HONOURING THE MEMORY OF STRANGERS IN THEIR MIDST
BY ANA POLICZER

This past October I travelled to Poland with my father to find the place where his mother, my grandmother, Anna Policzer (née Meister), died in 1944. During our trip through Poland we discovered a part of the Holocaust story we had known little about; it opened our eyes to the goodness of ordinary people charged with the extraordinary responsibility of honouring the memory of the innocent victims who died in their midst.

My father, Adam, was born in Miskolc in northeast Hungary in November 1938. In the summer of 1939 my grandfather, Janci, left for Chile to find a safe home for his young family. A few days after his arrival in Chile, the German army invaded Poland, and it became impossible for my grandmother Anna and her baby to leave Europe to join Janci.

In the summer of 1944, the German army invaded Hungary and the deportation of Hungarian Jews began. Anna, her remaining family, and the other 15,000 Jews of Miskolc were deported to Auschwitz. Anna had arranged for a Christian family to hide her little boy. It is thanks to them that my father survived; we have never heard of another child survivor from Miskolc.

For much of his life, my father had assumed that his mother and her family had died in the gas chambers along with the vast majority of Hungarian Jews who arrived in Auschwitz. The chances of his family having survived beyond their first day there were slim.

But in the mid-80s, he learned of a woman, Olga Csillag, also from Miskolc. Olga had been in the camps with my grandmother, had survived the ordeal and had written a book about her experiences. In her book she mentioned my grandmother, Anna: when they met, how they became friends, and when and where Anna died. This book was a rare gift that allowed my father to begin to uncover his mother’s story.

From Olga Csillag’s book he learned that after a few weeks in Auschwitz, several thousand Hungarian women had been transported by train to Stutthof, a smaller prison camp in northern Poland near Gdansk. Anna, her sister Klara, and her niece Marianna – as well as Olga Csillag – were in that transport.

Olga Csillag wrote that the train to Stutthof was comfortable compared to the cattle car transport to Auschwitz. This gave them hope that the worst of their ordeal was over. Their brief stay in Stutthof seemed to confirm this – the prison guards left them alone, and they were able to recapture at least some normalcy during their brief stay there.

But Stutthof was also the hub for several small work camps, and the women were soon transferred to one of them, Bocien, in the middle of Poland.

In Bocien, the hope they had clung to in Stutthof vanished. Olga described the inhuman conditions in Bocien – the backbreaking work, the sadistic commander – and my grandmother’s eventual death from exhaustion.

Olga Csillag’s book was the beginning of a long journey for my father. Not only was it proof that his mother had survived Auschwitz, it gave him something that few descendants of Holocaust victims have: he now knew some of what his mother had endured, where and how she had died – and he was able to confirm, after 50 years, that she had, in fact, died in the Shoah.

I have known people whose loved ones disappeared, whose deaths were unconfirmed for decades; whenever they heard a news story about other families’ unexpected reunions with
relatives long presumed dead, their suffering was renewed. The loss of loved ones is painful enough; to not know their fate prolongs a family’s pain, as they cling to faint hope and cannot put their loved ones to rest.

Olga’s book allowed my father to finally mourn his mother’s death.

My father’s journey culminated in a trip that he and I made to Poland last fall to finally visit my grandmother’s last resting place. We visited the three camps where she had been. We first went to Stutthof, then to Bocien, and finally to Auschwitz. Throughout our trip we searched for records and other traces of her experiences.

Although Stutthof was a small camp compared to Auschwitz, as the first concentration camp we saw, it was overwhelming. It had been a horrible place for its mostly political prisoners. As in the larger camps, there were unimaginably sadistic and cruel practices, and medical experimentation. There is also evidence that the camp supported a local soap-making factory.

According to Olga Csillag, treatment of the Hungarian Jewish women at Stutthof was indifferent; we learned during our visit that they were latecomers to the camp, were housed on the outskirts, and were largely left alone.

After Stutthof we travelled south to what remains of the camp at Bocien. We toured the countryside with a local military historian who had spent many years researching the area’s World War II history. He had discovered that late in 1944, as the Red Army was advancing, the Nazis began using prisoners on a massive scale to build military reinforcements; they used a large workforce of Hungarian Jewish women to dig anti-tank trenches throughout the countryside to slow the advancing tanks. My grandmother, her sister and her niece, as well as Olga Csillag, would have been among them.

The conditions were terrible – their commander was particularly sadistic and cruel, and the vast majority of the women died. My father learned from Olga Csillag that of the 2,700 women at Bocien, fewer than 300 survived. Some were forced to march on a frozen lake in winter, not knowing that the ice was too thin to hold their weight. Some were beaten to death. Some, barely alive, were tossed onto a pile of corpses to be carted away to large mass graves; before being thrown in, they somehow found the strength to pull themselves from the pile – only to be beaten dead or unconscious and thrown in the graves anyway.

Today, very little remains of this story around Bocien. The camp is gone, the anti-tank trenches dug by the women are mostly filled in, the fields are now beautiful farmers’ fields.

There are markers identifying the area as a WWII significant site where crimes were committed against Jews; we saw similar WWII markers throughout Poland.

We saw two monuments, erected by local communities, and dedicated to the Jewish women buried at two different mass grave sites near Bocien. Olga Csillag had described one of these monuments to my father: she was the only survivor in her family, and she returned to this site many times over the years to honour her sisters who died in Bocien and are buried in a mass grave in the cemetery in Dzwierzno, a nearby town. My father met her in the late 80s, shortly before she died. She was in poor health, her memory was failing, and she hadn’t visited Bocien in years. Still, she recalled her experiences vividly. She shared with him how every time she visited her sisters’ gravesite, there would be fresh flowers at the monument to the Jewish women.

During our visit last fall we learned that the Nazis had deliberately located the mass graves at Dzwierzno – where we believe my grandmother is buried – outside the cemetery boundary, quite likely to keep Jews off the cemetery’s sacred grounds. After the war ended, the townspeople petitioned their local government to officially change the cemetery boundary so it would include the mass graves, and they erected the
monument to the Jewish women at the cemetery entrance. When we visited, unannounced, there were fresh flowers just as Olga Csillag had described 20 years earlier, and the mass grave site was flanked by beautiful tall evergreens planted shortly after the end of the war.

We met with the parish priest who oversees the cemetery and asked about the flowers. We asked if there was a committee in charge of this. No, he said; it’s a spontaneous gesture by the local people. We were moved beyond words. More than 60 years have passed, and the town continues to honour our loved ones.

We asked if there were others, like us, who came to pay respects to their ancestors. He didn’t know of any – we were the first descendants of these victims he’d met.

Upon reflection, that’s not surprising: were it not for Olga Csillag mentioning my grandmother’s death in her book, we would still believe my grandmother had died in Auschwitz. The relatives of the other thousands buried with her in that grave – if any relatives survived – wouldn’t have known where their loved ones died. My father and I, along with Olga Csillag, may well be the only relatives of those buried there to ever visit.

We also met a local high school history teacher who teaches her students about the Holocaust. We saw some of the projects they had created, which were prominently displayed along one of the high school’s corridors. There are few Jews in Poland these days, and none that we know of in this small town. So for this dedicated teacher, our visit was an important link to this part of history. Most of the children growing up in the area don’t have a direct link to the horrible story that took place on the lands around them; meeting descendants of the victims made the story that much more real to them, and reinforced in the teacher the importance of continuing to teach this difficult part of history.

We came away that day with a new awareness of the scale of the crime committed. Bocien was a tiny camp in the middle of nowhere: yet close to 2,500 women died there. There were hundreds of other similar work camps – which most of us have never heard of – throughout Nazi-occupied Europe.

But we also came away with a profound sense of gratitude to the little town that continues to care for and honour the thousands of foreign women who died and are buried there. I kept thinking: for the people of that town, this was a crime committed by foreigners against foreigners. The fact that this town continues to remember the victims is a testament to their humanity and compassion.

As we drove past the beautiful, endless farmers’ fields around us, I imagined all the extreme suffering that had taken place there. I imagined more mass graves; I could visualize the cruelty and horror of more than 60 years ago. Looking at the Polish fields that had witnessed so much suffering, I found myself thinking about the memory of so many other lands around the world, of the agony of the people descended from other persecuted cultures and traditions. I thought about all the deaths, about the near annihilation of so many cultures.

The small, but profound, gesture at that cemetery in Poland – the fresh flowers left by ordinary people at a graveyard monument – is an acknowledgement that the horrors suffered by the women in those fields around Bocien are not forgotten, that the memory of their treatment continues to be as abhorrent to the people of that small town as they are to us. It gave my father and me great peace of mind: our loved ones are respected and honoured. It also gave us a newfound appreciation of the transformative power of a simple act of kindness and compassion.

Adapted from remarks delivered by Ana Policzer on Sunday, May 4, 2008, for the Yom Hashoah Service at the VHCS Monument, Schara Tzedeck Cemetery, New Westminster, BC
In November 2006, the Toronto Slovak Language Theatre Group presented an evening of poetry and music to honour innocent children and civilians who were murdered because of their Jewish origin. “I always wanted to realize a project of this kind,” said Valeria Toth, who organized the evening with her husband, Dusan. The selected poems were by Jewish authors of Slovak origin. An art exhibition in the lobby of the theatre featuring original paintings by Tibor Spitz, was an added attraction. Valeria continued: “I wanted truly to express the complex and often confused relationship of Jews with the country of their birth; the feelings of romantic and nostalgic love for the country and its people, mixed with pain and deep disappointment.”

The North York Centre for the Art hosted the evening, welcoming an audience of 130 people. Among the noted guests were the Slovak ambassador to Canada and many Holocaust survivors who brought their families. People were touched by the quality of presentation and arrangement. There were many wet eyes.

This performance was repeated in January 2008. Surprisingly, this was not in Toronto, but in Bratislava, Slovakia, and once more in Tel-Aviv in February 2008. The organizers included two of my poems evoking wartime and three satires critical of today’s society. These two poems I again present here, titled: Long Run, and Painted Forest.

Painted Forest
sun washed your blouse
you walked alone in the painted forest
scared of people who jail love
scared of people who jail lovers
into the masonry of their castles
water left strange symbols
in the granite bed
lips of hungry prisoners who could not escape
from the road to infinity
lips that curled
in flames
you still walk alone
the clay path of the painted forest
looking for your mom
looking for your dad
who are nowhere

Freedom of Speech
(masters of deadly ceremonies
perfected Romans
your words are nails
in the “coffin designate”
to another freedom
defense to state the truth
you believe
that the less perfect Romans
(those before you)
did not quite do
such a thorough job
as expected
from the great car manufacturers
your words are rusted
barbed wire prongs
resembling the sign
(so dear to you):
“Arbeit macht Frei”
the black steel ornament
of your favourite flower
the flower of hate

Photos: Above, Andrew Karsai, age one, 1943; Right, Leo Vogel
OF REMEMBERING AND BEING HEARD

BY LEO VOGEL

It has been over sixty years since the end of WWII and yet we, the survivors, continue to relive the traces of that intense childhood trauma. We will be doing so until we die. Often it’s not obvious how the horror affected us. We may not be overtly suffering from nightmares or constantly recall horrific mental images, nor show other outward signs. In fact we may not remember details of the trauma because we were too young or the pain too intense, or the events too unbelievable. Yet it emerges. It surfaces in our relationships, our view of the world and in day-to-day interactions.

Spending my early years (ages 2 to 5) in hiding from the Germans, constantly cheating death, left me with a lifelong dread of “what might happen next.” It’s as if I am on constant alert for something bad lurking just around the corner. Knowing that this fear is rooted in events a half-century old is sadly no consolation – the anxiety is still very real. As is often the case with survivors of childhood trauma, the pain remains deeply hidden until occasionally, during some unguarded moment, closeted feelings seep through to the present.

Such was the case one day when I sat on the beach with a friend enjoying the beauty of the moment. My friend had read much on the Holocaust but she had only second hand experience with this dark history. Revealing in the sounds, smells and sights of the ocean, we talked about how lucky we are to live in this beautiful place, in a peaceful country and how painful life is for so many others. The people of Darfur, Iraq, Israel and Palestine came to mind. Eventually, my friend asked about my Holocaust experiences, releasing a flood of painful memories buried for so long. I felt comfortable sharing with her some of my hidden feelings about the fears, stresses and anxieties of so long ago, the ones I had experienced when merely a toddler.

We each wrote a poem about that moment on the beach, from our individual perspectives. My poem is about the pain and confusion of hiding; hers is about the need for survivors to be heard and for the world to listen.
At first glance I thought, “Who would want to read another book about Reichsführer of the SS, Heinrich Himmler and his two brothers Gebhard and Ernst?” Then I noted the author is Ernst’s granddaughter, Katrin, a political scientist graduate.

So here we have three generations of Katrin’s family: her grandfather Ernst, born in 1905; her father, the youngest of three children, born in 1939; and Katrin herself, born in 1967.

While growing up in Germany, Katrin learned about her notorious great uncle Heinrich who was considered a “bad apple” by the rest of the family, while the rest of that generation were just ordinary Germans trying to make a living during those difficult years of 1933-1945. Then one day in the late 90’s Katrin’s father asked her to search the German Federal Archives in Berlin for files relating to his father, Ernst, who was simply thought of as the younger brother of Heinrich, a technologist, an engineer, Chief Engineer of the Reich Broadcasting Company in Berlin, and a non political person from everything that was said in the family. He died in the final days of World War II.

The opening of these files led Katrin to the discovery that Grandfather Ernst and his brother Gebhard were both high positioned Nazis with party card numbers dating back to the early 1930’s. In fact, they, their wives, their close relatives and friends were all rabid, career seeking Nazis with the strongest affiliation to the top leadership.

This is a story of discovery. It includes the elder generation – the perpetrators of crimes, the middle generation – the deniers of their past, and the third generation – the questioners. Katrin’s research reveals details of the lives of the older generation from letters and diaries preserved, unread, by the middle generation.

What is most fascinating about this account is Katrin’s situation. In the late 1990s as she commenced her research, she met Dani, a Jewish Israeli whom she eventually married. Together they have a son. Dani’s grandfather and father, Polish Jews, were escapees from the Warsaw Ghetto. Katrin’s role therefore is complicated by the fact that one day she will have to explain to her son why and how his German side of the family tried to wipe out his Jewish side.

The three Himmler brothers were born into a middle class German Catholic family in Munich. Their father was a respected teacher who rose to the position of principal. Included in the extensive family photo album is a picture of Heinrich, aged 12 together with his class of boys. Their dress suggests a background that is comfortably middle class. The caption reads, “Falk Zipperer, Heinrich’s friend is in the picture. He also joined the SS.” In the same group is George Hallgarten, a Jewish classmate, who immigrated to the United States with his family and became an eminent historian.

One is left with the question, “What determines that an innocent boy will turn into a monster the likes of Heinrich Himmler and another boy from the same class, an eminent historian?” Surely the answer must include the racist intolerance of the times.

Lucien Lieberman is a volunteer docent as well as a Director of the Vancouver Holocaust Centre Society and member of it’s Financial Committee.
Author, Lillian Boraks-Nemetz was born in Warsaw, Poland, where she survived the Holocaust as a child, escaped the Warsaw Ghetto and lived in Polish villages under a false identity. She has a Masters degree in Comparative Literature, teaches Creative Writing at UBC and is the editor of the No Longer Alone feature of this VHEC newsletter Zachor.

Rudolph Vrba testified as an expert witness at many trials of former Nazis, including that of Adolph Eichmann. He moved to Vancouver in the mid-1970s and lived here until his death in 2006. For many years, Vrba was a professor of Pharmacology at UBC.
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THANK YOU
Jenny Stozenberg, Many thanks for generously sharing your pictures with our family. Sarah Neiman
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Judith Forst, Many thanks for your contribution to our two recent Symposia at UBC. VHEC Board & Staff
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Mariette Doduck, Thank you for speaking to students from Fromme Elementary School, North Vancouver.
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