For our grandchildren,

Tessa, Jacob, Lilah, Max and Eli

Anyone who doesn't believe in miracles
is not a realist.

—David Ben-Gurion

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Acknowledgments

As with almost all authors, I owe a great deal to others, but I am of course solely responsible for any errors that may remain in this book.

As I need scarcely say, in addition to all else that I owe my mother and father, I incurred a large debt for the conversations we had over the years about the period covered by this work. But truth to tell my mother did not like to discuss specifics about the Holocaust, and I was extremely reluctant to "interview" her about everything that had happened. As a result, I am also indebted to the Shoah Foundation, housed today at the University of Southern California, for the interview the foundation did with my mother.

Others' knowledge and thoughts are also included in this work. When my mother and I visited Zofia Sendler in 1985, she explained what had happened while I was in hiding from the Nazis and when my mother found me again after the war. Her daughter Danuta also discussed these and other events with me. When we visited Lusia Avnon in Israel, she described what she recalled about the arduous post-war trip with my mother from Bergen-Belsen to Krakow, and her self-published book on her life was helpful on this and other scores. In New York, her sister Helga offered her thoughts as well, particularly about life in Selb, Germany.

Among family members, my other largest debt is to my husband, who has been keeping notes on my life for years and whose research and writing skills have been critical, especially since I began suffering several years ago from serious illnesses.

In addition, my late cousin Paul Rolnicki reviewed with me the days when his father and mine were in the Soviet military, my cousin Inka Hauser provided her insights as well, and my sister-in-law Helene Kaminski gave me valuable advice.

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Finally, I can never repay all the historians, attorneys, journalists, documentarians, Holocaust victims and others whose writings and films on the Holocaust and related issues inform this work. I hope that I have done them justice, that the book does not fall too far short in depicting the madness that was the Shoah.

Foreword

"Now it's my turn."
With these words Anita Epstein assumes her rightful role as a child survivor of the Holocaust, one who knows that she and other Jewish children who escaped death during the Shoah will be the last survivors. After they go the way of all flesh, the Holocaust will move from living history to historical memory; the content of that memory will be different, as will its ethos.

Children of her generation—and of mine—were always taught to wait their turn. Anita did so respectfully, understanding that while her mother was alive her story was central, Anita's but an embellishment. Some child survivors were less respectful, and their parents often belittled their children's memories, saying, "What could you know—you were only a child. What can you remember—you were so young." And because Anita was in hiding and not in the camps, her unique testimony was negated even more. Her suffering and her loss, real as they were for her, were secondary to the terrible tragedies of the adults who had been in the ghettos and camps. Thus, sometimes without thinking and certainly without understanding the cruel effect of their statements, ghetto and camp survivors were dismissive of the children and of others who lived in hiding, whether by passing as non-Jews or living in clandestine hiding places.

Yet now, more than three score and ten after the liberation of Auschwitz, child survivors' testimonies become all the more

important, for they will delay the inevitable transition, and the memory of the Holocaust will be enriched as a result.

Okay. It's her turn, and Anita Epstein has quite a story to tell.

She was conceived in love, perhaps in a flash of abandon that happens between husband and wife when, for a moment, all that matters is their love. No one who pondered the ghastly conditions of the Krakow ghetto in 1942 would have contemplated bringing another Jewish child into that world. And yet, a child was born there—Anna Künstler. Obviously, given the circumstances of her birth, there was no birth certificate. Were the birth to have been registered, her birth certificate also would have been her death certificate.

Such a child was not expected to live. Only one in ten of all Polish Jews survived the Holocaust, and the number was lower for Krakow, where Jews were deported to the death camps of Auschwitz and Belzec and where the "neighborhood" camp of Plaszów, under the cruel commandant Amon Goeth, was less than two kilometers away. And yet she did live.

We read of her rescuer, Zophia Sendler, who provided scarce food and desperately needed shelter to the young girl during the war. In Israel such women are called "Righteous Among the Nations of the Earth," but such an exalted status describes neither the simplicity of the deed and its majesty nor its motivation. Zophia was a religious woman; although she was promised recompense after the war, a share in a lovely home and some wealth, her religion was not one that permitted her *not* to offer a haven to a child condemned to die, even if such a child was a Jew. At considerable risk to herself and her family, she took in the baby girl and raised her alongside her own children. All the while, elsewhere throughout German-occupied Poland, other Jewish children were being murdered—"exterminated" was the word that the Germans used—and Poles who saved some of them similarly risked not only their own lives but those of their families as well. Still, the atmosphere

in the Sendler family was not all peace and tranquility. Zophia's husband, who must also have consented to offering shelter, was an abusive, wife-beating man. In the scope of things, this merits little mention, as it is overshadowed by all else. In her rescue home Anna Künstler became Anya Kasperkevitch; a Jewish infant became a Roman Catholic.

Zofia Sendler was by no means Anita's sole savior. As Epstein learned, she owed a great deal to the father she cannot remember, to his quick thinking to sedate her and give her away, escaping the liquidation of the Krakow ghetto, taking a taxi to hand off his daughter, and then courageously returning to the ghetto to be with his wife, come what may. In one paragraph, we see the wisdom, courage and forethought of her later-murdered father. Survival required all three characteristics—and, above all, luck.

If Epstein were writing a Hollywood script, she would have depicted the reunion with her mother, a survivor of Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen and other camps, in all its glory: mother and daughter are reunited, the bond reestablished at once, and off they go into the sunset. Why spoil the actual drama by foretelling the event? Suffice it to say that her mother, Eda Künstler, was wise enough to restrain herself and not to impose her needs upon the child, and Zofia was so very decent that she enabled the transition between the biological mother and the only mother Anya knew, her foster mother, to go as smoothly as possible.

As a little girl who survived what later became known as the Holocaust, Anna was regarded as a "miracle child." For adult survivors who witnessed so much death, the presence of this young child, the embodiment of life, was deeply cherished. In 1945, there were almost no Jewish children left in their world. Only after survivors married each other—frequently out of desperation and loneliness—and had children, often because women who had ceased menstruation in the camps were afraid that they would never conceive, were there other Jewish children around. Until

then, Anna was the only child, the cherished child, the beloved child.

Twice in this book I was bemused by coincidences, juxtapositions of her life and mine. Anita took a screen test to play Anne Frank in George Stevens' classic rendition of *The Diary of Anne Frank*. She may not have been chosen for the role for various reasons, including that she looked too Jewish. In the 1950s, after all, it was a handicap to be "too Jewish," especially if a film studio and a director were seeking to create a universal story. It might also have been because they feared that Anita's own Holocaust story might have overshadowed Anne's, in which the Holocaust is only dimly in the distance. Anne begins her "Holocaust" experience only after her diary ends, when there is the knock at the door. One wonders if some of the criticism of the false universalization of *Diary* might have been the same had an actual survivor played the role.

Anita also shares an annoyance with Eva Kor, who with her twin sister was a victim of Dr. Joseph Mengele's ghastly "experiments" at Auschwitz. Kor suddenly decided in the 1990s that she could forgive the "Angel of Death" and other Nazis and thereby make peace with her Holocaust experience. Having assumed the role of the heavy in the film *Forgiving Dr. Mengele*, I joined in Anita's opposition to such "cheap grace." Even though she is a survivor, Kor is not the one who can offer forgiveness and certainly not if it has not been earned by acknowledgment, confession, and resolve, the three essentials of repentance, the minimum requirement for forgiveness.

The sense of the miraculous survivor seems to have given Anita a character of strength and a resilience that has accompanied her through life. I will restrain myself from commenting on her immigration and Americanization—she does that with grace, humor and gratitude—and having known Anita and her husband Noel for so many years, I can only say that by reading this memoir I learned much about two people I thought I knew, and so will you.

Though you will read many sad things in this book, this is not a sad book but a powerful work by an accomplished woman, self-confident and ready to take center stage in service of memory. Now that it is her turn, we must celebrate how much she has to say, the depth and the power of her memory.

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Introduction

Before It's Too Late

In 1995, when she was nearly 80 years old, my mother was interviewed by the Shoah Foundation about her ordeals during the Holocaust—the torments of Hitler's camps, including Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen, the murders of almost all her family members, the recurring anxiety about whether her baby girl, who had been hidden from the Nazis, was still alive. Near the end of the interview, she was asked whether she wanted to impart any thoughts to her children and grandchildren. Her first answer was simple and direct: "Not to forget."

While the Holocaust will never be entirely forgotten, survivors worry that the public will pay less and less attention to it as it recedes further into history. That is certainly the case for many in my generation; we were the children then (I was the little girl who was hidden), and before long we will be the last remaining survivors. After us there will no longer be any who lived through it, none telling their tales at the world's Holocaust museums, none speaking to classrooms, none lighting candles at memorial services on *Yom Ha'Shoah* (Holocaust Remembrance Day).

Granted, second- and third-generation groups, museums, synagogues, schools, publishers, film producers and others will continue to spread knowledge of the Shoah after we are gone. Their task, though, will be more challenging. For one thing, post-survivor voices obviously will not carry the same weight as those who spent their days clinging to life in camps amid gassings, burnings,

beatings, shootings and hangings, those who starved, froze or collapsed from exhaustion or disease, those who lived in disguise or in hiding and in constant fear of being discovered. Those are the voices—Primo Levy, Elie Wiesel, Anne Frank and others—that moved the world. For another thing, Americans unfortunately set no great store by history, whether of their own country or the world. Indeed, one survey of Holocaust knowledge found that of seven nations examined—the United States, Germany, France, Great Britain, Austria, Poland, and Sweden—Americans knew the least about the subject. Most Americans could not even identify Auschwitz as a concentration camp.

In addition, post-survivor voices will have to counter the increased cheapening of words like "Holocaust," "Hitler" and "Nazis." Various political advocates cannot seem to stop hurling "holocaust" at their target of the week. In 2004, for example, an animal-rights group sponsored a traveling exhibit called the "Holocaust on Your Plate"; its large photographs equated a stack of pig carcasses with piles of human corpses and otherwise compared concentration camp victims with animals. Others speak of an "abortion holocaust," an "environmental holocaust," a "tobacco holocaust," or they hurl "Nazi" or "Hitler" regularly at opponents (especially, perversely, when they are Palestinians attacking Israelis). True, corruption of these words is not new. Nearly 30 years ago Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel lamented the use of "holocaust" in the media to describe the drubbing of a sports team or the murder of half a dozen people. Since then, however, the trivialization of these words has multiplied many times over. In fact, calling someone a "Nazi" online has become so commonplace that the phenomenon has given birth to "Godwin's Law," an adage created by one Michael Godwin and defined as follows by the Oxford English Dictionary: "the theory that as an online discussion progresses, it becomes inevitable that someone or something will eventually be compared to Adolf Hitler or the Nazis, regardless of the original topic."

All this, of course, is to say nothing of those who preach that the Shoah never happened, that there were no gas chambers at Auschwitz-Birkenau or that Anne Frank's diary was a forgery. Yes, the Holocaust deniers are, at least in the United States, a relatively small fringe group (in other lands, especially among Muslim communities and particularly in the Middle East and North Africa, they are, sadly, far more plentiful). Yet if we have learned anything from the Nazis and the Holocaust it is the peril of not taking fringe groups seriously enough, especially since this particular group is spewing more and more of its lunacy onto the Internet. Thus, the world must be reminded repeatedly that the Holocaust not only happened but that it was the height of human horror. People need to understand that "Holocaust" is not synonymous with "disaster," "mistreatment," "catastrophe" or large numbers of deaths, that it was savagery on a unique scale, the ultimate evil.

Perhaps the largest challenge to keeping the memory of the Holocaust alive, though, will remain that staggering number: 6 million. Who can wrap their mind around that magnitude of madness? Who can summon the ocean of tears needed to cry for 6 million murdered Jews? Who can imagine the faces of the 1 million to 1.5 million children among the piles of corpses? Sometimes I try, especially when I think of how close I came to being one of them. The mind-boggling number, though, keeps getting in the way. That is why we survivors have to tell our tales: in the hope that our personal stories can help the next generation and generations to come better grasp the horrors inflicted on millions and to explain how the relatively few of us who did not perish fared in our lives. In addition, we need to keep beating the drums against the new Jew-hatred that has emerged, especially in the Middle East and Europe.

My own story has its share of tragedy, but I certainly do not view myself as a tragic figure. After all, I was among the tiny fraction of Jewish children in Poland—a mere one-half of one percent—who emerged from the Holocaust alive. I also have a great deal to be

thankful for. My mother and first father, who died in Mauthausen, saved me from the crematoriums. Remarkably, my mother, though terribly ill after the war, still managed to travel for weeks and find me again. My second father, who survived Stalin's Siberia and killed Germans on the eastern front as a member of the Red Army, was an unwavering pillar of strength and support and love. My husband, two daughters, two sons-in-law and five grandchildren, as well as my brother and his wife and children, all bring me great joy. We clearly outwitted the Nazis by multiplying again.

But there were trying times along the way. At war's end, when my mother tracked me down after she had survived four of Hitler's camps, I was torn screaming from the Polish Catholic family where I had been hidden, a family with whose last surviving member I am still in touch. When my mother and I became what were euphemistically called "Displaced Persons" (DPs), anti-Semitism was rife in U.S. DP camps in Germany. One need only recall the vile remarks of U.S. General George Patton, then Military Governor of Bavaria, who saw Jewish DPs as "lower than animals" and treated them accordingly. Indeed, President Harry S Truman's envoy to U.S. DP camps reported after a 1945 inspection tour that "we appear to be treating the Jews as the Nazis treated them except that we do not exterminate them."

We lived at that time in Selb, in Bavaria, birthplace of the Nazi party, while we and everyone else we knew searched for someplace else to go, for someone to open a door for us. We spent eight months in Great Britain with my mother's sole surviving sister, who had wed in England before the war, but the United Kingdom was not high on my mother's list of possible new homes. Post-war England, after all, was one of many countries with a continued aversion to Jews. It excluded Jewish DPs from the lists of East Europeans it imported to work in its coal mines, its steel and textile mills and other parts of its wobbly economy, and, of course, it had sought to placate Arab leaders by reneging on its support for a Jewish homeland and

restricting Jewish entry into British-controlled Palestine. Many Jews reviled Britain for this, especially after its heartless treatment of survivors on the *Exodus 1947*, the Palestine-bound ship it rammed and boarded off the coast of Haifa, killing or maiming a number of DPs who resisted the boarding party and sending thousands back to camps in Germany. At the same time, much to my mother's frustration, U.S. anti-Semitism kept America's doors closed as well. In the end, however, with some maneuvering around a new anti-Jewish immigration law in America, we finally managed to make it to Ellis Island in late 1949, when I was 7 years old.

New York immigrant life in the 1950s also had its struggles. With little money, we lived in another ghetto, Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant. For entertainment, kids there sometimes played a game called "Hit the Rat," in which we would swing sticks at rats in the streets and try to chase them into sewer drains. In our apartment at 268 Pulaski Street, we would hold up our feet while mice went by our chairs. In elementary school I was placed initially in a class for "the retarded" (today's "intellectually disabled") simply because I did not yet have a full command of English, and in junior high school I ended up during recess one day with classmates throwing two darts in my back. In addition, a girl named Henrietta, who headed a Brooklyn gang called the Lady Chaplains, threatened me and told me to meet her and her friends after school. I did, but I told her that I didn't understand why she wanted to meet. She said to fight, of course. I asked why I would want to fight. She said I must be joking. I told her that I wasn't. Evidently thinking that I was either an imbecile or insane, she decided to become my protector. From then on, every weekday during the school year she walked me to junior high school in the morning and back home again in the afternoon.

I didn't tell Henrietta about my history during the Holocaust and rarely mentioned it to other children. Most didn't know what the Holocaust was anyway. As for the few who did, if I tried to explain

my story they either looked at me in a peculiar way, as if I were different (which I hated), or they asked uncomfortable questions. The one I disliked most was whether I had nightmares. Yes, I had nightmares, mostly about being chased and running as fast as I could to escape, and I frequently awoke screaming. But I disliked talking about that. Besides, I had spent some time deliberately not saying anything to my mother about my sleep demons. With everything she had been through, after all, how could I complain about frightening dreams, particularly since she suffered from far more horrible nightmares? Okay, I did tell my mother once about a nightmare, but I stopped after she dismissed it by saying, once more, that I had never been in the *lager* (the concentration camp) and that the bad dreams would go away. They never did. They are much less frequent now, but at times I still scream in my sleep.

Of course, there were pleasant experiences as well. I had some wonderful teachers, for example, including one in junior high who conspired to keep me away from an awful neighborhood high school and to enroll me in a better one further from home, Thomas Jefferson High. There I became "Miss Jefferson," wrote an advice column for the school paper, and did well academically. During those high school years, moreover, Academy Award-winning film director George Stevens gave me a screen test and auditioned me twice for the part of Anne Frank in his 1959 movie version of *The Diary of Anne Frank* (why I didn't get the role is an interesting question that will be explored later). As an adult, I quit my job teaching English to foreigners in Washington (where my husband was working for *The Washington Post*) and, without pay, created a group that helped, at least modestly, to stave off bankruptcy for New York City, which had opened its arms to so many immigrants like me. Although forgoing my salary squeezed our budget, I felt compelled to help the city secure federal loan guarantees during its 1970s fiscal crisis, when New York temporarily lost its borrowing power in the bond markets. As a result of that experience, I ended up

becoming a lobbyist, first for the nation's state boards of education and later for Mexico and other international trade clients, pushing laws, regulations and national policies in Washington instead of *schmatas* in Manhattan.

Although my adult life has been filled with a wonderful family and dear friends and colleagues, I long had a nagging sense of being left out, of not fully belonging, because I was neither a concentration camp survivor (thank goodness) nor a second-generation offspring born after the war. Beyond a scattered friend or two, I knew nobody with a similar history. It was a great comfort to me, therefore, to discover a group in the Washington area, now called "Survivors of the Holocaust—The Last Generation," which meets monthly at one of our homes and which is part of a worldwide federation of child survivors. As I listen to other members' stories and deal with the issues we all face, I know I am no longer alone.

I have waited a long time before putting any of this to paper. Partly this was because remembering the past has sometimes been painful. Partly it was because placing the story in historical context—which I consider essential if the young are to have any chance of understanding what happened—took me some time. Most of all, however, it was because I could not get myself to write a memoir while my parents were still alive and able to tell their own tales. I would wait my turn. My parents, after all, are the ones who suffered far more than I did and who began all over again with little more than memories of a broken world left behind them. They were the remarkably resilient ones, living on little in a foreign land, in a foreign language, with foreign customs and nonetheless succeeding. They are the ones to whom I owe everything. May they rest in peace (זצ"ל).

Now it's my turn.

Part I

Origins