

Didi's Story

For my children and grandchildren

**Thanks to Cy who suggested that I do this
and for doing it**

and Jake who helped

My name is Dorit Elise Grant (nee Dorita Kastnerova). I am the sole survivor of my family line and I thought it important to tell the story about my family so that our name will not be completely erased from the world's memory bank. I also see it as essential that my grandchildren learn about their origins from their grand-mother's side. They already know their grand-father's story which, although he came from the other side of the world, bears an uncanny parallel to mine. They may then learn to understand the world in which they live, the racial, religious and cultural differences and conflict that has led it to be constantly at war with itself. It may help shape their choices as human beings and how they may learn to live in harmony with the earth and find peace in their lives.

I was born into a well-to-do Jewish family on July 8 1927 in the small but beautiful town of Teplice in the Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia. Teplice is situated in the plain of the Bílina river, which separates the Ore Mountains from the Czech Central Mountains. It was one of the most famous spa towns in Europe with thermal springs fabled to have been discovered as early as 762*. Sudetenland was home to about three million ethnic Germans; whilst it is estimated that before World War 2, there were only approximately three hundred and fifty thousand Jews in the whole of Czechoslovakia. They, however, enjoyed the same civil rights and religious freedom as all other Czech citizens. Teplice had its own thriving theatre, a promenade with



The Station now



The Theatre now

smart shops, beautiful parks and Synagogue.

My family was a very close-knit Jewish family. My mother had three brothers, Hans, Fritz and Kurt. Her parents were Adolph and Rosa Laufer. I was particularly attached to Grandfather Adolph who was kindly and adored me and my brother, Herbert. He owned a porcelain factory just outside Teplice and I still have a cup and saucer with the Laufer trade mark at the bottom.

My father, Hans Kastner, was born in 1898 in Austria. I remember a photo of him in uniform, having fought in the First World War. His parents died before he married my mother, Mimi. My father owned a company that produced machinery. The firm's name was ECCO. Another branch of the business was owned by his brother, Paul, who lived in Vienna with his glamorous wife, my aunt Ly. They occasionally came to visit us in our lovely home in Teplice, bringing presents for all the family. Ours was a happy and care free life with loads of friends and dinner parties. We had a German *fraulein* to do the cooking and take care of me and my brother Herbert. She was like another mother showering me with love. Whilst my father spent his days in his office my mother sat around in the cafeterias and life was swinging.

*The first authentic mention of the baths occurs in the 16th century. The town is mentioned in the 12th century, when Judith, queen of Vladislav I of Bohemia, founded a convent for Benedictine nuns, which was destroyed in the Hussite Wars in 15th century. Teplice figures in the history of Wallenstein, and is also interesting as the spot where the monarchs of Austria, Russia and Prussia first signed the triple alliance against Napoleon in 1813.



My Grandfather Adolph



My Grandmother Rosa



Mimi



My Father Hans



Hans with his brother Paul



My brother Herbert



Uncle Hans



Mimi with her brother Kurt



On holiday with my mother, brother and fraulein



On holiday with my mother and brother



On holiday with the old Chrysler



Me on holiday

However, this idyllic life style was to come to a sudden and disastrous end. In September 1938, Sudetenland was ceded to Germany by the infamous Treaty of Munich to which Britain, France and Italy were signatories. Overnight we were now part of Germany with its Master Race ideology. As a unit my entire family decided to leave our homes and start a new life in Prague, the capital. By March 1939 the whole of Czechoslovakia was occupied. We lived together in apartments in a large building in the city. But there was no way of escaping the Nazi scourge*.

Shortly afterwards, the news reached us that my uncle Paul committed suicide after being stopped on one of the borders of Austria, trying to flee that country when it was occupied by the Nazis. I recall my father's tears on hearing of his death. Suddenly our lives had changed completely. We, the children were not allowed to attend Czech schools. For the education of the children, our elders organized our own schools – small groups of children being taught in private homes. We were forced to wear the yellow Jewish star and forbidden to enter certain shops or go to the Theatres, Cinemas and other public places. We could, however, swim in the Summer and skate in the winter on the River Vltava near where we lived. There were signs which read *Juden Verboten*.

* Although we were unaware of these events at the time, *On June 21, 1939, Constantin von Neurath, the Nazi General, issued a long list of anti-Jewish decrees, essentially identical to those in effect in Germany, designed to destroy the economic viability of the Jewish population and confiscate all Jewish property. All Jewish people were forced to leave Czechoslovakia. In October 1939, the first Czech Jews were deported to concentration camps in Poland. By October 1942, seventy-five percent of Czechoslovakian Jews had been deported [most of them killed at Auschwitz].*

When I think of it now, it was just the way black people were being treated at the time in America except that they did not have to wear badges to proclaim their race, they wore a natural badge, the colour of their skins.

The average Czech was polite, but the majority were two-faced and anti-Semitic, a strange and perverse categorization as Christianity, Judaism and Islam, are all Semitic religions.

I am not quite sure how we survived. My father of course had lost his business, but may still have had a substantial bank account. My uncle Hans decided to flee the country and go to London in 1938 where he lived until his death in 1950. My father had successfully applied for a visa to go to Uruguay in South America, but my mother could not bear leaving her parents behind; a decision that haunted her for the rest of her life.

One day, in the winter of 1941, my father was summoned to shovel snow by the Germans. This was the kind of humiliation Jews had to put up with in order just to survive. In May 1942 we were all ordered to leave our flats and were moved to an old house in Prague, overcrowded with Jewish families in a similar predicament, filthy and riddled with cockroaches, to await transportation by train to Terezin, the infamous concentration camp some 2 hours journey from Prague. Uncle Kurt had preceded us in January 1942, a few months earlier, whilst my other remaining uncle, Fritz, was allowed to stay on with his non-Jewish wife, Aunt Emy, in their home in another district in Prague. We were able to entrust all our possession to his care as we were only allowed to take a few essentials in backpacks.

On May 9 1942, we were ordered to assemble at a special place before embarking on the dreaded journey to Terezin. We were each given a transport number. Mine was Au 209, a number which has stuck in my memory ever since. My

mother's parents were to follow us to the camp at a later date.

Terezin*, 60 km from Prague and on the way to Dresden, was an old fortress built at the end of the nineteenth Century by Kaiser Josef II against Prussian attacks. It was named after his mother Empress Marie Theresa. In 1930, it had a population of about 7,000 – mostly soldiers. By the time we got there it was a concentration camp with 40,000 - 60,000 inmates from all over Europe – from Germany, Austria, Hungary, Denmark, and Holland as well as from Czechoslovakia.

At the camp we were separated into different blocks – for men only or for women. Even the boys and girls were separated as were the old – no mixed blocks. So that brought an end to our life as a family unit.

I was put into a huge building called L410, for girls between the ages of eleven to sixteen. I shared a room with 23 other girls, all born in 1927. There were similar rooms for girls of the same age. On one side of the room there were six four-tiered wooden bunk beds with flimsy coarse pelisses riddled with bed bugs. The wash rooms, with only running cold water, and toilets were along a corridor infested with rats.

* Ghetto Terezin, as the area was euphemistically termed, in its inception in 1940 had been referred to as a self governed Jewish settlement. In reality it was part of the Nazi final solution plan – a way station for Jews from Bohemia and Moravia and elderly Jews from Germany and countries occupied by the Nazis.

I was scared to use them unless accompanied by another girl. We shared our thoughts, food and clothes and were very close. We were lucky to have a very humane supervisor; a woman who taught us History of Art as well as General Knowledge. In the evenings she shared her knowledge with us and instilled us with courage, hope and decent values. We were often awakened in the middle of the night to be counted. This could take hours whilst we shivered in the cold.

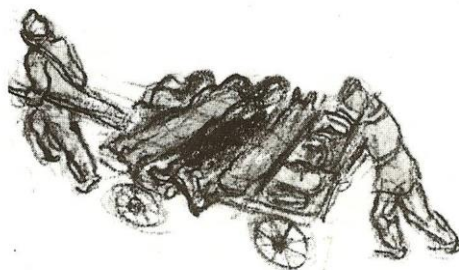
There were also many great musicians and artists in the ghetto and no shortage of cultural and educational events. I recall productions by the brilliant conductor, Rafael Schachter, of Verdi's Requiem and Smetena's Bartered Bride, among others works. I sang in the Chorus and there were secret rehearsals in the evenings.

I worked in the Landwirtschaft (agriculture) planting and growing vegetables and cucumbers. We marched every morning to the fields outside the ghetto, supervised by Czech gendarmes and Jewish Supervisors plus two armed German soldiers. Sometimes the Supervisors were beaten by the soldiers if they found out something not to their liking. I quite liked the work and often managed to nick a cucumber or small lettuce. It was good being outdoors.

In the evenings between 6pm and 8pm, we were able to walk about or have lessons. It was also the time we could visit our parents. My mother, Mimi, was held in her Kaserne, Hamburger. She shared a room with other women about her age and most of them were very kind. Mimi worked in the kitchens and so was able to pinch all sorts of tidbits which she shared with me and her room mates. She also had a small cooker in her room on which she made soup from some of these leftovers from the kitchen. This was always a bit of a treat, for the food in the camp was awful –

a daily diet of tasteless, watery soup, mashed black potatoes in a mush of minced horse meat, a few slices of bread, about 2 ozs. margarine, turnips, black ersatz coffee; and a weekly sweet dumpling, which I looked forward to; and a monthly tin of liver pate.

There was a severe lack of essential vitamins in our diet which resulted in the many illnesses that laid us low. I myself suffered at various times from Impetigo (disgusting pussy spots all over my body, but mostly on the legs), Jaundice (a disease of the liver, which turned me yellow, even the whites of my eyes, and gave a feeling of nausea) and Encephalitis (a contagious disease) which meant that I had to be put in quarantine in the Hospital – a brief respite when I did not have to work and could sit on the balcony and sunbathe. I was lucky not to have caught the typhoid that many of the girls in my room came down with. I recall with horror the wooden cart, piled high with the bodies of mostly the old who had died of starvation or illness, being pulled along the street to an unknown disposal point for burial; and the stench that filled the air particularly in the summer months.



Dead bodies going through Terezin

I hardly ever saw my brother and had no idea of what kind of work he was made to do. My father repaired locks and watches and had a special room reserved for that. I visited him whenever I had an opportunity and gave him my tin of liver pate in exchange for a cigarette – he exchanged things for cigarettes. I believe he suffered a great deal from the fate that had befallen him, a successful Jewish business man with a lovely family in a well-heeled district of Teplice!

On the other hand, the camaraderie that existed between me and my room mates helped me to make the best of our situation, more or less oblivious to many of the things that were going on around us and in the outside world. Somehow, one tends to remember the good things, but the bad ones were always there under the surface, scenes too painful to recall. Like the time I visited my dying grandmother in the disgusting conditions the old were housed, blood oozing out her mouth, and me just standing there while she passed on. I do not recall ever seeing my grandfather at the camp, living as he was in the section reserved for old men. But he miraculously survived and returned with us to Prague at the end of this most difficult time of our lives.

There had always been the spasmodic arrival of transports loaded with new arrivals; depositing some before setting off again to the East. We had a clear and chilling idea then where these transports were headed but no idea of their final destination or if one day it would be our turn to be transported thither. We were also quite aware that we were better off where we were.

In the summer of 1944 the die was to fall. My father was the first of my family to go. I clearly remember the agony of our parting – queuing with him whilst he awaited his turn to board a crowded cattle truck; he kissing me goodbye, not

like a father, on my mouth, as if he knew he would never see me again. But worse was to follow. My nineteen year old brother, Herbert, who I hardly ever saw, was shortly after sent off, along with other young men, in another transport to an unknown destination. Deeply distraught we at least cherished hopes that my brother Herbert who was a young man would survive.

We were liberated by the Russian army on the fifth of May 1945. It was not very dramatic. They came in big trucks, dirty and loud and gave us sugar and salt and vodka – which were in the trucks. We all vacated the houses and there was a big confusion not knowing what to do. Mimi and I moved into a little house. We did not know who had been the previous occupants – Czech or German. The majority of Germans had left the camp by train before the arrival of the Russians but there were still some old Germans about who were immediately made prisoners. A group of about twelve of these was forced to work in the very fields where I had worked. Ironically, I was asked by the Russians to oversee their work. Some of my friends tried to encourage me to be harsh with these old men, but I saw no point in acting like that.

On one occasion, whilst out in the fields, a drunken Russian soldier grabbed hold of me. He pushed me into a high corn field and tried to rape me. My loud screams were heard by one of the old Germans who came to my rescue. The Russian simply walked off. I decided that I would no longer stay in the job.

Soon the Russians organized health checks and delousing procedures. They also began negotiating with the Red Cross to provide for our return to our various homelands. We were not permitted to leave the Ghetto which was in quarantine on account of the typhoid epidemic that was still in there.

Throughout this period, there was a daily stream of *Musselmanner* (emaciated survivors) arriving from the horror camps – all skin and bones, half-starved and dirty; some even crazy. They brought with them a further outbreak of typhoid. We hoped to see familiar faces of loved ones. We hoped that Herbert would be among them. After frantic enquiries we were to learn that he had not survived; he had ended up in a camp where half starved on the meager rations provided and forced to work outdoors in the freezing winter of 1944/5, he died in April, just two weeks before the liberation of Buchenwald.

As fate would have it, among the bedraggled procession from the horror camps, there was one outstandingly handsome young man. He seemed to be in good health and was singing a song. I was extremely taken by him and I asked him who he was. He replied that his name was Arthur Lessman, a Pole. [Years later, I recalled that he looked like the French movie star Alain Delon] I took him with me to our little house. Mimi was furious with me, but I was completely smitten; and he stayed with us until he caught typhus [typhoid] and had to be put in special Hospital where no one was allowed to visit. He eventually got well, and he was determined to immigrate to the USA, but promised that he would send for me. The Red Cross was able to arrange this and the end of June was the last I saw of him. I was very sad but hoped that I would one day hear from him – I never did.

Sometime later, a friend of mine, Irka, and I managed to hitch a ride into Prague with some Russian soldiers. This was quite illegal and fraught with danger, clinging on to the side of the lorry whilst been groped from the inside. But it had to be suffered, as I was able to visit my Uncle Fritz and Aunt Emy and to have a hot bath, the first one in 3 years. We returned to Terezin a day later, excited and clean. It was

not until August that we eventually were able to leave and begin a new life in Prague.

We returned with granddad to our old home on the fourth floor of a block of flats on Na Porici, 46. Emi and Fritz were living on the 6th floor. Our furniture was exactly the way we left it; Fritz had seen to that. I was able to meet up with friends who had returned from Terezin and other camps. We went out dancing and socializing and generally having lots of fun. The Red Cross or some other such organization arranged for me to have a two week holiday in a hotel in the countryside beside a lovely lake. With good food, boat rides and lots of swimming the trauma of the last few years was eased, if not erased from my memory.

I attended the English College to learn English and also became an apprentice to a well known Dress-maker whose studio was opposite the clock tower in Prague. I was taught to make things like shoulder pads, earning some meager wages. The owner was very strict as were the other older employees. I do not remember the details of our family finances, but believed we did not pay rent as we owned the flat.

Then one day in 1947, Uncle Hans who had been living in London send me an affidavit inviting me to join him in there. This was a very exciting prospect for me and I set out by train shortly afterwards. Mimi and my boyfriend, Petr, who now lives in Israel, waved me goodbye. I was naturally a bit apprehensive about this new venture, but reassured when I was met by my uncle at Victoria station in London. He was an antique dealer with a flat quite near to Harrods. It was over crowded with antiques – statues of angels, etc. and it soon became clear that it was quite unsuitable for me to remain there. His solution was to park me off with a distant cousin of my grandfather's, Uncle Max Laufer and his wife

Auntie Grete and their two sons, Johnny and Peter, who lived in a smart house in Golders Green.

They were strictly Jewish in outlook and I did not quite care for Grete who shouted a lot, as she was a bit deaf. All she seemed to want for me was that I got married to some rich Jewish boy. When I was living with uncle Max and Grete, she read my diary. This upset me and her so I moved out to the neighbour's whose daughter Inge was my good friend. They did, however, pay for me to attend a Polytechnic in Regents Street in order to improve my English and take the Cambridge exam.

[They were later to move to Canada where they spent the rest of their lives. Johnny lives in Canada and Peter moved to Israel. Each year he sends me a Christmas card. I just have these two distant relatives who are alive today.]

Mimi came to London a year or so later on a domestic visa, the only way she could gain admission to Britain. She became housekeeper to Mr. Goldring, the writer. It was there that I met my good friends Ted Thorpe and Gillian Freeman.

I still have many friends here, in Israel and Australia that I knew from Terezin. I am in correspondence with my old friend Petr in Israel as well as with three girls that I shared the room with in Terezin who live in Sydney. There is also Heda who I see regularly here for coffee.

Mimi and I moved into a furnished room in Kilburn for a while and then into a small flat in Swiss Cottage. I found a good job as a travel courier to Austria and Italy. There I met Zdenek Lederer who had also been in Terezin although I did not know this at the time. But we never talked about our experiences in the concentration camp. He was very clever and political. Later on, he worked for Radio Free Europe in

Munich, an anti-Communist station financed by the USA, and where he was able to find a job for me. We lived together in Munich earning American dollars and having an interesting time. He had written a definitive book on Terezin, which was published in America. In June 2007, I was able to borrow Zdenek's book from the British library. I was amazed to read so much about Terezin I never knew. It describes facts and life in Terezin better than I could tell you. Zdenek died in the Sixties.

But I soon realized that I did not want to marry Zdenek and so returned to London and Mimi in 1952. I found a job at Inghams Travel Agency (mainly to Austria) – in Bond Street. My best friend there was Nannette Sacki. Another friend was Theodore Bikel, the Israeli actor and singer. Theo held open house every Sunday at his flat in Maida Vale which was attended by actors and singers and at which he held forth on the guitar. It was there that I met Cy Grant on 4th May 1952. He had just returned from America with the Lawrence Olivier Company.

The rest is history, as they say.....