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HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE DAY

Honoring the Legacy of a Holocaust Mother

By LLOYD GREIF

My 97-year-old mother, Herta Greif, died last fall of aortic stenosis that led to congestive heart failure. A Holocaust survivor, she had been a fighter all her life, and with this illness she was no different. When she suffered a massive stroke in July 2005, she lapsed into a coma from which her doctors said she would not recover. But, in a matter of days, she did, at which point her doctors estimated she had, at most, a year to live. Mom hung in there for more than six years, with the only lingering signs of the stroke being having to use a walker and occasional bouts of memory loss.

The stroke cost mom her long-term memory, but that was a blessing of sorts. Although she had plenty of good memories — growing up in Bregenz, Austria, working in her family's chain of general merchandise stores in Bregenz, Innsbruck and Salzburg, meeting and falling in love with my father, Mendel Berysch Greif, a Polish apparel salesman, and bringing up my older brother, Mark, and me — she had plenty of bad ones, too, all of them associated with Nazi Germany and the Holocaust.

I said my mom was a fighter, and was she ever. She had the heart of a lioness in a diminutive, 4-foot-11-inch frame. Take, for example, the time when her younger brother, Robert Ernst, a soldier in the Aus-



Herta Greif circa 1938. Photo courtesy of Lloyd Greif

trian army, was arrested and repeatedly brutally beaten for refusing to be conscripted into the German army after Austria's annexation in March 1938. Mom, age 24, went to the local Gestapo headquarters to try to obtain his release. That bold, throwing-caution-to-the-wind stunt could easily have resulted in her joining Uncle Robert behind bars, but she wasn't going to let her brother rot in jail. Ultimately, only the fact that their late father, Oskar Ernst, a captain in the elite Austro-Hungarian mountain rifle regiment during World War I, was a decorated war hero won her brother's release. But, there was a catch: Uncle Robert had 24 hours to leave the country with only the shirt on his back — and *without* their father's Iron Cross.

Although Uncle Robert journeyed to America and wanted Mom to join him, she refused, staying behind to take care of their mother, Hermine Ernst, who was too ill to leave Austria. With Europe growing darker by the day for Jews, my mom and dad were wed in a civil ceremony in Vienna in July 1938. It was already clear that having a formal Jewish wedding, with all the pomp and circumstance, was not only not a good idea, it was *dangerous*.

Only after Kristallnacht, in November 1938, did they finally flee to France, forcibly leaving their re-

maining possessions behind. With the advent of World War II fast approaching, my dad enlisted in the French army. He was captured when France fell in June 1940. As a traveling salesman, he spoke fluent German and had the gift of gab; he was able to persuade a German sentry to look the other way and escaped during his first night as a prisoner of war.

Reunited, my mom and dad lived in Agen in southwest France — *Vichy France*. They lived in hiding, in constant fear of discovery, until the Nazis did away with the illusion of Vichy France and their luck finally ran out. One dark day in June 1944, my father was nabbed during a Gestapo raid at the apartment where they were paying a Gentile family to hide them. My mom was out at the time and, unaware that the Gestapo was patiently awaiting her return, was approaching the apartment house on foot when a neighbor warned her of the imminent danger. Frantic and distraught over her husband's safety, my mom still wanted to be with my father but, fortunately for Mark and me (not to mention her), the neighbor physically restrained her, convincing Mom that she could do more for Dad by remaining free and at large, giving him something to live for.

My father was on Convoy 76 from Drancy to the Auschwitz death camp on June 30, 1944. While he was struggling to survive, first at Auschwitz and then at the Dora-Nordhausen concentration camp, where Jewish slave labor was used to make V-2 rockets, my mom was alone, fending for herself. Living in hiding in the woods and barns of the French countryside, she didn't know whether her husband was alive or dead, or when her own luck would run out. When the U.S. Army liberated Dora-Nordhausen on April 11, 1945, 91 percent of the inmates were either dead or dying; my dad was one of the mere 9 percent still barely clinging to life. My parents were reunited at a U.S. Army hospital, where my mom at first could not even recognize her skeletal husband.

My father, who lost 10 siblings to the Holocaust, changed his first name to the far more Gentile-sounding Emile when they moved to Paris. In 1947, they emigrated to Los Angeles, where my mother rejoined her brother, Robert, at long last. Together, my parents started Paris Handbag Manufacturing Co., a maker of women's leather fashion accessories, in downtown Los Angeles. Dad oversaw design, operations, marketing and sales, while my mom handled finance and administration (after Hitler's decrees forbade non-Jews to shop at Jewish-owned stores, putting an end to the family's retail business, my mother had gained employment as an accountant in Austria — until the company where she worked was ordered to summarily terminate all Jewish employees).

But working in the family business with Dad wasn't enough for Mom; after the Holocaust years of fear, horror and death, she wished for the darkness to

give way to light. As she put it, she “wanted to watch something else grow at home besides plants.” My brother was born in 1950; I followed five years later.

But death revisited our family in March 1962, when my father, who never fully regained his health after the hardships of the camps, died, leaving my mom a widow in her 40s with two young boys, ages 6 and 11, to raise. Unfortunately, the family business also perished with my dad. Mom, a beautiful woman, never remarried — *by choice*, refusing to let *anyone* come between her and her kids. Was she over-protective of us? Absolutely. Was it understandable? Very.

Being a single mother wasn't nearly as common then as it is now, and a single mom in a strange land, more difficult yet. Mom learned a new profession, cosmetology, made new friends and supported us as best she could until we went off to college. Later in life, she returned to her accounting profession roots.

Perhaps Mom's proudest moment came the day she took and passed the exam to be an American citizen. She subsequently showed her appreciation for the country that took her in after the war by serving on the Federal grand jury that indicted fugitive financier Robert Vesco and by repeatedly volunteering as an Election Day poll worker.

The years passed, but the memories of the Holocaust were ever present. Mom frequently spoke about those terrible days, both unable and unwilling to let them go. Mom lost everything in the war — including, ultimately, her husband, a delayed victim of Hitler's Final Solution — but she had her children and, over time, her grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and that was what kept her going. Mom lived for her family. She had an amazing will to live, and this strength of spirit characterized her throughout her life — first living for her brother at the time of the *Anschluss* (Nazi Germany's occupation and annexation of Austria), then her mother, then her husband and, finally, her descendants.

When the stroke finally, blessedly, erased the Holocaust from her memory, Mom was able to live out her remaining years in peace, without being haunted by those terrible thoughts. But she need not have ever worried whether her children would be able to comprehend or remember what she lived through. We will never forget, and we also will never forget what a great and loving mother she was.

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