

Chapter 28: The story of my mother

To her generation, or those few who survived it, the story of my mother's life would not seem extraordinary. She was born in 1920 on her grandparents' farm —a few Jews were farmers like their Ukrainian neighbors —in Eastern Galicia, near Lvov; then Poland, now Lviv, Ukraine. One night, as a three year old girl, she witnessed Ukrainian bandits murdering her father, who during the First World War had been a musician in Austria's emperor, Franz Josef's, personal orchestra. After her mother re-married, my mom was dispatched to her uncle in Berlin, where she attended a German gymnasium growing up as a Germanized Jewess. A teenager, she witnessed the ascent of the Nazis —she was expelled from school, gradually losing contact with her German girlfriends. In October 1938, just a few days before *Kristallnacht*, she was among the "Polish Jews" forced by the Germans back to Poland. Over the years my mother used to tell about her early life in a detailed yet disorganized fashion —many disjointed fragments lacking chronological continuity. But one of her tales left a strong image in my childhood memories: returning from school, as a petite 16 year old, black haired girl, with a bundle of books in her hands, she saw Hitler's car crossing the center of Berlin. "I squeezed myself between the crowds...everybody raised his right hand...screaming *heil Hitler* and *sieg heil*, and I saw *him*, no more than ten meters away from where I was standing, I saw his little mustache, he sat in the black Mercedes, saluting the adoring crowd... you should've seen how they adored him —the old and young, especially the young women; you could see it in their eyes... how they loved that monster."

1939, WW II and the German invasion of Poland found my mom in Krakow. There are two versions of her war story: the "official" one, recounted in a series of anecdotes; and the "real" version, which we figured out only after her death. In the "official" version my mom survived in the Ghetto of Warsaw; thanks her German education she could work for the German administration, thus sustaining herself and avoiding transportations to the gas chambers of Maidanek. Just prior to the Ghetto uprising, so the

story continued, and its final destruction, a “good German” —a highly placed official in the German railway system in Poland— helped her cross over to the Aryan side. He supplied her with false documents, bearing the Spanish name Navara (to account for her dark look) and continued sheltering her until the end of the war by providing contacts across conquered Europe. Rarely, when in a nostalgic mood, on Yom Kippur or the yearly Holocaust memorial day, mom spoke about the hungry children of the Ghetto, the corpses in the streets but more about the years after she left the Ghetto: trains packed with German soldiers; German officers flirting, sharing their food and wine with her, and boasting that they “can smell a Jew from a distance.” The long years of moving from town to town, shelter-to-shelter, always pretending “I’m a German”, always avoiding informers, who would have sold her to the *Gestapo* for a portion of bacon; these were her favorite tales. She was the sole survivor among her entire family—not even a second-degree cousin on either side had been left behind; not even a grave. Her own survival had left her with many visible and latent scars; yet she was proud to come out alive, modestly attributing it to her resourcefulness, shrewdness, youth, a perfect Berlin dialect, *chutzpa* and the “good German.”

Suddenly, in 1974, after my father’s death, the “good German” from the stories had surfaced; Herr Herbert Vogt was his name. My mother had resumed contact with him and his wife Inge, who now were living, in retirement, in Frankfurt, West Germany; and they started to exchange regular visits in Haifa and Frankfurt. My mother saw to it that Herr Vogt, who passed away in 1982, was invited to *Yad Vashem* in Jerusalem, where he was honored by the State of Israel as one of the “Righteous Among the Nations.” To arrange for this she had to provide evidence that he had helped other Jews as well. I had met Herbert Vogt several times during his visits to Israel. What I saw was a white haired, slim, elderly gentleman of medium height. The pleasant face and smiling blue eyes betrayed how handsome he must have been in his prime. I found him agreeable, mild mannered yet jocular and witty —a perfect old man to share a beer with. He used to, I remember, call my mother “Nina, *mein Kind*.”

Only after my mother's death we learned about the true nature of relationship between her and Herr Vogt. This was when we discovered, in the depth of her closet, a bunch of old letters— it was their correspondence from the war years. These were "war letters"—nothing overt, everything covert—the meaning of things to be read in between the lines; yet it told a love story. Love shared by a German official and a much younger Jewess; their love triumphing amidst a world engulfed in a cloud of burning and smoky chaos; her real identity could have been uncovered anytime —a death sentence to both of them—yet their love went on.

Here is one such letter:

1 November 1941

Dear Anna!

I suppose that fate wanted things to be this way. There is surely no benefit in fighting it. Entrapped in our subjective attitudes we cannot know where to put our steps, and yet subconsciously we choose a path leading us around the abyss. Dear Anna, it is only sad that we never saw each other here again. But that is how it always goes. Now the roles have changed. You are, hopefully, living in better circumstances now, whereas I find myself in worse as far as my livelihood is concerned. But that does not matter. There are times when one is forced to change roles. Who knows how long my guest appearance here might last. I was there only last Saturday to Monday. Now your letter only reached me today, and so I cannot make any plans at this late stage. I could travel by next Sunday at the earliest....

Please be patient; the reunion will be all the more cordial. I imagine that we will have an evening as wonderful as those we used to have, and I am confident that we will consider the interim as something that never happened at all.

What we are experiencing is, in a way, a peculiar thing. If one were to write it down on paper, and someone else were to read it, then that person would vow that such things cannot happen in life. It is almost like a novel. But, as we know, life writes the best novels. Please, will you wait just a little bit longer, and the novel will come alive again, and the characters

live, to talk, and to love each other. Please behave yourself and don't do anything foolish. I wish you all the best for now. I am kissing your hands, your mouth, everything.

Yours Berta*

[* Berta was Herbert's code name]

So this is how it was: they had been lovers. He sheltered her in Krakow and then hid her with his family and friends across Germany and Austria, under false identity of course. That she stayed in the Warsaw Ghetto was her own fabrication (she saw it however from the Aryan side, the outside). For how could she, a Jewess, now married to a Jewish doctor—first in post war Poland, and later in Israel— possibly admit that during the war, which killed her entire family, and a large portion of her people, she had a German man for a lover?!

Herr Vogt's story was remarkable: the man who had arranged the traffic of trains across Europe, including the transports to *Auschwitz*—had become a "Jew lover". I always thought that it should be turned into a novel. My friend, Christoph Meister—a German language scholar at the Universities of Hamburg and Johannesburg, was captivated by the story. Based on extensive research and interviews with Vogt's wife Inge and other Jews saved by him (including my mom's friend Steffa), he wrote a *Roman à clef* entitled "The man who sent trains to *Auschwitz*." One of the questions the book attempted to address was: what motivated that humble German hero, an ordinary young man, to stand out, one among millions, and actively oppose his own nation's murderous system, risking his own life—was it only love?

A paragraph from the book:

Many years later, long after Herbert's and Nina's deaths, I sat opposite Steffa in her apartment in Düsseldorf. It was May, and I recall noticing the *Chanukia* on the sideboard the very moment the twelve o'clock church bells from across the street started ringing. They were so loud that we had to stop our conversation for a couple of minutes. Steffa and Nina had been

very close friends, yet some of our sources seemed to indicate that, as far as Herbert had been concerned, they had also once again become rivals: as in those teenage days in Galicia. Had that waltz in the small kitchen marked out a triangular perimeter of desire? I realized that there was no way I could put this question to the polite, hospitable and elegant elderly lady in front of me. And then I also realized that, whatever the answer to such question might have been, it would be meaningless because it would not really touch upon the truth of those past feelings. The truth, I realized, would be what Steffa decided that she wanted to remember.

“How was Herbert? What impression did he make on you in those days?”

She thought for a while before replying. “He was kind. He was so kind, and so polite, so gentlemanly. But the best thing about him was that he was so funny, so cheerful! Oh my God, how we laughed in those days! I have never ever laughed so much in my life again! You know, Nina was always a bit on the serious side, so when the three of us went out together she would sometimes be a bit envious of Herbert and me laughing so much. But we were good friends, that was all — I just liked to be with Herbert because he made me laugh, because he helped me to feel alive again in the midst of all this sadness and fear!”

Kindness, cheerfulness, sense of humor, self-deprecation had been Herbert’s antidotes to the ruthless psychopathy which overwhelmed his people. Herbert’s portrait hangs on the wall in my study; in a way, it is because of him that I do exist. His wife Inge sadly passed a few years ago.

December 1944: the German Eastern front is collapsing and the Russians are knocking on the gates. Here is Herbert’s last war letter and the first one that he dared to sign using his real name:

“Until then I wish you the very, very best, stay healthy, don’t forget to eat and look after yourself in every respect. If something should go wrong you know what to do, and where you have to go. I won’t find any peace until

I have provided, at the very least, for the immediate future. And that is what is tiring me so terribly at the moment.

Once again, all the very best for you, my child of sorrow! For now I shall be satisfied if you manage to cope with circumstances for the time being. In any case, my thoughts and worries are with you every minute, and I am struggling, what, how, when, and so forth.

Until we meet, fondest greetings and dearest kisses
Herbert

They met again only 30 years later. And she kept his letters until her last day.

"It was so nice, so nice, he came, it was such a glorious day, he came to me, so much love, and so much love." Was it Herbert she was talking about on her death bed?

We tried to publish the book about Herbert Vogt—the rare German *mensh*, and his love to Nina— but in vain. "Sorry, we are not interested in yet another book about the Holocaust", this was a common reply from numerous publishers. Thus, the manuscript is accumulating dust on the corner of my desk, probably the same fate bestowed on the pages I am writing now.

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My mother after WW II, in Poland

[See more pictures below](#)



My mother: early years in Israel



Herbert Vogt, with wife Inge, my mother and the German Ambassador in Israel. Herbert receiving the title of "Righteous Among the Nations", in *Yad Vashem*, Jerusalem, 1982



With my mother in her house, a few months before her death.