The Story of Edie Shafer and her Family: The Holocaust and Post-War Recovery

By Edie Shafer

Despite the uncertainty of life in Nazi Germany, my parents, Manfred and Gerda Delner, planned a future with one another and in June of 1938, they were married. Together, they were living with my maternal grandfather. In November of 1938, like so many others, they were caught in the terror of what came to be known as Kristallnacht or Night of Broken Glass. On Nov. 9, during a rampage throughout Germany and Austria, Nazi thugs burned synagogues, looted Jewish-owned stores and killed many Jews. My father and grandfather were arrested, taken to jail and later forced to unload a truck containing sacred objects that were then set on fire.

My father was taken to Sachsenhausen concentration camp where he worked under brutal conditions, with little food and no comforts. He told us it was important to just blend in and not be noticed. Being noticed might get you shot.

Finally in February of 1939, Dad was released with the proviso that he leave Germany within three months. He had to report to the Gestapo weekly and was told that if he failed to leave, he would be tracked down and sent to prison again.

With great tenacity and great good fortune, he managed to get tickets for passage to Shanghai for my mother, my grandfather and for him. Leaving meant an almost certain possibility of never seeing the rest of his family who stayed behind, but my parents had no choice.

Upon arriving in Shanghai, they were taken to large community halls that housed hundreds of other refugees. They slept on cots and had no privacy. It was better than nothing but as soon as they could my mother and father moved to a one-room apartment they shared with six others. Eventually, they opened a cigar store, divided the 7’ by 14’ area in half, eventually they opened a cigar store, divided the 7’ by 14’ area in half, one part for living quarters and one for business purposes. After I was born the three of us shared our seven-foot-square living space. Imagine!

We survived bombings, poor food and illness. When the war ended, we began the process of coming to the United States. Finally in 1948, Mr. Harry Hoffmann, who knew our relatives, sponsored us to come to Milwaukee. We were very fortunate and always felt grateful for his help.

For the outside world, it would seem the Holocaust and all its terror were behind us. The Holocaust as defined by historians, ended in May of 1945, but for survivors like myself, the Holocaust experience continued…"

The Nathan & Esther Pelz Holocaust Education Resource Center

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Remember • Educate • Inspire

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I couldn’t be happier and prouder to have set up a legacy fund as a part of the new and exciting Create a Jewish Legacy program. As a child of a survivor, I know first-hand how important planning for a future is.

If my father had not planned for his future after the camps, he wouldn’t have created his life in America. Now it is my turn to plan for the future of my community, and the Nathan and Esther Pelz Holocaust Education Resource Center. HERC provides educational resources for teachers and opportunities for students so that the lesson of the Holocaust will never be forgotten.

– Nancy K. Barnett
The Executive Director's Notes

A s someone relatively new to the Milwaukee Jewish community, my transition from the lecture hall into the office of HERC's executive director was certainly an exciting experience, carrying with it many exciting opportunities and challenges. As I began to observe the operation of HERC, it did not take me long to recognize the importance and strengths of the organization that has so quickly become my new home. HERC is a superb educational center, offering schools in the Milwaukee area educational programs on a subject that is often difficult for teachers to grapple with. Its program package includes visits of Holocaust survivors who come to share their testimony with young people. It also has powerful educational programs for middle and high school students, touching upon a variety of subjects: the historical context of the Holocaust, anti-Semitism, Nazism, propaganda, bullying and more. HERC's community outreach agenda is also very impressive, offering commemoration ceremonies, lectures, films, book discussions, symposia and more.

While HERC has a great deal of assets, we still have a lot of work ahead of us if we wish to see HERC's full potential come to fruition. As we follow the news coming from Europe of a recent anti-Semitic wave, on a level unprecedented since the end of World War II, our task becomes not only to move our organization to another level by turning it into a state-wide institution, active especially in areas characterized by little ethnic and religious diversity. In order to grow and expand geographically, HERC has started recruiting a group of energetic and committed educators who will help us engage far greater numbers of students and teachers. With a dynamic team, well-trained and focused on its pedagogical targets, we will in the upcoming years change the face of Holocaust education in the state of Wisconsin, and hopefully – never need to find ourselves living in a place in which our voice, the voice of consciences, dignity and social justice, cannot be heard.
new threats came to dominate global politics. It began in the year 1900 and ended at the turn of the millennium. However, if we consider how it differed from the era that preceded and succeeded it — some would convincingly argue that the “actual” 20th century began in 1914 with the outbreak of WWI, when an old world order suddenly came to dominate global politics.

Far beyond mere intellectual debate, the question of when the 20th century began and when it ended is a matter of great consequence in the lives of individuals. A good example of how much this question matters is the story of Walter Reed, our keynote speaker at HERC’s 76th Kristallnacht Commemoration that took place at the Jewish Museum Milwaukee this past November. According to Reed, the 20th century began not on that horrific night between November 9 and 10, in 1938 known as Crystal Night or Kristallnacht. It began several years earlier, when he was a young student in a Viennese Jewish high school. When, as a ten-year old boy, he was taunted by his soccer team mates. From the point of view of the individual, the events of persecution, incarceration, harassment, and life under the threat of death, may be far more different than the experience that came to be known in the western world as The Holocaust, and may have in the story of each survivor, its own timeline.

The story of Edie Shafer best demonstrates how idiomatic the stories of individual Holocaust survivors are. Edie’s unique experience of the Holocaust took place, not in Europe, but rather in Shanghai; not under the threat of Germans, but rather the Japanese; not only during the peak of the Holocaust, between 1941 and 1944, but rather, after the war had already ended. As Edie told her mother the secret that her biological father, Werner Vetter, whom she hardly knew, was a Nazi officer, she faced the first question of the Nazi-German world: what is the future scenario will be the focus of Angela’s talk. Her mother, a Jewish woman living under a fake identity as a Gentleman farmer for three years, was married by her mother and then married to a Nazi officer. Angela’s talk promises to be a memorable event and will focus on her mother’s youth as a Jewish girl in Vienna, and her incredible story of survival. She will also talk about the wonderful people who, in utter expression of selflessness, helped her survive the war.

Co-sponsored by HERC and the Harry & Rose Samson Family JCC, our recently launched Holocaust Book Club was dedicated to another work by Jan Gross, his recently published book Fear, dwelling on a question no simple answer can be found for: how could rabid anti-Semitism persist in Poland right after Auschwitz? The incident lying at the very heart of this book was a pogrom that occurred at least six months and a year many that took place in the town of Kielce. It was triggered by a publicized Oslo blood libel, a rumor that local Jews were kidnapping and murdering Christian children.

Indeed, for some individuals, the ghosts of the Holocaust emerge even decades after the war. This is the story of Angela Schluter, the daughter of Edith Hahn, author of the Nazi Officer’s Wife, who will be the guest of the Milwaukee Jewish community on Monday, March 15, at a program co-sponsored by Congregation Shalom and HERC, to tell an incredible story. Only in this tale, the perpetrator is not the Germans, but rather the Japanese; not only during the peak of the Holocaust, between 1941 and 1944, but rather, after the war had already ended. As she told her mother the secret that her biological father, Werner Vetter, whom she hardly knew, was a Nazi officer, she faced the first question: what is the future scenario will be the focus of Angela’s talk. Her mother, a Jewish woman living under a fake identity as a Gentleman farmer for three years, was married by her mother and then married to a Nazi officer. Angela’s talk promises to be a memorable event and will focus on her mother’s youth as a Jewish girl in Vienna, and her incredible story of survival. She will also talk about the wonderful people who, in utter expression of selflessness, helped her survive the war.

For some, recovering from the Holocaust took decades. A good example can be seen in the film Aftermath, made by the Polish director Wladyslaw Pasikowski. Featured in cooperation with HERC during the Milwaukee Jewish Film Festival. The film takes place in the imaginary town of Gorolowa around the turn of the millennium. While fictitious, its plot is loosely based on the true story of the town of Jedwabne, where according to the scholar Jan Gross, the Polish book Neighbors gave this incident worldwide publicity. One-half of the town — that is, the local Polish population — tortured, murdered, and ultimately thrust into a barn and burnt its other half — Jedwabne’s entire Jewish population. Remarkably, what made Aftermath an outstanding Holocaust film is its focus, not on the Holocaust itself, but on the more modern techniques that followed it, a period that left the imaginary town of Gorolowa haunted by and burdened with a troubling and repressed past.

Defining the boundaries of historical era is complex. As history belongs to the broader fields of study, it is not a field of science, quantifiable in objective terms. Therefore, when students of the Holocaust ask even a basic question such as that posed above, several different answers may be proposed: the rise of the Nazis to power in January of 1933, the passing of the Nuremberg Laws in September 1935, Kristallnacht, the ghettoization of Polish Jews in September 1939 — all can be considered starting points of the Holocaust.
On Oct. 29 residents of Chai Point, together with members of our survivor community, joined us for Coffee and Nosh, and were given a docent-led tour of the “Stitching History” exhibit, currently on display at the Jewish Museum Milwaukee. They also had a chance to meet our new Shlicha, Amit Zehavi.

Raye David received flowers and artwork from students at Oak Creek West Middle School, Dec. 18, 2014.

Kristallnacht Through the Eyes of Adolescents. On the occasion of the 76th anniversary of Kristallnacht, the pogrom that occurred on Nov. 9-10, 1938, known for the shards of glass littering the streets of the Reich, our community gathered for a commemoration ceremony at the Jewish Home and Care Center. We were joined by representatives from different faiths in the Milwaukee community (pictured above) who came to stand up against hatred, bigotry and racism. Mr. Walter Reed, who had experienced Kristallnacht as a young man, was the keynote speaker.

Clockwise from top left: Mr. Walter Reed, Dr. Richard Luz, Dr. Shay Pilnik, Dr. Amir Rosenbaum and Hazzan Jeremy Steen, Werner Richheimer, Phil & Belle Anne Freund, Becky Komisar, Rabbi Steve Adams, Philip A. Freund, Bailey Wakefield, Jack Altman, and Zoe Styler

We would like to thank Marty and Beverly Greenberg for their generous sponsorship of the program.

On Friday, Nov. 7, Ripon High School students presented the drama, “Hiding in the Open.” The play tells the true story of two Jewish sisters from Poland who work in a Nazi hotel during World War II, assuming false Catholic identities. Together with drama director Tylor Loets, HERC helped educate the students on the backdrop to the events unfolding in the play. After hearing lectures by executive director Dr. Shay Pilnik (on the history of anti-Semitism) and our new Holocaust educator Brittany Hager (on the context of the Holocaust), the drama students had a chance to hear the testimony of Howard Melton, our Speakers Bureau member.

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Speakers Bureau member and Holocaust survivor Louis Koplin with students from Saint Anthony School of Milwaukee following a “From Ignorance and Fear to Knowledge and Understanding: Jews, Judaism, and the Holocaust (FIF),” May 22, 2014.