as the options for Jewish children closed one by one. Parks became off limits. Exams were sud-denly no longer to be sat alongside non Jewish classmates. Antisemitism wasn't yet a night of smashed glass; it was a re drawing of maps in which Jewish life was cordoned off into smaller and smaller spaces while the adults murmured that things would blow over.

A few weeks after his barmitzvah, the glass fell. He remembers going to school by bike after Kristallnacht, past the toy shop on the corner where his favourite board game used to be in the window, the marble floor smashed to gravel and thrown across the pavement like someone had taken a mallet to childhood. Other shops, Jewish names over the doors, boarded and blackened. "First the shop, then the school. Then I knew something was wrong." The synagogue where he'd just read his portion was wrecked; the men were rounded up and taken to camps "for questioning". The disguise of normality had gone.

In that compressed, lethal winter, his headmaster, Erich Klibansky of Javne, read the weather more clearly than most adults. A reserved man with a stiff collar and a stubborn sense of duty, he began organising Kindertransports, writing letters, begging for sponsors, pushing against quota systems and the small brutalities of British bureaucracy. In the time it took the Nazis to move from broken windows to deportations, Klibansky got 130 of his pupils out. Kurt left Co-logne in early 1939 with a suitcase, a schoolboy's English picked up from lessons, and parents who believed they would join him as soon as the paperwork came through. "That was their big mistake," he tells you quietly. "They said, we stay together. We're not going to be parted now."

London, when it arrived, was not a promise but a series of temporary arrangements. A hostel in Minster Road, another in Willesden Lane. There were billets in the countryside too: standing in a village hall with another Jewish boy while local families came in to see which ones they might take home, the lottery of who ended up somewhere kind and who didn't. Kurt calls himself lucky. The family that took him in were decent; there was food, a bed, a place at the table. "With most of us refugee boys, we pulled ourselves up by our own bootstraps," he would say later. "Nobody gave us a hand. But sometimes people gave us a chance."

He got one more year of school before the notices went up: enemy aliens, education finished, if you want to eat, you work. He thought about becom-



ing an engineer, building bridges some-where out in the world; the authorities thought the better use for a 15 year old German Jew was as a factory hand in Bedford. Three hours into his first shift at a big engineering firm, the man-ager called him into the office to tell him the obvious: "You can't work here. You're an enemy alien." The same boy who had been saved as a child refugee was now a potential threat behind a lathe.

So, he did what refugee boys have always done. He swept floors in a music shop, ran errands, watched the clock, felt the walls close in. The work paid for food but not a future. Then some-body mentioned some Belgians from Antwerp who'd evacuated themselves out of London be-cause of the bombing, Jewish diamond men setting up a small polishing workshop in Bedford. He went round. They hadn't planned to take anyone on. They gave him a broom. That was the beginning of the diamond life.

He learned the craft from the bench up, watching, asking questions, taking any task they would trust him with. Polishing first, the slow, exact work of turning rough stones into something that caught the light. Later, cutting, grading, learning to see what other people's eyes skimmed over. It was a trade that valued what your hands and eyes could do more than what your passport said. After the war, the industry scattered across the remnants of empire.

A Belgian company with a government backed licence to buy stones in what was then the Gold Coast needed someone young enough to survive the tropics and experienced enough not to get robbed blind. At home in Bedford, his wife wanted to know why they should move at all. They'd just bought a house. They were making a living. "But to be offered a position like that," his friends said, "is already a great achievement. They're trusting you with millions."

He went. Seven years in Ghana in the 1950s, when independence was an idea you could feel in the air but not yet see on a ballot paper. "It was a black country," he says without flinching. "Very few white people. Half a dozen Jews." Women on the street were either pregnant or car-rying a baby on their backs, or both; everybody looked the same at first, then, slowly, they didn't. The locals came to the office to look at him. He was a curiosity, not a target. "There wasn't any discrimination," he insists. "But there is a curiosity. You didn't see many white people." In his letters home he tried to describe the heat, the colours, the strangeness and the welcome: a place where he was different but not hunted.

He talks about Ghana like he talks about almost everything that isn't 1938: with a kind of mod-est astonishment, as though these things happened to some other man with his name. When he came back to London the first time, he carried on in the trade. Things didn't quite work out, and then the wheel turned again. Tanzania, keen to throw off the old colonial brokers and run its own diamond business, opened an office in Holborn and needed somebody who understood the trade and the politics. "My expertise was something they didn't have," he shrugs.

He worked for them nearly thirty years, training British school leavers to sort stones by weight, colour and flaw, staying in touch with "half a dozen of the girls" decades after they swapped the sorting tables for other lives. In his own shorthand, this was another piece of luck: another country, another government, deciding that the refugee boy from Cologne knew something they needed.

You ask about age because his body is in the room with you, fragile and present, and because in a few weeks' time he will turn one hundred. He laughs. "Put it this way, I still know what my name is," he says, then talks about going to the Survivors' Centre and watching the slow decline of the people around him.

He has a son in Stanmore, grandchildren in Liverpool and elsewhere, more medical appointments than anyone deserves, and a battered mobility scooter loaned indefinitely by a Jewish charity that didn't bother with paperwork. "They said, you can have it until we ask for it back," he grins. "So far they haven't asked." This, too, he files under luck: not sentimentally, just as another instance of the world occasionally tilting the right way.

The central absence in all this, his parents, is almost an off stage character. It took him more than fifty years to learn what happened after they missed their chance to follow him. For dec-ades there was nothing: no documents, no confirmation, just the knowledge that they hadn't made it to America, that the quota system had locked them out and the trains had gone east. In the mid 1990's, long buried archives surfaced, listing transports and extermination sites with the bureaucratic neatness of a railway timetable. Only then did he find out that Siegmund and Irma Marx had been deported to Minsk and murdered within days at Maly Trostenets, an ex-termination camp in the forests outside the city, where tens of thousands of Jews from Germa-ny, Austria and the occupied territories were shot or gassed and left in pits. Once he knew, he decided he had to go there. You didn't just turn up at the gates of a former death camp and ask to look around; you needed an invitation into the present as well as the past.

The path in is one of those only from Kurt stories: a Cologne Catholic with ties to the cathe-dral's social projects in Belarus; a German group doing educational visits; a place for him if he could stand the October cold. The first slot fell through when someone else needed the space. Then a second opened. He flew via Cologne, stayed in the Eifel mountains with his hosts while the first frosts crept down the hills, and then went on with them to Minsk, where interpreters met them at the airport and drove them out past Soviet housing blocks to a killing field that had been half hidden under a rubbish tip.

The Russians had, deliberately or not, allowed the site to be swallowed by scrub and rubbish; the memorials were late, half hearted, generic. "It was one of the largest German extermination sites in Eastern Europe," he says. "And nobody's ever heard of it." Standing there, he said later, he felt both closer to his parents and further away than ever: the Nazis had wanted the place to vanish, and for half a century it almost had.

That trip, like almost everything else, ends with people. Elderly ghetto survivors in Minsk speaking only Russian because the Soviets had burned Yiddish out of them. German church people from Dortmund and Cologne who became, improbably, some of his closest friends. "I never wanted anything to do with Germans," he admits. "I kept away. I could barely speak German. Now I can again." Somewhere between the hospitality, the archives and the work of remembering, the country that expelled him and murdered his parents produced individuals he gladly calls friends. It is not redemption; it is relationship, which for him is as close as the world gets to justice.

This is a pattern with him: catastrophe, then connection; loss, then a web of relationships mov-ing in to fill the space without ever pretending to heal it. He tells you about the cousin from Is-rael who married a German woman and now lives in Cologne; about a South American relative who turns up at a family gathering in Europe in his seventies, knowing the names of Kurt's mother and aunts from his own genealogical research. "After nearly a hundred years, I meet him," Kurt says, and the line hangs there between awe and a shrug. These are the ripples of de-cisions made in 1938, 1939, 1942, reaching out into living rooms and WhatsApp groups dec-ades later.

The coincidences pile up. A book written by a Hungarian Auschwitz survivor whose forced labour transfer took her to Gelsenkirchen, the city where Kurt's grandfather had lived. Her son, born in Israel, barmitzvahed in the rebuilt Cologne synagogue where Kurt had read Torah as a boy, later becomes a doctor in New York and marries Kurt's great niece. "You couldn't make it up," he says, not as a cliché but as an operating principle. The routes of exile and survival cross and recross until the map looks less like an arrow and more like a web.

If you spend time on the Holocaust education circuit, you start to recognise the way some survivors carry their story like a script: polished, linear, a narrative they owe to the dead and the living. Kurt knows that script, has written his own version of it in talks, in testimony sessions and in his memoir, The Boy from Cologne, but in his living room he resists its neatness. He will talk about bar mitzvah in Cologne, photographed badly, he notes, by cousins with a Leica they didn't know how to use, then jump forward sixty plus years to shaking hands with King Charles at a Kindertransport anniversary, passing him a contraband DVD in a blue envelope that protocol said he must not hand over.

The disc contained a German television documentary, Die vergessenen Kinder von Köln, built from newsreels and interviews about the very

transports that had saved his life. Security at St James's Palace had already turned away the kosher caterer that day, bomb threats in London trumping kugel, but when Kurt asked the then Prince of Wales if he could give him a present, Charles said yes, of course. A week later, a letter arrived from the palace thanking him for the film. For Kurt, that letter folds his teenage flight from Cologne into the official archive of the British state in a way that feels both unlikely and necessary.

He respects Charles, likes him even. "People used to say he's an idiot," Kurt tells you. "He's not. He's a good man." He remembers the King's grandmother, the Queen Mother, as a shad-ow presence too, the one who explained the Kindertransport to a young prince and made these lost children part of his moral landscape. That kind of multigenerational recognition matters to Kurt. It lets his story sit alongside the comfortable myths of wartime Britain without being smoothed into them. He can talk, in the same breath, about the sheer luck of being accepted by this country and the coldness of being classed as an "enemy alien".

I ask about the USC Shoah Foundation's holographic "Dimensions in Testimony" project, where schoolchildren can sit in a darkened space and ask a recorded Kurt their questions. He waves a hand. It's fine for other people, he says, but it doesn't do what a conversation does.

"You can't discuss anything," he shrugs. "You ask a question, and if the question is part of the curriculum, it can answer it." Then, almost as an afterthought: "When I'm gone, my children can still talk to me."

That line lands harder than anything else in the room. It turns the whole apparatus, the cameras, the projectors, the carefully indexed database of answers, into a kind of secular kaddish, a way of keeping the voice in circulation after the body has done its work. This projectsits in that same uneasy space between documentation and intimacy. The technology is different, the ambition similar: to catch not only the facts but the way he moves through them, the jokes, the shrugs, the pauses.

What I keep circling back to, as I change film and ask him to turn his head slightly toward the window, is how much of his life has been spent building and rebuilding trust. Trusted by Belgians and Tanzanians with sacks of uncut diamonds; trusted by schoolchildren in Reading, Hampton and Leighton Park to tell them what happened without turning it into a horror film; trusted by German mayors and Bundestag presidents to walk back into cities that once spat him out and accept their hospitality without forgiving the system that made it necessary. In school halls, he tells pupils that the lesson is not just what hatred can do but what kindness can inter-rupt. People who hate others, he likes to say, really hate themselves.

He would insist, if you pushed him, that he is not special. "I'm just lucky," he tells congregations and classrooms. Lucky to have had a headmaster who would risk everything for his pupils. Lucky to have been taken in by kind strangers in the English countryside. Lucky to have had work that took him out into the world and back. Lucky to have a son, grandchildren, a community, a scooter that gets him to the chemist at seven in the morning for blood tests he grumbles about but doesn't miss. Luck, in his telling, is not something that cancels injustice; it is what human beings do inside it.

When he looks into the lens, it is not for my benefit or the camera's. It is a practiced, calm, faintly amused gaze that seems to say: I am still here. Now what are you going to do with that?

Sometime soon Kurt will stand up in a North London synagogue and mark his hundredth birthday with another bar mitzvah, reading from the Torah again as an old man. The language will be different, the building different, the country and the congregation unimaginable to the parents who put him on a train in 1939, but the gesture will be the same: a public insistence that he belongs, that he is still here, that the child who cycled past broken glass will answer with words. This portrait sits just before that moment, on the hinge between ninety nine and one hundred, between survivor and centenarian, catching Kurt in the act of carrying his story one step further than anyone had any right to expect.

Agnes Grunwald Spier

Turning memory into ammunition

Agnes Grunwald Spier was never supposed to make it out alive. Born into a collapsing world in Budapest in July 1944, she arrived just in time for the round ups, the yellow stars, the ghetto, and a war machine trying to finish off what it had started and somehow, she and her mother slipped through the cracks. Eight decades later, in a North London flat filled with books, portraits and meticulously kept files, she has turned that narrow escape into a lifetime of calling the world to account.

Agnes's origin story is not just dark; it's almost absurd in its detail. Her father, Philipp, was one of about 50,000 Hungarian Jewish men yanked into forced labour in 1943, sent to clear mines and build airfields in conditions designed to kill them off quietly. He was briefly allowed home long enough for Agnes to be conceived, then shipped back out to a world of explosives and dysentery where more than 40,000 of his comrades didn't make it. When he finally staggered back in March 1945, he'd beaten odds that were not designed to be beaten, surviving, as he later told her, on mulberries and sheer stubbornness.

Meanwhile, Leona, Agnes's mother, was being pushed from one address to another across Budapest, ordered to wear the star, evicted into what she called a "Star of David house", then shunted again into the city ghetto. At one point she was told to report, baby in arms, to an unknown destination. She tried to stash Agnes with her mother in law; the older woman refused, saying she couldn't feed her. So, Leona turned up the next day with her newborn, and some nameless man in charge looked at the women with children and sent them away. No explanation, no heroics, just an anonymous flick of the wrist that probably saved them from a train journey with no return ticket.

When the Budapest ghetto was liberated in January 1945, a cousin found Leona sitting on a set of steps, clutching Agnes, surrounded by frozen bodies. It's the kind of scene most people only encounter in grainy black and white footage; for Agnes, it's page one.

The war ended, but the sense of being surplus to requirements did not. Hungary was now under Soviet control; anti Jewish hostility hadn't evaporated just because the uniforms changed colour. Leona decided if she survived, she would leave. She meant it. Getting out meant slipping into the shadowy networks funnelling displaced people through Vienna: fake papers, hushed conversations, a rumoured train, money changing hands in back rooms.

Agnes's first clear memory is not of bombs or soldiers but of being lifted into that Vienna train, a tiny kid holding a felt Scottie dog in her left hand while adults bustled around her with the anxious energy of people betting their lives on a timetable. She remembers the cramped cabin, sharing the bottom bunk with her mother and waking up to find both parents now on the top, her father hunched on the floor, wrestling with a bizarre cocoa heating gizmo that promised hot chocolate in five minutes if you could just persuade it to work. For a child who probably hadn't tasted chocolate in Hungary, it was alchemy.

There's paperwork to prove it all happened. Agnes still has her UN displaced person ID card from Vienna, stamped "persecuted", listing her age as "two and four twelfths". She has the ration coupons her father handed back on the way out, the receipt from when the authorities forced them to surrender their radio, the bureaucratic breadcrumbs of a family trying not to disappear.

1. Repatriation and validation entries must be authenticated with official stamp.
2. This card valid only at DP Camp or place where issued.
3. This card must be carried on the person at all times.
4. **This card must be produced in order to draw ration card.**

1. Rücktransport und Gültigkeitsvermerke müssen mit amtlichem Stempel beglaubigt sein.
2. Diese Karte ist nur in dem DP Lager oder Ort gültig, in dem sie ausgestellt wurde.
3. Diese Karte muß immer mit sich geführt werden.
4. **Diese Karte muß zur Lebensmittelkartenausgabe vorgezeigt werden.**

1. März 1947
6 Feb. 47
28. NOV. 1946
26. MRZ. 1947
22. DEZ. 1946

V 005780

Persecuted

UNITED NATIONS
DP IDENTIFICATION CARD

Name / Name: GRÜNWALD AGNES

Date of birth / Geburtsdatum: 14.7.1944 Age / Alter: 2 4/12 Height / Größe: 0,80 mm

Weight / Gewicht: 14 Kg Hair / Haarfarbe: BLONDE Eyes / Augen: BROWN

Nationality / Nationalität: Czechoslovakia

DP Registration No. / DP Registratur Nr.:

Signature / Grünwald
DP Signature (DP Unterschrift)

Scars or identifying marks / Narben oder besondere Merkmale: NONE

Fingerprint Right Thumb / Fingerabdruck rechter Daumen

Date of entry US Occupied Zone, Austria or Germany / Datum des Grenzübertrittes in die US Besatzungszone Österr. oder Deutschl.: 1945

Issued at / Ausgestellt in: VIENNA Camp No. / Lager Nr.: NOT Date / Datum: 19.10.46

Repatriated to / Rücktransportiert nach: Date / Datum:

UNITED STATES ARMY AREA COMMAND VIENNA DISPLACED PERSONS MILITARY GOVERNMENT

PATRIC B. HEALY 1ST LT. INF.
Name and Rank of Issuing US Camp Comm. or UNRRA Official / Name und Dienstgrad des ausstell. US Lagerkomm. oder UNRRA Beamten

Validation date / Gültigkeitsdatum: 19.10.1946 Official stamp / Amtliche Stempelgie

Agnes' Displaced Persons ID card, issued by the US Army Military Government in Vienna 1946

In May 1947, they stepped off another train, this time in England, where an aunt had already landed and could vouch for them.

If you met Agnes as a schoolgirl in 1950s Britain, you wouldn't necessarily have known any of this. Her parents insisted on speaking English at home so she would grow up without an accent; Hungarian was effectively banned, a language amputated for safety. She sounds like any other English woman of her generation. On paper, she became one: naturalised in 1954, a neat official stamp declaring she now belonged, sort of.

But the war never really left the room. Her father, shattered by what he'd seen and done, refused to have more children. In 1955, when Agnes was ten, he killed himself. Her mother, who had already dragged them both through ghetto, camp and exile, now raised her alone, earning a living while carrying the kind of stories most people only hear in documentaries. Agnes went on to study Politics and History at Oxford Brookes in the 1960s, then did time in the Civil Service; respectable, sensible, everything on the rails.

Yet there was always this unspoken riddle at the centre of her life: how do you grow into an ordinary "English" existence when your very birth certificate is stamped with genocide? When she later had three sons of her own, she realised they would look, sound and feel completely British, but their DNA carried the ghetto steps, the mulberries, the UN cards. That was the moment she stopped trying to tuck the past away and turned to face it head on.

In the late 1990s, when plenty of people her age were easing off, Agnes enrolled in a Masters in Holocaust Studies at Sheffield University. It wasn't nostalgia; it was a decision to take the thing that had haunted her life and interrogate it with every tool academia could provide. Out of that came her first major book, The Other Schindlers, a forensic hunt for the rescuers you've never heard of; the people who forged papers, hid neighbours, bribed guards, and then vanished back into anonymity. The book has been translated into several languages, but the real point is that it refuses the lazy narrative that there was one Schindler and everyone else just watched.

Her follow up, Who Betrayed the Jews?, went for an even more radioactive question: not who saved, but who sold out their Jewish neighbours, colleagues, sometimes friends. It digs into the mess of fear, ideology, greed and opportunism that fuelled denunciations, topics that make nationalists and memory launderers intensely uncomfortable. Agnes does not flinch.

Then came Women's Experiences in the Holocaust, a book that feels like the missing track on a record you thought you knew. Instead of treating women's stories as marginal, she foregrounds them: diaries smuggled out of ghettos, letters from camps, memoirs that never made it onto university reading lists. The "Afterthought" at the end is her mother's story, Leona the teenage breadwinner, the would be concert pianist turned family lifeline, the woman who breastfed her baby through hunger in the ghetto and cooked a possibly canine carcass for Russian soldiers because survival doesn't care about the menu. Agnes writes it not as a sentimental tribute but as a clear statement: this is the kind of woman history keeps trying to erase. Not on her watch.

I walked into a small London flat that functions as a one woman archive. There's a purple hued portrait of Agnes in her youth, commissioned back when she was a civil servant and her then husband's boss asked a village artist to paint her; she kept it when the marriage ended, a fragment of a previous life that still matters. There's a family painting from their 25th wedding anniversary, now hanging again because, as she puts it, it's part of the story; her, her boys, the ex husband in a framed photo within the painting, like a visual footnote.

Then there are the boxes. Thick binders stuffed with documents: her father's labour battalion papers, birth certificates, translations done in post war Vienna, her own naturalisation certificate, the fragile UN cards marked "persecuted". She knows exactly where the good stuff is buried, like the slip confirming her parents returned unused ration tickets before leaving Austria, or the pass that shows her father's unit number, a clue that has stubbornly resisted every attempt to match it to a known battalion.

She drops family bombshells with disarming casualness. Her grandfather, Malkiel Grunwald, was the man who kicked off the Kastner trial, one of the fiercest post war showdowns over who negotiated with Nazis and on whose behalf. Two great uncles were teachers in Budapest who, in the summer of 1944, helped write and distribute a leaflet urging Christians to help their Jewish neighbours, got arrested and tortured for it, and were released only because the government changed. "Foolhardy or very brave," she says. The line might as well be her family motto.

Agnes has been on more than her share of official committees: Justice of the Peace, trustee of the UK Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, deputy at the Board of Deputies, lay member of the Architects Registration Board, appointments to Holocaust education bodies in Britain and Ireland and an advisory group for the Anne Frank Trust. It's an impressive CV, but it's not where her edge lies. It's in the way she refuses to smooth the rough edges of history for anyone's comfort.

Take Vienna. She's been back for conferences, walked its postcard perfect streets, drunk sweet wine in the cafe where Stefan Zweig once met his friends, and felt utterly on edge. "I felt there was someone in every doorway," she says. Budapest doesn't hit her like that; Berlin doesn't either. Austria, with its long cultivated image of being Hitler's first victim, does. She contrasts it sharply with Germany's slow, painful reckoning with its crimes, and with Poland's periodic attempts to legislate away discussion of Polish involvement in the Holocaust, attempts she's publicly criticised and been mobbed for online.

She is, improbably, quite at home on social media. While many survivors or their children stay off, Agnes uses the platform to talk about Holocaust history, antisemitism and Israel/Palestine, and to plug her books. The mentions are not always pretty. Trolls come for her; organised campaigns try to shout her down. She shrugs, notes she gets more support than abuse, and remembers the Australian reader who wired money across the world for signed copies of all three books. At an age when most people are shrinking their world, she's still picking fights with deniers in 280 characters.

The establishment has noticed. On International Women's Day 2012, the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust named her an inspirational woman; in 2019, the Board of Deputies spotlighted her in a series of profiles. In 2016 she went to the palace to collect an MBE for her work as a founder trustee of HMDT and for services to the Jewish community and Holocaust awareness; two years later, Sheffield and Oxford Brookes universities both awarded her honorary doctorates. It's the kind of honour roll that normally suggests safe, consensus history. Agnes, with her unflinching tweets and awkward questions about rescue, betrayal and complicity, is anything but safe.

Ask her what's next and the answer is not a quiet retirement. It's a family memoir she has been "slaving over" for years, four fat binders deep and still growing. The plan was to start writing in earnest one September; her body had other ideas, sending her to the doctor instead. Osteoarthritis limits marching at protests, but it doesn't stop her sitting at a keyboard, or pulling yet another slim, yellowing document from a plastic sleeve to see what else it can tell her.

She says she's doing it for the grandchildren, and there are a few now, scattered across London suburbs and contemplating futures that might involve other countries, other languages. But the truth is, she's also doing it for all the people whose stories didn't make it out of Budapest, Sopron, Vienna or the DP camps. For the women whose diaries never got translated, the teachers who handed out illegal leaflets, the anonymous man who took one look at a young mother holding a baby and decided, for reasons known only to him, to send her away from the transport line.

Agnes Grunwald Spier's life doesn't fit neatly into the "triumph over tragedy" script. It's messier and more restless than that. She was born into a death sentence, raised in the long shadow of a father who survived the war but not the peace, and spent decades learning how to turn inherited trauma into something like a weapon: books, lectures, threads, documents laid out on a red tablecloth. If there's a moral, it's this: survival isn't the end of the story. It's the opening track.

Equibus sunt lis dolorestiae velluptur? Qui audantorento dit la cor repedit iumque aliti repudit, quos et apis arcium

Eva Clarke

Straddling Both Camps

Eva watches me fuss with a Leica as if it's an eccentric relative and asks, half practical, half performer, whether the light is going to go "baboom". It isn't a flash, I reassure her. She tells me not to worry about her veins. "It's all vanity," she says, glancing at her hands on the table.

The real question, she says a few minutes later, isn't about light or lenses, but about expression. "That's the other thing I never know, whether to be serious or not. Respectful, yes. But…" Years before I turn up with my Leica, another photographer came to Cardiff to photograph Eva and her mother, Anka. He dragged them outside and placed them against the blank white wall of the garage, insisted they must be unsmiling because of "the tenor of the story". Anka hated the pictures.

Years later he emailed Eva, asking to use one for an exhibition; she initially said no, told him straight that her mother "really disliked all these photographs". "Our story is one of hope," she explained. "We survived. There's no need to be grim." In the end she relented on a single frame, the only one where Anka has the hint of a smile, but the encounter fixed something in her. Bearing witness, she decided, doesn't have to mean posing as tragedy against a white wall. Which is why, she says now, half smiles are fine, more than fine. "I hope you'll use ones that have half smiles." This time, she's not being arranged as a symbol; she's agreeing to be seen as what she is, a woman whose story ends in survival, not just in grief.

I'm here because of the opposite of a blank wall: because her life, on paper, is a catalogue of specifics almost too extreme to be believed. Born 29 April 1945 on a cart at the gates of Mauthausen concentration camp, weighing about three pounds, one of only three babies ever born there who survived the Holocaust. American troops arrived five or six days later. Her mother, nine months pregnant and weighing thirty five kilos, had just endured a seventeen day journey in an open coal wagon with no food and hardly any water. By any rational measure, neither of them should be here at all.

Eva has her own version of survivor guilt for that. "Yes, I regard myself as a survivor," she says, when I finally ask the question. "But I have to qualify that. I'm a survivor purely through accident of birth. I actually feel more of a second generation because I don't have any memories."Then, inevitably, the line she knows is unforgivable and true at the same time: "If you'll forgive the dreadful pun, I straddle both camps."

Language in this area is radioactive. She knows that too. There's a hierarchy she never asked to be part of but has bumped up against for years. "I imagine there are some camp survivors who disregard me in that respect," she says. "But you know. So what." Anyone displaced by the war, she insists, is a survivor "in any way, shape or form". The line between "real" survivor and second generation is as man made and absurd as some of the lines on the maps that created this mess in the first place.

To make sense of that, I have to go back before she existed. The official story starts in 1933, the year Hitler comes to power in Germany. Her father, Bernhard (Bernd) Nathan, a Jewish architect from Hamburg, looks ahead and decides to move. "In 1933 he thought that was far enough to be safe," Eva says. "It wasn't." He goes to Prague, which is still democratic for five more years. There he meets a law student, Anka Kauderová. They marry on 15 May 1940 in a city already under Nazi occupation.

In December 1941 they are deported, with both their families, to Terezín/Theresienstadt, the Czech fortress town the Nazis have turned into

a ghetto and transit camp. They are there "purely because they were Jewish", as Eva always emphasises in school halls. Old people, the sick, the visibly pregnant and mothers with small children are taken east in transports whose names everyone in the ghetto learns to dread. The Nathans are young and healthy; they are sent to work. Bernd is put on building sites and transport details. Anka gets herself into the food distribution office, which lets her steal scraps for the fourteen relatives also crammed into Theresienstadt.

None of those fourteen comes back. The list of Eva's dead reads like the closing credits of a film I'd hoped might have a better ending: three grandparents, two aunts, their husbands, an eight year old cousin called Peter, a maternal great grandmother and great grandfather, a clutch of great aunts and second cousins. All murdered in Auschwitz. Her father is killed later, on a death march in January 1945.

In between, Anka and Bernd attempt the impossible: a love life in a place designed to crush not only desire but privacy itself. "Despite the strict separation of men and women at Terezín, my parents managed brief, secret meetings," Eva says in her biography. "Acts of love and defiance in a place built to dehumanise." One of those meetings leads to a pregnancy. A boy, Jiří (George), is born in February 1944 and dies two months later of pneumonia.

"Had he lived," Eva says, "I would not have been born. Because my mother would have arrived at Auschwitz with a baby, and they would both have been killed." It's the sort of cold, logical paradox she has had to get used to articulating: her entire existence is predicated on the death of a brother she never met.

When Anka is deported to Auschwitz later in 1944, she doesn't yet know she is pregnant again. The bump is small enough that she's selected for forced labour rather than the gas, and she's sent on to Freiberg, a sub camp near Dresden, to work six nights a week in an armaments factory. She will later tell her daughter, in a conversation that makes twelve year old Eva squirm, that the pregnancy was the result of "getting together secretly as and when we could, and to hell with the consequences, end of story." The consequences, of course, were anything but simple.

When the Nazis in Freiberg eventually notice she is pregnant, they make her and Bernd sign a paper agreeing that the baby will be handed over to be killed. Pre authorised murder. Before Anka can tell him she is expecting, Bernd is taken to Auschwitz and then on into the snow. He is shot on a death march on 18 January 1945, nine days before the Red Army reaches the camp. "He never even knew my mother was pregnant," Eva says.

By April 1945, the war is collapsing around them. The factory in Freiberg is threatened by the oncoming front, and the guards decide to evacuate their slave labour. Anka, nine months pregnant, is forced into an open coal truck with about a thousand other women. They are shunted across a dying Reich for seventeen days, with no food and almost no water. "She described herself as a 'pregnant skeleton'," Eva says. "She weighed about five stone, thirty five kilos."

At one siding, the transport stops next to a farmhouse. A local woman comes out with a glass of milk. Fifty years later, Anka will still insist that glass of milk saved both their lives. "And this was in total defiance of the Nazi officer standing there with a whip," Eva says. "So I always say, there were some brave people."

Eventually the train reaches Mauthausen in Upper Austria, a camp whose reputation has travelled even among the inmates. Unlike Auschwitz, which Anka had never heard of before she was sent there, Mauthausen is infamous in pre war Czechoslovakia as a place from which no one returns. When she sees the name on the station sign, something in her gives way; she goes into labour. The gas chamber has been destroyed the previous day on SS orders.

Anka pulls herself down from the coal wagon and onto a handcart. On 29 April she gives birth to a baby girl weighing somewhere between three and three and a half pounds. "I joke that I was born in the 'maternity wing' of Mauthausen concentration camp," Eva says in schools. "It's the only possible joke." A camp doctor warns that the baby probably won't live. There is no medical care to speak of. Somehow, both of them do.

It's easy, at this distance, to let the horror drift into statistics: three babies born in Mauthausen who survived, one of them Eva; some forty thousand people perished there; eleven members of her immediate family murdered at Auschwitz. What brings it back into three dimensions is what happens after.

After the war, mother and daughter return to Prague and live with Anka's cousin Olga for three years. Anka marries again in 1948, to Karel Bergman, a Czech Jew who has survived the war in the RAF as a Czech airman and translator. When the Communists take power in Czechoslovakia that same year, the family decides they've had enough of regimes. They leave "legally", on forged papers and good fortune, and end up in Cardiff, where Karel gets a job and Eva grows up as a Czech Jewish girl in South Wales.

"Although we came legally, we might have come as refugees, we might have come as asylum seekers, we might have come as migrants," she tells me. "And I think that's a very important point to make." When she stands in front of contemporary teenagers and talks about people being called "illegal", about boats and borders and the small practicalities of flight, she isn't playing to the gallery; she's stating the terms of her own arrival.

Cardiff, as she describes it, is not exactly Prague. Her parents are not religious or observant; there is an Orthodox and a Reform synagogue, but they belong to neither. They have friends in both, but their real community after the war is a horizontal one: other young, strong women who survived Freiberg and Mauthausen because they were able to work and had each other. "They kept in very close touch after the war, even though they lived all over the world," she says. "They wrote letters, met whenever they came to London. That group of women was vitally important."

What Eva doesn't have in Cardiff is what her classmates take for granted: grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins who turn up on Sundays and pinch your cheeks. She is growing up in a house with no older generation, conscious that something is missing even if she doesn't yet have the vocabulary for why. The difference is that Anka refuses the culture of silence.

Eva starts to learn "her story", as she calls it, at six or seven. One afternoon she comes home from school and notices a suede handbag hanging on the back of the kitchen door. It has the initials "AN" stamped on it. "My mother's name was Anka or Anna, and her first married surname was Nathan. AN," she explains. "I didn't have the surname Nathan, because my stepfather officially adopted me before we left Prague." She is learning to read and she asks, naturally, what the letters mean.

Anka takes a deep breath – "here we go," as she later tells it – and gives a single, measured answer. "All she said to me was, 'You've heard about the war…'" Eva remembers hearing it in the background between her parents and their friends. "And she said, 'Well, you had two daddies, and one daddy was killed in the war. Now you've got another daddy.' That's all she said."

From there, the story accumulates slowly. Eva is "like a sponge", always asking questions; as she grows older, the replies become more detailed. A child psychologist she once sat next to on an educational trip to Auschwitz told her that Anka had done it "absolutely by the book", starting very simply and adding complexity as the child could bear it. "That is why I know her story so well," Eva says. "We didn't talk about it all the time, but we talked about it a lot."

This, for her, is where the ethics of memory start: not on museum walls, but in kitchens, between mothers and daughters. It also explains her impatience with both total silence and total over exposure. She has watched friends whose parents never spoke about their pasts; she has watched others who made the Holocaust the only topic at the dinner table. Either extreme, she thinks, warps the children. You need enough truth not to feel conned, but not so much that you drown.

By the time her own sons are teenagers in Cambridge, she expects – half hopes – that they will start asking questions too. They don't. "The reverse was the case in my story," she tells me. "My two sons didn't ask any questions. And my mother was

more hurt or offended by that." The boys feel there is a "black hole"; they know their grandmother is different from everyone else's, but teenage life is full of other distractions. The questions don't come until later.

She doesn't push. She knows, from years of speaking in schools, that people come to this in their own time. "Some people never found out," she says, of other second generation friends. "They didn't want to upset the parents by asking, and the parents didn't want to burden them with the story. When the parents died, they felt a sort of double bereavement."

Eva doesn't have that regret, but she has others. She starts speaking publicly about Anka and Mauthausen in 2000, when she is already in her fifties. Before that she has lived a full and, in her words, "very fortunate" life: school in Cardiff, art college in London, work, marriage to Malcolm Clarke, raising two sons, a long career as a college administrator in Cambridge. Holocaust education is not a calling she goes looking for; it's something she is nudged into by invitations, grandchildren, and the recognition that there are not many voices like hers left.

By the time she fully leans into it, the world has caught up with her in strange ways. Wendy Holden's book Born Survivors, published in 2015, weaves her mother's story together with those of two other women, Priska and Rachel, who went through the same sequence: pregnancy in Auschwitz, six months of slave labour in Freiberg, seventeen days in coal wagons, birth in April 1945 in or near Mauthausen, survival against all odds. "All three mothers, all three babies survived. None of the fathers," Eva says. "Obviously I'm one of the babies." In their seventies, the three of them stand together at Mauthausen as honoured guests rather than inmates.

Eva takes satisfaction from that symmetry, but she doesn't romanticise it. She is acutely aware of the danger that all this can slip into Holocaust tourism. That's part of why she worries about whether to smile in portraits. Part of why she is so precise in her school talks about the numbers and the names.

Another part is the present. At the end of the shoot I ask her, as I always do, how she views the world today. She laughs a little and then says, "It makes you despair." The echoes are too loud to ignore: flags and slogans, people chanting about traitors, refugees pushed back into the sea. "I'm very glad my mother isn't around," she says. "You wonder how and where and when this is going to end. Our capacity for cruelty as human beings… it's incredible."

And yet she keeps going into schools. Keeps sitting on trains to RAF bases and provincial sixth forms. "Education is the only answer," she says to me. "But sometimes you do despair." Then she talks about the student ambassadors from the Holocaust Educational Trust, most of them not Jewish, who stand up in their schools and universities and get vilified online for it. "I have undying admiration for them," she says. "They carry on doing their work and standing up.

If there is a line that runs through her life from that coal truck to this Cambridge semi, it's that balance between despair and stubbornness. Between being, in her words, "a survivor purely through accident of birth" and choosing, daily, what to do with that accident. When she sits in the garden in Mauthausen with the other two "babies" and their families, when she stands in the Imperial War Museum and looks at her own birth certificate in a glass case, when she accepts a British Empire Medal in 2019 for services to Holocaust education, she is acutely aware that none of this was destined.

"Luck had an awful lot to do with it," she says of Anka's survival. Her own contribution comes later: the decision not to keep quiet, not to reduce it to a single tragic image against a blank wall, but to keep telling the story, with jokes where they help and statistics where they matter.

When I'm packing away, she offers me a book, Born Survivors, and a leaflet for Wendy Holden's latest, about the teacher Freddy Hirsch, who made children's lives "almost bearable" in Theresienstadt and Auschwitz and was later erased for being both Jewish and gay. She doesn't press them on me; she just says, "I don't like to pressure people," and hands them over when I say yes.

Mary Dillinger

The weight of everything that was left behind

There's a photograph on the table. It's not a good photograph, a picture of a picture, really, third or fourth generation, grains fighting grains, but Mary Dillinger puts on her glasses and leans in, and suddenly she's absolutely certain. "Here is definitely 100%. Here is a dark, black jumper, blue, whatever. That is him. That's very clear. I am almost positive, because I've seen it, you know, so many times."

The man sitting cross-legged in the middle of the frame, not very tall, a dark jumper, was born in 1912. He was Mary's father. The photograph was taken in a labour camp, somewhere in Ukraine or Poland, she's not entirely sure of the exact geography, and the fact that it exists at all still puzzles her. "I was wondering," she says, almost to herself, "Who on earth had a camera in the camp."

It's a question that hangs in the room like smoke.

Mary Dillinger was born in Budapest in 1943. The arithmetic of that is not incidental. "Extremely clever," she says, when the year is worked out aloud, meaning her father must have been home somewhere in the middle of it all, briefly, between deployments. He wasn't there for the first twenty-two months of her life.

Her family were Budapest intellectuals, comfortable but not wealthy, secular but recognisably Jewish. Her maternal grandfather, whose name in Hungarian is Kanyzsiai, findable on the internet, she says, "big time", was, without a university degree, the head of a school for five hundred deaf and mute children in Budapest. "He went all the way to the top without ever going to university."

He had come from a small village, had taught other children at the age of ten or eleven for a few pennies to give to his mother for food, and had arrived, by force of character alone, at the top of an institution that occupied a huge building on the outskirts of the capital; the kind of place that, as Mary puts it, you'd compare to Welwyn Garden City if you were trying to explain the scale of it to someone English.

Her father's father was a solicitor. Her father himself had wanted to be a doctor, but as a Jew in Hungary in the 1930s, that door was closed. He became a clerk, and eventually, in Australia, an accountant. Mary's parents met through her grandfathers, both Freemasons. One grandfather died and asked the other to give a speech at the funeral.

The young accountant came. The young woman noticed. "My grandfather probably thought, here comes a nice Jewish boy."

Hungary's Jews were among the last in Europe to be deported to the death camps, but what preceded that was its own particular bureaucracy of degradation.

Mary's father Alajos Popper, bottom right

Her father's family had its own texture of achievement. His mother's uncle was Sándor Bródy, one of the most celebrated writers in Hungarian literary history, still well-known. Her grandmother, at the age of twenty, in 1900, had gone alone to Paris, with an aunt, to buy millinery models and had known the Impressionist painters. "Can you imagine? Twenty years old, alone in Paris."

Jewish men were conscripted into the Hungarian army not as soldiers but as a labour force. They were put to work clearing forests, hauling and digging at the direction of the German military. "They had no weapon, no buttons, no rank," Mary says. "They had to clear woods for a railway to the army. I think it was probably for the German army more than the Hungarian army, to be able to go towards Russia."

Mary's father was called up for this service around 1941 or '42. Before that summons arrived, there was a moment that became something of a family story. He and his cousin, who was the same age, and who would not survive the war, dying in 1942, were walking along the Danube promenade in Budapest. "They realised that if they thought that you looked Jewish, then you didn't have a chance." The two young men began speaking English to each other. They walked into the best hotel on the promenade and ordered a coffee, pretending to be English. They went home proud of themselves. And there, waiting, was a brown envelope. Call-up papers.

He came home at least once during that first period of labour service. Mary was conceived, and then was sent again. The second deployment was the one that took him east, the one recorded in the handwritten book she has on the table. It was written by two doctors who were among the group, intellectuals most of them, and among them, she says, "one of the best opera singers" in Hungary. The presence of the doctors mattered. "Because they were doctors, they made sure that everybody more or less washed, because otherwise you had typhoid and goodness knows what." They put on shows for their Hungarian guards. "Things weren't as hard as they could be."

The group moved through what Mary describes as the arc of Poland, Ukraine, and then down into Serbia. In Serbia, they were brought to the copper mines. By this point, the guards had been reduced to one or two, sometimes five at most. The men were too weak to run anywhere.

Mary's father's feet were by now in a condition that made walking almost impossible. In the school building where they were sheltering, he told the others to go without him. "He said: 'Boys, I can't walk any further. Please go.'" They refused. One man said he wouldn't go unless everyone came. Her father insisted: "I am not going to hold you back because you have a chance of freedom." One guard, "obviously he was a nice soldier" asked if anyone had anything of value left, a watch perhaps, anything. People had held things back for emergencies. They pooled what they had. The guard took them to the woods. The Germans were waiting. Everyone was murdered except four.

Her father was one of the four. "Not one of them stayed alive. Only, as I said, dad. I don't know what happened to the other three."

She pauses. "Can you imagine? At the last hurdle. You live, live through all this, and you are nearly in the straight."

One of the men murdered in those Serbian woods, she mentions almost in passing, was Miklós Radnóti "one of the most famous poets in Hungary," she says, "before the war." Radnóti had known he was going to die. "I listened to one of his poems, and you know, he knew. He actually was a big smoker, and he knew that he is not going to stay alive." His wife, she adds, is still alive, more than a hundred years old.

Mary's father Alajos Popper, front row, black shirt

Back in Budapest, Mary and her mother were sheltering in her grandfather's institution. The building had come under the nominal protection of Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who, from his arrival in Budapest in July 1944, used his country's diplomatic status to shield Jews in buildings under Swedish protection." The Arrow Cross, Hungary's fascist militia, came in, and decided, as Mary tells it, simply for sport, to shoot every tenth person in the courtyard. Her grandfather was standing ninth in the line. He was the head of the institution; someone had to maintain order. He survived by one position.

Her mother survived through a different mercy. Mary's grandmother, who was going blind, employed a Christian woman as a housekeeper. When the danger became acute, this woman took Mary and provided her with forged Christian papers. "She came and got me and I had to change, I got my Christian birth certificate, had to change that. And yes, and eventually she got my mother also out. And I mean, that is risking your life."

Mary had intended, before the events of October 2023 made travel impossible, to go to Israel and have the woman's name added to the memorial at Yad Vashem. She still wants to.

Meanwhile 450 of the five hundred students at the school had been taken home by their parents when war broke out, and had perished. Only the fifty who were orphans had stayed; they had nowhere else to go. "He had to live with that," Mary says of her grandfather, who carried the weight of those four hundred and fifty for the rest of his life, "that he allowed them to be taken home."

After the massacre in the Serbian woods, Mary's father was alone in an army uniform, the uniform of the occupiers, as far as anyone could see, among people who hated the Nazis. “You know, it's not funny. Just before the end of the war."

He was starving. He had learned one word of Russian leber, he thought it was, the word for bread. A peasant let him climb onto the back of a cart. He walked along the Danube, people giving him scraps of bread. Someone told him he didn't look like a regular soldier and warned him not to try to go back into Budapest, which was still under German occupation. He found family in Timișoara, Temesvár in Hungarian, and waited there for the war to end.

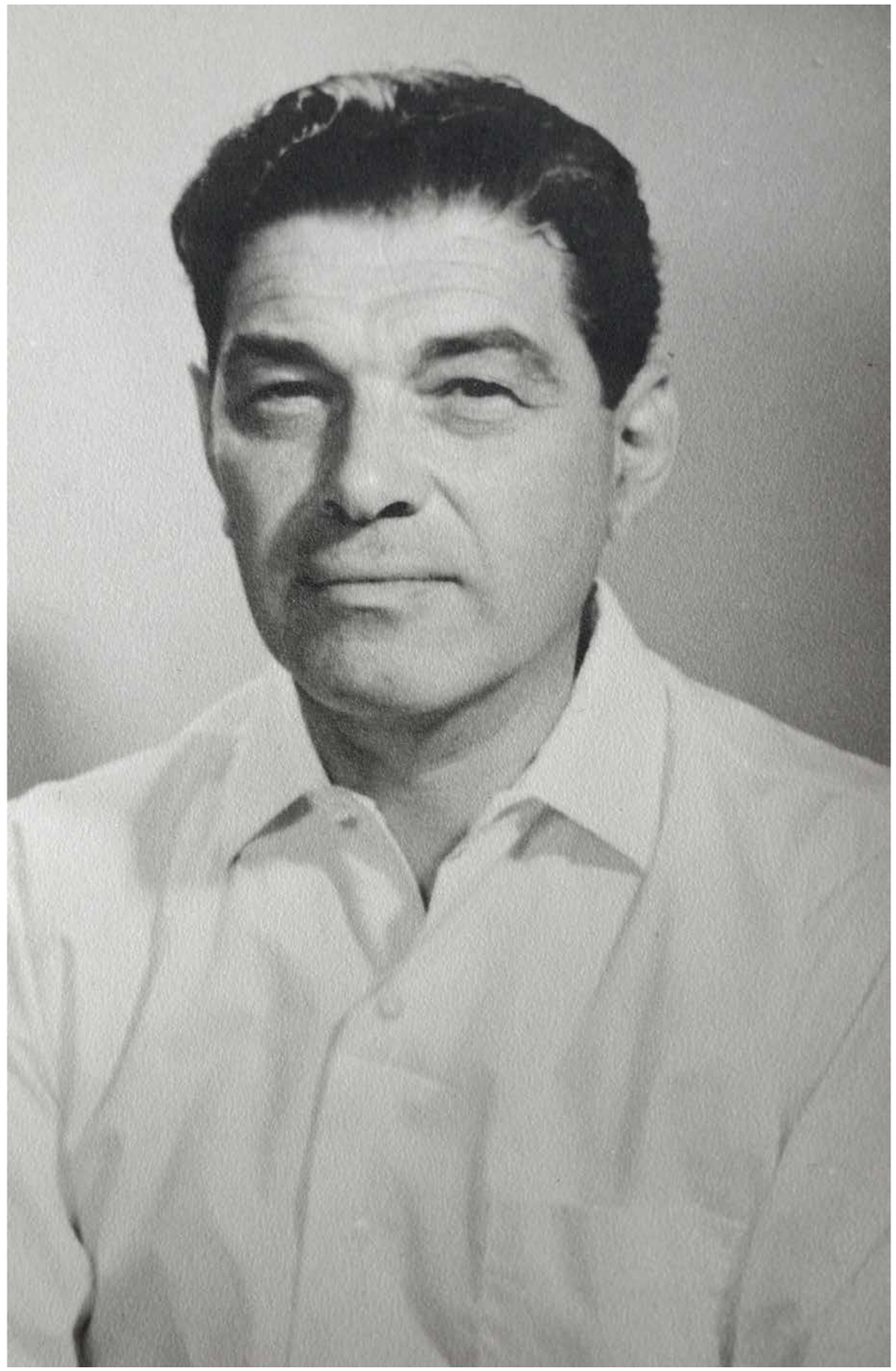
He couldn't go back to Hungary even after liberation, not immediately, because Budapest was still occupied. When he eventually returned, the communist secret police pulled the family apart looking for foreign currency. Someone had reported them for possessing a five-dollar coin. "And then they took my dad in. And I think he really had a beating there. And then when he came out, he hardly could walk and he told everybody, no, no, no, nothing happened. It was, it was okay."

Mary was thirteen years old when she left Hungary. It was 1956. For a few days during the revolution, the border to the west was open. Her uncle, who had worked for a meat firm with factories near the Austrian border, organised everything. Eleven people, in the middle of the night, guided by a local man who knew where the mines had been laid and where they'd been lifted. Her stepmother, her father had remarried by this point, to a woman who had survived Mauthausen and who suffered profound depression afterwards, was nine months pregnant. Her mother-in-law was sixty-three but looked eighty-three to a thirteen-year-old. The guide took her father's watch as payment. At one point, he made them all lie flat in the dark. "Everybody down now. Like flat, because it might be something dangerous."

They crossed into Austria, went on to Australia, where her father's brother was already living. She came to England on holiday in 1963 and married. Her father stayed in Australia forever. Her parents had divorced, but they remained on speaking terms; he sent her the handwritten book eventually, the account of the labour battalion written in meticulous Hungarian by the two doctors. She has never had it translated. Her children want it in English. She feels, she says, awful that she never did it sooner "I really should have gone like other people, and spread some of the stories."

The afternoon is almost done now. Mary is looking at the photograph again, the one of the man in the dark jumper, sitting cross-legged in the middle of the camp, somewhere east of everything he knew. "He was very, very lucky," she says. You can hear everything that word is carrying. Her grandfather, the stern, self-made man from a village so small it barely had a name, who never went to university and nearly became a dean, who taught deaf children to lip-read and was ninth in the line, never spoke about the war. Not one word, not one story. "Zip. Nothing." Two world wars and total silence.

Her father talked all the way. There's a tape somewhere, a recording made before he died, when he'd already had a stroke. By then, she says, he was talking about it "like a holiday camp." So nobody used it. But the book is here, and the photograph is here, and she is here, and the story, in the end, got told.



Marys father Alajos Popper after settling in Australia

Mala Tribich

No Hierarchies in Hell

The first thing she does is worry about the light.

Not the metaphorical kind, the literal glare of the low winter sun coming off the living room window. I'm placing my 1937 Leica iiia and tripod into position and she's squinting up at the ceiling, trying to work out which of the windows is burning holes in her retinas.

"Now it's in my eyes," she says, half amused, half concerned. "I can see it."

We shuffle. I twist the blinds, I put up my own my own light instead, talk her round a few degrees on the sofa so nothing is full beam. I assure her I'm only framing from the waist up. She immediately smooths her top, worries about "little hairs" that might show. Eighty plus years old, a survivor of Piotrków, Częstochowa, Ravensbrück and Bergen Belsen, and her first instinct is to make sure the photographer has something decent to work with. "You look very smart," I tell her with a wink, "Everyone looks their best when I photograph them." "Are you actually doing it now?" she asks, mock suspicious, as the shutter barely registers a decibel, marking the rhythm of our meeting, practicalities, small jokes, coffee, and then suddenly, without fanfare, she's talking about why some people should not call themselves survivors.

I've come here, this last session of the project, off the back of dozen other survivors, with the same basic script: I'm working on a portrait series of people who survived Nazi slave labour and its orbit, for an exhibition at the Wiener Holocaust Library. The project is small, but the ambition is not. I want to catch something of that late stage testimony, when memory has been honed by repetition and politics has grown up around it, like scaffolding around a building that refuses to fall down.

Mala gets it instantly. She's been in enough projects, filmed by enough crews, photographed by enough hopeful documentarians.

"There was a period," she says, once we're done with the formal posing and she's back with her coffee, "when they were photographing survivors all the time. Dozens of people. Ten at a time, and again, and again. I said, what are you going to do with them?"

With me, she says, she feels there's "a better idea" something contained, thought through, that might actually be seen by the people it needs to reach.

Her own story has been told often enough. Born Mala Helfgott in 1930 in Piotrków Trybunalski, first ghetto in Nazi occupied Poland. Hidden for a time in Częstochowa with her cousin Idzia in the house of a Polish couple, forced to recite Catholic prayers, terrified of being discovered. Sent back to Piotrków to find the ghetto in its lethal endgame. Her mother and eight year old sister taken in a round up and shot in a forest nearby. Fifteen years old, put into slave labour. Deported with a five year old cousin, Ann, to Ravensbrück, then Bergen Belsen. Typhus. Liberation by the British when she was close to death.

"Piotrków, Ravensbrück, Belsen, Sweden, England," reciting the litany now familiar from speeches and school talks. On paper, it ticks all the boxes a curriculum or a news editor might want. Ghetto. Camp. Child. Liberation. Survivor.
It's what's happened since that I'm here to write about.

There is a particular quality to the way she talks about school visits. It's half exhaustion, half fierce pride. She has done hundreds. Maybe thousands.

She has a house full of letters to prove it. "They didn't write them because they wanted to write," she says. "Some of them you can see they're struggling to say something, and others are really very good." For a long time, after each talk, teachers would ask their pupils to respond in writing, to her, and she kept everything. "At some point," she says, "everybody had to write something, to acknowledge it, or to show the teachers."

It's the teachers she praises first. "They're very responsible," she says. "They want the children to react properly and to sit quietly. I've seen them sometimes get one out the door, if they're not behaving." She's not romantic about teenagers: "Some of them don't" listen, she admits. But most, in her experience, are engaged. They write back. They try.

I ask her what the best question a student has ever asked. She laughs. "I can't think," she says, then offers one that has clearly stayed with her. A small boy, "not very big," put his hand up near the start of a talk. "Why did Hitler hate Jews?"

It's a child's question, blunt as a hammer, and it exposes the limits of adult language. There's no way to compress centuries of antisemitism, conspiracy theories, war, humiliation, personality disorder and ideology into something a Year 8 can digest.

"What can you say to that?" she says to me now. "I said, because he was crazy, he didn't know what he was doing or something to that effect. I had to say something." She shrugs. "It's a very big answer for such a small question."

The exchange is a good example of how she sees her role. Not as a psychologist, but as a witness who refuses to turn her story into spectacle. She knows that "young people go for horrors," and she doesn't want to feed that appetite blindly. She chooses her details carefully. She tells them about hunger and fear and disease and death, but she doesn't wallow.

"I think they can possibly identify," she says when I ask whether teenagers put themselves in her place. "Thinking, oh, when I was twelve I was in such and such a year, going to school. I presume they do. They've written that they were very moved. But that's really coming to an end now, because there'll be people that will be speaking about it who haven't experienced it."

That's the politics of testimony in a single breath, her awareness that we are at the tail end of living witnesses, and her anxiety about what comes next. We talk about antisemitism now. I tell her my own story: being the first Jew many people in Scotland had ever met; realising how much of what they thought they knew came from ignorance, not malice. She nods. She knows those stories, the wartime evacuee child asked to "show me your horns," the casual demonisation passed down as folklore. "That's what they have learned," she says. "The Jews have horns."

She reads the Jewish Chronicle and the Jewish News, she tells me, but not the "ordinary" newspapers. "I don't know what's going on in the world," she half jokes, meaning, really, that she can't bear the daily grind of bad news. She follows the radio. She's seen enough.

We touch briefly on Israel and Gaza, the kind of conversation that would explode on social media and which she handles with a tired candour. She says Netanyahu "responds in a way they get a hundred times as much as they give," and admits she sometimes thinks, "gosh, how can he do that?" Then, almost in the same breath, "Well, maybe he's right, I don't know." She is not here to provide neat political answers. She is here to insist that the hatred she grew up with has not gone away just because there's a Jewish army now.

"Even though the Jews now can defend themselves," she says, "it continues at such a rate."
That's the other half of her educational work: not just telling the story of what happened, but connecting it, cautiously, to what's happening.
Which brings us to the hierarchy.

We are talking about the exhibition, about the other people in the project. She asks how many I've photographed. "Ten so far," I say. "We hope to have fifteen for the exhibition." "Fifty?" she says, mishearing. Then laughs when I correct her. "One five. It's very recent," I add. "All in the last six months."

"Not many survivors," she says. Then, almost off hand, comes the line that has been circling my own thoughts for months.

"Except people call themselves survivors who were three years old," she says, "and they think they know it all."She's not smiling now. "When they're used for important things," she says, "I say, how can you remember when you were three? They left at three. They didn't even live through the war. "

She lets the sarcasm hang in the air. It's not that she begrudges anyone their trauma, or their right to speak. What she objects to is the inflationary rhetoric, the way "survivor" has become a status some people claim, and some organisations bestow, regardless of how much the person actually remembers or endured.

It's a difficult subject, and she knows it. "That's not for me to make a judgement," I say, out of reflex, trying to soften the moment. "No," she agrees, but doesn't retract the criticism. "But… when they're used for important things… I say, how can you remember?"

It's not the only hierarchy she's sceptical of. Kindertransport. Hidden children. Ghetto survivors. Camp survivors. People who were in Auschwitz "proper" versus those in sub camps and labour details. People who were in Britain during the war but classify themselves as "Holocaust survivors" by association. She has watched for years as certain stories are elevated, certain people wheeled out again and again, certain kinds of suffering turned into shorthand.

"It's all sort of now, at the end of it, getting mixed," she says. The survivor community is small and ageing, and organisations that once focused on first generation testimony now work with second and third generations too. She supports that shift; it's necessary. But she wants the language to be honest, the distinctions clear. A three year old who was evacuated to New York has a story, certainly. It is not the same story as that of a fifteen year old in Piotrków or a teenager in Belsen.

The brutal truth Mala is pointing at, and which it takes a survivor to say out loud, is that there are no hierarchies in hell, but there are hierarchies in how we talk about it. And those hierarchies have consequences.

This is where the Mala and I overlap. We both mistrust tidy narratives. We both flinch at the way institutions sometimes smooth off the rough edges of testimony to make it more palatable, more marketable.

She tells me about earlier waves of documentation: Steven Spielberg's Shoah Foundation filming in the '90s; the photographers collecting portraits ten at a time with no clear plan for where they'd go. "I said, what are you going to do with them?" she recalls. "I don't think they even gave us copies."

There's no resentment in her voice, exactly. More a cool assessment of the ecosystem she's been asked to live in. "It's valuable," she says of the photographs. "But it's not valuable to the photographer, it's valuable to the people."

That's the bar she's setting for my project, for this work, is it valuable to the people whose faces and stories I'm using? Or is it just content?

When I tell her this is for the Wiener Library, she brightens. "Within my lifetime," she jokes "if I live that long." She's serious, too. She wants to see it on the wall. She wants to be able to bring her family, her friends, the other survivors she knows. She offers introductions: a contemporary from Hungary, whose number she digs out of a battered telephone book; others from the Holocaust Survivors' Centre. "If you ask them, they will introduce you to a lot of people," she says. "They already have," I reply. That's where I met Harry. That's where I met Kurt.

"But Kurt had quite a different story," she says, with understatement worthy of a critic. She lives in the overlap of these narratives. She is not about to let anyone pretend they're all the same.

We circle back to the young. It's where her energy goes these days, and where she thinks the project should go too. "There's no point telling me again," she says. "I know it. I've lived it." What matters now, is reaching the "younger people."

The politics of testimony, in her hands, is both simple and ruthlessly demanding. Don't over inflate titles. Don't under describe pain. Don't confuse being a child in wartime with being a child in a death system. Don't treat survivors as mascots or as endlessly renewable resources. Do, however, use the time that's left to build connections that will outlast her generation.

That conviction colours everything, even her view of this afternoon's photographs. She remembers earlier sessions where nobody ever saw the results, where the images vanished into someone else's archive. With this series, she wants visibility now, not just a hypothetical future.

"In a way," she says, "it is better to come up with them sooner rather than later. You can use them again later anyway. But it keeps it going, because there will be people who recognise people."

The recognition is not just about faces. It's about the pattern of a life: Piotrków, Częstochowa, Ravensbrück, Belsen, Sweden, secretarial college, Maurice, sociology degree, children, grandchildren, school halls, Number 10, a living room in London with too much light.

"It's all one story," she said in another context. "Before, during, after. You can't cut it." That line sits under everything we've talked about today. Hierarchies cut. They slice lives into categories and ranks. Her politics of testimony refuses that.
As I pack up, she worries about her son ringing, about whether she should call him to say she'll be busy. She apologises for not remembering names, "whenever I want anything, I can't think of it", then promptly remembers the one she was searching for and writes it down for me.

"I haven't forgotten everything," she says. "Not yet." She hasn't. She remembers enough for several lifetimes. Enough to know that when organisations and governments and newspapers talk about "survivors" as a single, homogenous group, they are flattening the world she came from beyond recognition. Enough to know that some of the people now introduced as survivors at "important things" didn't, as she puts it, "even live through the war."
There's no malice in that observation, but there is a warning. If we're careless with who we call what, we risk confusing proximity with experience, and experience with authority. For someone like Mala, who has spent decades calibrating her own story so it can be heard without being sensationalised, that matters.

In the portrait I've made of her, the light is finally right. No glare in her eyes, no bleaching on the wall. Just a woman sitting exactly as she wanted to sit, looking past a lens that has seen more than its share of history, and refusing, gently, firmly, to be slotted into anyone else's hierarchy.

When the print goes up at the Wiener Library, it will hang alongside Harry and Kurt and the others. Visitors will read the captions, clock the names of camps and towns, perhaps build their own unspoken league tables of suffering. My hope is that Mala's story, as she tells it, will trip them up. That somewhere between "Piotrków" and "Bergen Belsen" and "MBE" and "hundreds of letters from schoolchildren," they'll hear her voice saying: it's all one story. You can't cut it. You certainly can't rank it.

And when the day comes, sooner than any of us want, that there are no more voices like hers in rooms like this, we'll be left with what we've chosen to record. The politics of that choice is what keeps me up at night, and what brought me, Leica and light and all, to her door.

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