

**THE LAYERS WITHIN HER:  
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF  
THE DEVELOPMENT OF A HOLOCAUST SURVIVOR'S VOICE**

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Author:  
Ashley Reichelmann

Faculty Sponsor:  
Ellen Friedman  
*Department of English*

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**ABSTRACT**

Holocaust ethnography tends to focus broadly on issues of religion and faith, death and life, memory and family relationships rather than the experience of a single person. My study of Dr. Vera Herman Goodkin, however, addresses the effects that the Holocaust had on her personal development into the woman she is today. I have tried to capture her voice and to preserve her experience, hopeful that knowledge of her story and stories like hers will help prevent future atrocities.

**INTRODUCTION**

On the outskirts of Lawrenceville, New Jersey, in Dr. Vera Herman Goodkin's beautiful home, an empty coffee cup and two half eaten cookies lie before me. As our interview comes to a close, I realize I am out of questions. "Okay. I think that's all I have. Do you have any questions for me?" She speaks softly, yet firmly, "Well, how are you going to organize this material? Do you need to record that?" I quickly reply, "Well, I will leave it running just in case something else comes up." I explain, "I have never written ethnography before. My understanding is that it allows one to study a culture—in our instance through the eyes of one person. So I hope to organize it around your development into the person you are today. To me, the story is about how you've grown because of what happened in the past. As you grow, your development is like an onion: one layer on top of another, one new piece to add to the foundation" (10/25).<sup>1</sup>

*Layer One: Maternal Grandmother says, "I would rather hear good news from far away than discontent from nearby." <sup>2</sup>*

That was all Margit Burger needed to hear: her mother to tell her it was okay to leave Uzhorod, her hometown in Hungary. On January 26, 1926, Margit married a young man who had long sought her: Emil Herman. At the age of ten, he told his best buddy, Margit's brother, that he was going to marry her someday. Although Margit was only five years old at the time, her life quickly became intertwined with Emil's. The same year he realized he found his future wife, Emil left his house to live with his maternal grandparents so that he could attend school and become something more than a farmer. At the age of seventeen, when his mother died, he cut his ties with his family. At twenty-eight, with his medical license in hand and a good relationship with his wife's family, Emil prepared to start his own family with Margit.

Even after she married, Margit still thought of her mother's comment. The newly married couple packed up and moved to Hradec Královè, one of the most important and historical cities in the Bohemian region of Czechoslovakia near the Karpathian Mountains:

It was a small, very modern town. Wonderful schools. Lots of parks. Age-old trees. When we went back four years ago, I went to the [Jiràskovè Sady] park that my mother kept describing [as] the park where she was wheeling me and people stood in line to take

a look at her most beautiful baby. I sat at a bench with those age-old trees, with tears running down my face because I saw young mothers like the one that my mother described pushing their most beautiful babies in the world (09/27).

Vera, the daughter of Margit and Emil, paused, almost in tears, and said, "And they didn't know what was going through my mind. It was a wonderful peaceful town and it was a very happy life" (09/27).

She is the voice I hear as I write. Hers is the story I tell.

On Friday, June 13, 1930, Czechoslovakia was a thriving country, and Vera Herman, a thriving baby girl. She describes her entrance into the world: "They took one look at me and they didn't want another" (09/27). Vera became the only child of a close-knit upper middle class family, with a father who was a physician, mother who was his assistant, and a nanny to care for her. She grew up quickly in a house of adults with cosmopolitan views. All four of her grandparents were Jewish, and her parents raised her an observant follower. Her father was a social democrat and socially conscious man. Her parents wanted her to become fluent in many languages; therefore, she was allowed to speak only Czech to her father, Hungarian to her mother, and German to the nanny. Before school every morning at 5:00 a.m., Vera would accompany her parents to play tennis as their ball girl. The three of them did everything together and never imagined something could ruin the idyllic life they lived.

Hradec Královè showed no traces of anti-Semitism during Vera's childhood. Even though she was a member of one of just three Jewish families, she fit in with all of the other children and most of her friends were non-Jewish. One of her earliest memories is of the special treatment she received as a part of the upper middle class: luxurious clothing. She can recall her mother taking her to the seamstress, where the designer would create a masterpiece out of torn rags. During the process, the wearer would have to get fitted, which involved many straight pins. Vera would look for the pins, finding some and missing others. One day, she put on her new dress and went to the park, where she remembers feeling something sticking her: "I thought it was a pin. But it wasn't; it was a wasp. And I guess by clamping down, it really encouraged the wasp to let the stinger go. And so I wasn't a happy camper and my father was so sweet. He ran down the alley. He came back and on his palm was a dead wasp. He said, 'I took care of it for you'" (09/27). Thanks to her father's prospering medical practice, Vera's family received luxuries that the poor of Czechoslovakia could not afford. However, Emil's work never imposed upon family time and even the not so fond memory of a wasp exemplifies the love and friendship that Vera shared with her parents.

Many of her memories illustrate the privileged and happy childhood she lived. Whether riding the horse-and-buggy to her grandparents' house or sitting under the sun lamp eating chocolate and apples with her friends, she had opportunities that some Jewish children did not. The memory that epitomizes her childhood occurred one day when her mother asked her what she wanted for her fourth birthday:

First of all, I was an only child and I was an overprotected only child because I was always sick, every Monday, Wednesday, Friday. Oh, I was just a mess...[but] I prized my independence. So when I was four, I was asked what I wanted for my birthday, and I said I wanted to go down to the park by myself...so she [my mother] said, "Yeah, go to the park." And her friends at first came up and asked, "What'd you get her for her birthday?" So she would draw the drapes open and she said, "All year long, every day she gets what she wants, and this is what she wanted for her birthday" (9/27).

Even as a child, Vera valued her will power and the freedom her parents offered. She had many adventures on her own, but none would prepare her for the journey of independence that lay before her.

One instance of her independence happened at school. In Czechoslovakia, children went to school six days a week and had off on the Christian Sabbath. Since Vera was Jewish, her Sabbath was Saturday, a school day. To celebrate, her mother would dress her up in her elegant whites with ever so obvious matching white stockings, which Vera, hated. Children looked at her strangely and said, "'Boy, you come from a strange house. You know, you wear your Sunday clothes on a Saturday.' But there was no malice; they were just a little confused. 'Can't you tell what day of the week it is?'" (9/27). At this time, Vera began to stand out, not for something good, but for something that others interpreted as bad.

Growth of Voice: "I had an idyllic existence and I was an only child, a pampered only child. There wasn't anything in this world that I wanted that I couldn't have, that I didn't have, but mostly, I had my parents' undivided attention and love and my mother and I always clicked. It's in a way unusual with mothers and daughters because there's a lot of emotional baggage, but we were friends. As a matter of fact, I guess I was about eight or nine and I responded to her in a way that she didn't consider respectful and she called me on it. And I said, 'Well okay. Do you just want me to be your obedient daughter or do you want me to be your friend?' ... To her credit she said, 'I want you to be my friend.' I saw the love that she had for her mother, the closeness. Even though we were far away, we were twelve hours away by car, by train; we would see my grandparents two, three times a year. And I adored my maternal grandmother. I think she was the wisest, the most wonderful person and she had a great deal of influence on me." <sup>3</sup>

Grandmother was a woman who was not afraid to speak.

*Layer 2: Maternal Grandmother says, "You know Germany isn't that far from here. These German Jews see the handwriting on the wall. Don't you think that you and your family ought to find a safe haven?"* <sup>4</sup>

Between 1933 and 1936, the small town of Hradec Královè became a stop on what would later be known as the underground railroad for German Jews. The town was not an official stop, nor was the town known in Holocaust history as part of the railroad. The only proof of its use is Vera's childhood memory:

And so these people would come, they would come through Czechoslovakia and many of them ended up in the United States. Some of them stayed in England, some went to Scandinavia, some went to Canada, some went to Australia and New Zealand and they started new lives. But they had nothing but the clothes on their back or maybe in a little overnight case and they didn't have any money. So there was sort of an underground railroad that people would arrange for them to stay in the homes and ours was one of the homes. I was too young to even ask a question when these strangers came through the house. They came, they went and then they were replaced (09/27).

Vera does not remember anything about these people, just that they did not stay very long. She no longer remembers any conversations, any details, only that they were searching for safety from the Nazis in Germany.

But the Nazi boots quickly became a reality in Czechoslovakia. On March 15, 1939, they marched in. Vera was home from school that day, because as usual she was sick. When she saw them, she reacted with tears. She was nine and no other reaction seemed appropriate. "I cried because they, they just looked so otherworldly, you know with this goose-stepping and the foot extended and coming down like thunder. Ah, I cried and I said, 'They're

going to kill us.” To this day, she has no idea where the thought came from. Home from school that day, “I got to see the show” – the show that altered Jewish existence more than any other event to date (09/27).

After the Nazi boots arrived, anti-Semitism quickly emerged. As a second grader, Vera knew she was Jewish and the other children were Christian, but she never thought anyone looked at her differently until a seven-year-old taught her otherwise:

Two weeks after the Germans came in just before we were kicked out of school, I came in and one of my classmates, my second grade classmates said, “There’s a dirty Jew.” I remember that, and I remember that because she followed that by saying, “And she’s a Hungarian too.” Because my mother had a Hungarian accent in Czech and the Czechs didn’t like the Hungarians.... But she [my mother] couldn’t help it; she sounded like a Hungarian in Czech. So I had two sins against me. My mother was a Hungarian and I was a dirty Jew, but I said, “I bathed” (09/27).

By then, HUMOR could not alleviate the tension. Nothing could ease the apprehension that had risen since the Nazis arrived. Not even a heroine who came to her rescue could accomplish the task, but Vera vividly remembers the young girl who stood up and said, “That’s not right. My mom and dad say everybody is the same” (10/25). The young girl was non-Jewish and an only child, and it now appears that the issue of prejudice was spoken about at home. After the war, Vera and her parents went back to offer thanks to the girl and her family, but she was out of town. Her last memory of the child was her defense of Vera.

Because of the newly enacted Nuremberg Laws, it was also Vera’s last memory of school in Czechoslovakia since she was withdrawn by the third grade. According to Michael Berenbaum, “For the first time in history, Jews were persecuted not for their religious beliefs and practices, but because of their so-called racial identity, irrevocably transmitted through the blood of their grandparents” (29). Although the Nuremberg Laws had been in effect in Germany since 1933, they were not enforced in German-dominated lands until 1935. Czechoslovakian Jews saw the restrictions as signs of the future. They were not allowed to walk in groups of three, not allowed to go to bars, to theaters, to hospitals, to work. They were not allowed to live a normal life (Berenbaum 28–30). Most of her memories of this time are mixed. Vera fondly recalls the last movie she saw in the theater: *Snow White*. But the memory is soured when she remembers that, because of the Nuremberg Laws, her parents were not allowed to accompany her. A non-Jewish family willingly took an Aryan-looking Jewish girl to the movies, as a fun outing – one of her last in Czechoslovakia.

Vera has no further happy memories of life in Czechoslovakia after the movie. She never had an encounter with the Nazis in her town, but often feared one would happen:

One of the most frightening experiences I remember was, I guess, I was out and it was the holiday. Kosher slaughtering was not permitted, kosher slaughtering of meat, and besides we didn’t have any ration cards and we didn’t have meat. Somebody got hold of a goose and geese were a delicacy on high holy days. And I was chosen to take this poor animal to a man who did ritual slaughtering, who put his life on the line because if anyone ever found out that he did it, he would have been dead. But to him that was an article of faith. As for me, I was carrying this live bird in a bag and all I kept thinking about was how this bird could make a noise, and I could be dead. And I don’t know why my parents took a chance (09/27).

But her parents did take the chance in the fall of 1939, as did many Jewish families who refused to suppress their religion in the face of prejudice. Sometimes religion could remind them of the life they used to live – a life in which they had choices and were treated as human beings.

In 1939, her father applied for visas, hoping to move his family as quickly as possible. They now realized that the Czechoslovakian government would not save them from the Germans; the family had to save themselves. At the last minute, the family received a quota number to the United States, but the Czechoslovakian government would not allow any Jewish people to emigrate. Vera's father was so law-abiding that he would not illegally cross the border. The family waited and waited. But the borders closed; no numbers were offered and no Jews were granted permission to leave. Her father did, however, have their furniture legally sent to the U.S. Their possessions arrived, although the family would not follow for years.

In late 1939, just after the family received news about the closure of the borders, they heard a knock at the door. When her father opened it, the people outside said, "You don't live here anymore; we do" (09/27). Quickly they packed whatever they could carry and left. After becoming homeless, the hiding began. But other Jews in the town made different decisions. A young mixed couple – Jewish wife, German husband, and child – survived. The husband used his connections to get himself imprisoned in her place and somehow the whole family made it.

As for Vera's family, they were not going to wait any longer. In late 1939, they began hiding in Vera's hometown, Hradec Královè, in what was once "the most prosperous and democratic country in central Europe" (Berenbaum 42). A colleague of her father had a retreat in the woods that was empty, and he allowed them to stay there for about six weeks. This was typically the time limit for places of hiding because any longer and the loaners became fearful and worried. The Hermans did not blame them. The family's later hiding places included false walls, attics, empty cottages and dirty barns. For the Hermans, "fear and uncertainty became a way of life" (10/18).

At the last hiding place in Slovakia, the family received fair warning that they were to be on the next transport to Auschwitz. Squeezed into a closet-sized structure, they had with them only a few articles of clothing, boots, and a doily-like tablecloth, which covered the small table the host provided. One day in November 1943, there was a knock at the door from a group of four men, calling themselves the "Committee of the Confiscation of Jewish Property." They included a local betrayer, an SS officer, a local Slovakian officer, and a Jewish lawyer who was dragged along to draft forms. The Committee took the doily tablecloth; there was really nothing else they wanted, except the pretty boots belonging to Vera's mother. But her mother would not give them up. Margit argued that the shoes she was wearing were not sufficient for the outdoor weather and she needed the boots to survive. The argument worked and the Committee left with the doily. Now the family had a decision to make.

*Growth of Voice: "And I must say that my father had had it up to here, and he was just about willing to be a sitting duck, you know, already. But my mother, maybe because a woman with a child has that much more will, she started going from door to door trying to find a way to get away. And she had heard that there was an organization, something like the underground railroad for slaves, that would help you escape in a very specific way. By that time, deportation had taken place in all of the central European countries. There was one city where the Jewish community was persecuted, but still intact, and that was Budapest." 5*

Grandmother and Mother were women who were not afraid to speak.

*Layer 3: Vera says, "And he did not want to be caught with us. So without saying a word he turned on his heels and started walking away from us. And as I tell the kids when I tell the story, I still have a physical recollection of how exhausted I was, and I really didn't care much anymore. I was twelve and I was scared and I said to my mother, 'I am just going to lean back here.' Meanwhile it was pouring, 'I am just going to lean back here against this tree and take a little nap.' . . . I thought maybe I was having a nightmare and when I woke, everything would be okay. And if it wouldn't, I didn't care very much to wake up . . . but [my mother] wasn't impressed. Instead, she started running in that mud. My father and I just watched with our*

*mouths open and she is screaming in the darkness: 'You have children of your own; are you going to let this one die?'"* 6

Vera remembers the moment like it was yesterday: the feeling of physical exhaustion; the pouring rain; the mud and having to extract each foot by hand to shake it off before taking another step; her awe at her mother's strength. Each feeling remains with her today. But, just prior to this scene, she also felt like a hero. While knocking on doors in Slovakia, Margit learned of an underground railroad to Budapest, run by farmers who lived on the border of Slovakia and Hungary. Finally someone trusted Margit, and told her to take her family to the local train station and board the next train to the village on the Czech-Hungarian border. The family had to leave all luggage behind along with the remnants and loose threads of their Stars of David. They received specific instructions to get off the train and look left, where a young man would be waiting. The Hermans were to follow him at a reasonable distance and he would house them until guiding them across the border.

Night had fallen by the time they arrived at the young man's house, which was a small barn that sheltered three generations, including the visiting grandmother who was a Nazi sympathizer. It was quiet and dark. He placed a ladder that led to the loft of the barn. He asked them please to be quiet and the next time he propped the ladder to climb back down because they would be leaving. They climbed up and lay down to rest. It was then that Vera felt heroic:

We got up there and in a little while we realized we actually were not all alone. The rat population of the farmhouse was in the attic with us . . . Great big fat rats, and I remember being so frightened, not for myself but for my father because he was losing his hair. You know, male pattern baldness, the patch up here, . . . so I took the scarf I was wearing off my head and I put it around him because I was afraid that when he laid down on the ground, they might get curious and start nibbling at his scalp. I felt very brave (10/18).

The innocence of a child provided hope and faith. Her youthful exuberance encouraged her parents. In turn, Vera trusted her parents in all of their decisions and, even as the rain poured outside, when the ladder arrived, she trusted them enough to descend and try crossing the border. Here, she learned true fortitude from her mother:

By the time we got to the bottom of the ladder, we were soaked to the skin. And then we started walking and it was almost impossible. I mean [the farmer] was equipped and he was a strong young man. We would sink into the mud up to here [Vera points to her mid-thigh] and then we literally had to extract our feet with our hands, kick off the excess mud and take another step. This was a labor-intensive process and we were not watching for anything else, but he was. He saw a flicker of light at a distance in a place where he was not accustomed to seeing it, and he figured quickly they may have changed the guard and a new guard may map out a new patrol route (10/18).

At this point, the farmer turned and began to walk away. Her mother's quick reaction and unbelievable courage in running after him taught Vera what it meant never to give up, never to lose faith, never to lose her voice.

The man took them back to the barn again and the next night they safely crossed the border where they took a train immediately to the capital city. In Budapest, they still had to hide, because they were illegal Jews. But here, on the Czechoslovakian border, hiding meant registering with the police every afternoon: "There we were, but there we weren't" (10/18). In Budapest, by contrast, Admiral Horthy allowed the illegals to remain. He pretended to be allies with the Nazis, but did his best to protect Jews because his daughter-in-law was Jewish. Anything that happened to Jews might happen to her as well.

Admiral Horthy, the Hungarian regent, was “a member of one of Hungary’s most aristocratic families” (Werbell 13). After serving with distinction in the Navy during World War I, he was named to the regency. Although Hungary was a monarchy with a royal family, “Horthy had persuaded the parliament to vote him considerable powers, particularly over the security forces and army” (13). Regardless of his “personal dislike of Hitler,” Horthy expressed many anti-Semitic sentiments, and, senile at seventy-six, he led Hungary into participating in the Nazi’s “Final Solution of the Jews” (13). On October 14, 1944, he declared an armistice and the Arrow Cross party, “a pro-German anti-Semitic party led by Ferenc Szalasi,” assumed power (“Arrow Cross Party”).

The move to Budapest gave the Hermans two more months of freedom. In early January 1944, the hiding ended. Nazis came with megaphones and called all Jews, Hungarian or foreign, out of the buildings with anything they could carry. Those who did not cooperate were shot on the spot. Vera acknowledges, “It was not an assumption; it is first hand knowledge” (10/18). After everyone was accounted for, the Nazis forced the Jews to march three or four miles toward Tolonc, a medieval fortress on the outskirts of Budapest.

The march crossed a moat and there were so many people in the fortress that they had to sleep outside standing up that night. The next morning, two thousand people inside the fortress were sent to Auschwitz, and room was cleared to allow for all prisoners standing outside, including Vera’s family, to enter the fortress. On the morning of March 14, at the entrance of the fortress, men and women were separated. For the first time, the Hermans were divided, something they never imagined when Vera was a young child. Now a young woman aged 13, she would walk side by side with her mother. In February 1944, before seeing Emil again, Vera and her mother were transported to Kistarcsa, a transit camp nine miles from Budapest. Here they spent two months awaiting the next decision of the Nazis, but suddenly a neutral diplomat altered that fate.

*Growth of Voice: “Hiding affected the person that I am now. I suppose I react in a feminine way, but I think that it would affect men probably in the same way. And it can go one of two ways: either you become very bitter or you learn to savor life and believe very deeply in the fact that love is stronger than hate. . . . And [how the] Holocaust [affected me], I mean I am a woman. I react like a woman. So perhaps, I am a little more sensitive, a little more hair splitting.”<sup>7</sup>*

Mother was a woman who was not afraid to speak.

***Layer 4: Mother says, “If you slept in anything resembling a bed, and if you ate anything resembling food, then I have no right to hold onto you.”<sup>8</sup>***

In the middle of an April day in 1944, the women and children were called outside to speak with three men from the Swedish Red Cross. Somehow, maybe through threats or bribery, the three men convinced the commandant, Istvan Vasdenyei, that Kistarcsa was unsafe for children. The task was not difficult, since Vasdenyei was known for being “humane and . . . doing] whatever he could to ease the plight of the Jews under his control” (“Kistarcsa”). Thus, for any mother who was willing, the Swedish Red Cross would take their children, aged 5 to 14, to a safer place. Vera later recognized that, most mothers didn’t, couldn’t let their children go, “partly because they didn’t believe these men and partly because it was just too painful to give them up” (10/18). Margit, however, felt differently. She gently pushed Vera forward and passed out from the weight of the decision. When Vera turned to help her mother, the three men picked up the child and quickly carried her off. While placing her in the car, they quietly revealed that they “really [didn’t] work for the Swedish Red Cross. [They] work[ed] for a Swedish diplomat whose name [was] Raoul Wallenberg” (10/18).

Raoul Wallenberg, whose name Vera will never forget, is vital to her story. Berenbaum describes him as “a Swedish aristocrat, the scion of a distinguished banking family, and an

architect who had been trained at the University of Michigan" (166). When President Roosevelt established the War Refugee Board in 1944, Wallenberg became its right hand man and was chosen as the second secretary of the Swedish Embassy in Budapest. Besides the excitement and adventurism, Wallenberg's thoughts of his grandmother drove him to become a voice for, and protector of, Hungarian Jews. His maternal grandmother, in whose home he was raised, was one-fourth Jewish, and if she lived in Hungary, she would have been deported (Werbell 24). Wallenberg arrived in Budapest on July 9, 1944, four months after the Hermans were placed in holding camps and the night after all the Hungarian provinces besides Budapest had been, as Eichmann would say, "dejewified" (26).

Wallenberg was not discouraged by his late arrival; on the contrary, he worked quickly to save Jews in any way possible. He created Swedish protective passes, or Schutzpasses, which read, "The Royal Swedish Legation in Budapest confirms that the above-mentioned person will travel to Sweden in the course of repatriation as authorized by the Royal Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs" (Werbell 34). Unfortunately, the War Refugee Board restricted Wallenberg's rescue efforts: "There were approximately 175,000 Jews in Budapest, and Wallenberg had permission to save only 4,500" (38). At first, the Legation, headed by Wallenberg's colleagues, established rules: passes would first be distributed to those with long-standing business or family ties in Sweden. But it was too painful for Wallenberg to turn people away. He reasoned, "if he worked hard, people lived; if he was lazy, people died" (47). Eventually, Wallenberg found other ways for him and his staff to push the limits of what was acceptable intervention by a neutral country's diplomat.

When the Arrow Cross threatened Wallenberg's life and stole his car, HIS workers went into hiding. He borrowed a woman's bicycle and rode around Budapest searching for his staff and urging them to return to work (Werbell 68). By October 1944, Wallenberg and "Section C," the name of his secret production line, offered passes to anyone menaced by the Arrow Cross or SS, regardless of their connections to Sweden or qualifications for the pass. On October 15, Baroness Elisabeth Kemény arrived on Wallenberg's doorstep. She was married to Baron Kemény who worked with Eichmann, but she was mortified by her husband's actions and pledged to help Wallenberg in any way possible. After discussions with Wallenberg, she convinced her husband to honor every protective pass that had been distributed. Because the Baron adored his wife, he resisted Eichmann's proposal to march all Jews out of Budapest, and announced that the protective passes would be honored (Werbell 77). Between October and December, despite attempts on Wallenberg's life, he still worked to save approximately 100,000 Jews. Whether on a train platform, a death march, or in a cattle car, he appeared as the "Angel of Budapest" and spoke as if sent from a higher being. Because of his precise and powerful command of German and his exceptional confidence, Wallenberg was able to trick Arrow Cross and SS officers into releasing Jews holding official and unofficial protective passes, and in some cases holding none at all. Many times he put his body between a Jew and an officer. Even with a gun pointed at him, Wallenberg remained calm and almost always walked away with the Jews and his safety.

Wallenberg's three men dropped Vera off at a Swedish children's home where she met twenty-six wonderful children whose mothers also had given them up at holding prisons. For two weeks, they did their best to create some semblance of a normal life, and at night, Wallenberg would come to play with the children. At the end of the second week, Vera became very sick, and was diagnosed with scarlet fever. She said good-bye to her new friends and was quarantined in a hospital for contagious diseases. She was one of the last Jewish children to be accepted by a non-Jewish hospital. Vera remained for six weeks, resting until she was deemed cured.

Later, Vera learned that the Arrow Cross, the pro-German party that adopted a symbol similar to the swastika, murdered all twenty-six children with whom she had become friends. Although members of the Arrow Cross had taken an oath never to touch the Wallenberg houses because of their diplomatic immunity, one night some got drunk and broke into the children's



home. At the time, 13-year-old Vera did not know why she was taken to an orphanage after her stay in the hospital. She did not like her situation, but quickly learned to accept it.

*Growth of Voice: "Disbelief in the Holocaust cost a lot of lives."*<sup>9</sup>

Mother and Vera are women who are not afraid to speak.

***Layer 5: Vera says, "When I was discharged from the hospital, I was picked up by someone from the Swedish Red Cross and they took me to an orphanage. . . . And I never asked too many questions. I was sure I was an orphan and I thought that was a reasonable place for me."***<sup>10</sup>

While Vera became accustomed to thinking of herself as an orphan, her mother remained in the Kistarcsa holding prison. Two thousand women from the prison, including her mother, were loaded onto cattle cars and the transport to Auschwitz began. One of the two thousand was never supposed to be on a transport. The daughter-in-law of Admiral Horthy could be imprisoned in a holding cell and forced to labor, but she was never to be sent to a death camp. Horthy thought that if he kept her in Hungary, he could control her fate. Auschwitz is in Poland, where Horthy had no voice. For some reason, although "Horthy stopped the deportations, Eichmann sent off a train from the Kistarcsa transit camp. The Jewish representatives went to Horthy, used their connections and influence, and Horthy ordered the Hungarian authorities at the border to stop the train" (Nizkor Project). On July 15, 1944, just before the train crossed the border, it was redirected to the last holding prison on Hungarian soil ("Kistarcsa").

The women in the cattle cars did not understand what was going on. They did not realize they were still in Hungary. Suddenly, the train halted and the doors opened. Although the Germans were efficient at keeping death records, they did not properly document who was in which car. Therefore, all the women had to be removed from the cattle cars – all two thousand to find one person.

As Margit was forced from the train, she saw a man she recognized, who then disappeared. Minutes later, he approached her. It was her husband, Emil! But she did not want to make a commotion, nor did he. He brushed up against her and dropped a small bottle into her hand. He whispered, "Take this." Without thinking, Margit swallowed the liquid, and immediately lost consciousness.

Emil, the prisoner physician at Sàrvàr camp where his wife had arrived, wanted her to pass out. He wanted her on a stretcher and out of harm's way. He wanted to be able to care for her. Because she was unconscious, she escaped the Germans' solution to the off-course train. When they learned of the detour, the Germans decided to kill all the passengers right outside the prison gates. The authorities shot and killed 1,996 people. The only survivors were Admiral Horthy's daughter-in-law, two people who hid, and Margit, Vera's mother.

When she awoke, Margit was in the women's section of the prison. She did not see Emil again for three months, until October 1944, during the Sàrvàr prison uprising. In the midst of that event, Vera's mother and father managed to find one another and grasped hands. They squeezed through a crack in the fence and began walking, still holding hands. From that moment, they never let go. They walked for three weeks from the Hungarian-Polish border to Budapest. On the way, they foraged for food and slept in burnt out farmhouses.

When they reached Hungary on November 30, 1944, Vera's father visited "the legendary Swede who does wonderful things for Jews" – Raoul Wallenberg (10/18). When Emil arrived at the Embassy, Wallenberg shook his hand, saying, "I have Schutzpasses for you and your wife, which are Swedish protective passes, but you know what? We also have your little girl" (10/18). While Vera's father went to get Margit, Vera was picked up from the orphanage. When she saw her parents, life started again. They spent ten weeks in the cellar of a Swedish protective house while the Russians liberated Budapest block by block. On January 16, 1945, the Russians gained

control of the street where Vera was hiding. She breathed a sigh of relief because she knew, for her, the war was over.

The day the war ended for Vera, Wallenberg succeeded in saving 70,000 Jews in the Central Ghetto. The next day, he began another struggle with the Soviet government. After speaking with Per Anger, his beloved friend and colleague, Wallenberg set out to obtain food and medical supplies for post-war Hungarian Jews. Both Anger and Wallenberg wondered whether he would be treated by the Soviets as a “guest or as a prisoner” (Werbell 158). Both the Swedish government and his friends quickly realized Wallenberg went as a prisoner – they never saw or heard from him again. “When he left Budapest on January 17, he left behind the largest Jewish community in Europe to have survived the Nazi domination” (Werbell 159). As Wallenberg headed toward Debrecen, Vera, now fourteen years of age, held onto her mother’s hand as they walked back to Czechoslovakia to start life over. And she never let go.

*Growth of Voice: “Well, as I said in my book, I thought they [my parents] were a mirage [when I was reunited with them]. I couldn’t let them go. I couldn’t. . . . I was physically holding onto them until I believed that they were there in the flesh.”*<sup>11</sup>

Vera Herman is a woman who is not afraid to speak.

***Layer 6: Vera says, “I was 15 and a half, almost 16, going on 55.”***<sup>12</sup>

When Vera and her family arrived in the United States in 1946, they had survived an event that, in many cultures, did not even have a name. Her parents had aged noticeably. Upon their arrival, the family attempted to lead a normal life, and left behind their language and parts of their history. Her paternal grandmother used to say, “Where you eat the bread, you speak the language” (09/27). Outside the home, the family spoke only English. After they settled in Mount Vernon, New York, Vera began attending Davis High School. Here she was regarded as different – because she was the only Eastern European and Holocaust survivor – even weird – because of those differences.

A young woman named Helga Honig arrived shortly before the end of Vera’s last semester of high school. Helga was also a Holocaust survivor, who had lost both her parents in a death camp. Vera befriended her and from the relationship, she realized how lucky she was that she and her parents survived and found one another: “I count myself among the fortunate because when you survive as a family unit, reconstructing your life was a lot easier [because] you have someone to validate your existence” (10/25). Over a year and a half, her English improved immensely and, in 1948, she graduated high school and received a full academic scholarship to New York University.

During her freshmen year, she met a young man named Jerry Goodkin and they began a serious courtship. But at the end of her first academic year, her father passed his U. S. medical boards and was hired by the New York State Department of Mental Hygiene. Her family relocated to Utica, New York, where she attended Syracuse University on full scholarship. Jerry did not give up that easily; he commuted from the Bronx to Utica for three years. After they graduated from college, Vera and Jerry were married on August 31, 1952. Both pursued master’s degrees at New York University: he in chemistry, she in French literature. After she completed her master’s, Jerry applied to Ph.D. programs, and the search led them to Troy, New York.

In 1954, a semester into his Ph.D. program, Jerry was drafted into the Korean War. Luckily he was so allergic to fish and iodine he could not be stationed in Korea. Instead, Jerry was sent to Germany, where Vera joined him shortly after for his thirteen month stay. This would be Vera’s first trip back to Europe, including Germany. She remarked, “I must have been head over heels in love because that was truly traumatic” (10/25). Jerry had long known of Vera’s background because she felt “if he was going to hitch his wagon to mine, he needed to not just know where I came from but also where I was coming from” (10/25). The first boarding

room Jerry found had hot and cold water and a toilet, a rarity, but Vera “could smell the [landlady’s] hostility for the occupying forces” (10/25). Even though the landlady did not know they were Jewish or that Vera was a Holocaust survivor, her dislike of Americans was enough for the couple to search for new living quarters. Eventually, they rented from a woman whose husband had died in the Stalingrad mission, where he was sent for refusing to join the Nazi party. Together, Vera and Jerry spent thirteen months in Germany living on his modest soldier’s wages and sleeping on a straw mattress. Vera spent most of her time in the apartment or taking part in Jerry’s life on base; thus, she never had to reveal that she spoke German or why she spoke it. When they had time to travel, they journeyed to France, Sweden, and Italy, but Vera could not go back to her beloved Czechoslovakia because after the war it was a communist country where one could be arbitrarily arrested.

When they returned after his military service, Jerry finished his Ph.D. and accepted a job as a chemist in Baltimore from 1958-1962. During this time, Vera’s father applied for a position with the Pennsylvania State Department of Mental Hygiene, because New York required doctors to retire at the age of 70, which Emil did not wish to do. He became director of the unit in York, Pennsylvania. However, his career was ended by a diabetic stroke, which forced him to retire. The Hermans then rented an apartment in Trenton, where, on October 29, 1972, Emil died at the age of 72. Margit, resilient as ever, lived in the apartment for twenty-three more years, spending her spare time as a hospital volunteer. She managed the gift shop well into her nineties and, in 1995, passed away at the age of 93. By now, the Hermans blended in rather nicely; Margit had created a wonderful life in the United States for her family.

Despite their quiet new lives, the Hermans never left their previous experience behind. It remained embedded in their personalities. When the family moved to the United States, Vera’s father “shut the door” and avoided talk about the Holocaust. His personality changed from open and cheerful to reserved and private. Her mother showed signs of survivor guilt. Her temperament remained the same, except when she thought of her parents. Then, she regretted leaving them behind. Family members encouraged the Burgers to go into hiding, but they refused. Both perished in Auschwitz in June 1944, along with Vera’s Aunt Bella and her cousin Dolly.

The only change for Vera was the life she lived in her dreams – dreams she recalls more clearly now. “But I wish I didn’t because I guess when I slept more soundly I would know that I was dreaming, but in the morning I wouldn’t remember what they were. Now I do” (10/25). She has a recurring dream, one that many young children fear most: losing her parents. The loss is never the same. The story is different each time, but the outcome never changes. Her mind plays tricks. One night her parents are crawling from graves; the next they are in Auschwitz. Her dreams are only a part of her night personality, but they make the Holocaust ever more real in her daily life – a life that for so long she tried to leave behind.

*Growth of Voice: “Once I started talking, I never shut up.”<sup>13</sup>*

Vera Goodkin is a woman who is not afraid to speak.

***Layer 7: Vera says, “Once I spoke, I realized that I had a duty to speak. I owed it to Wallenberg. To those who did not survive to speak. And above all, I owed some knowledge and understanding to the young people growing up today.”<sup>14</sup>***

In the meantime, Vera and Jerry started their own family. They had two beautiful, very different, girls, Kathy and Debbie. Kathleen Suzanne was born on February 22, 1958, and Deborah Ann on November 16, 1960. Vera hoped to raise her children to be “tolerant and sensitive and loving and perhaps less materialistic” (10/25). She wanted to offer them values from her hometown in Czechoslovakia and from their own in the United States. Her children grew up knowing she was a survivor of the Holocaust. Her oldest, Kathy, learned when she was

nine “and then I think I told her too much all at once because, she is a very sensitive person, and she would hear an anecdote here or a remark there, and she finally sat me down one evening and said, ‘I want to know. I want to know the whole story’” (10/25). Mother told daughter the whole story and at 3:00 the next morning, Vera was sitting beside Kathy’s bed listening to her cry. They were tears that Vera could not stop. Kathy’s reaction determined when her younger sister, Debbie, would hear her mother’s story. Vera did not tell Debbie until she already had courses on the Holocaust from her synagogue school. Because Jerry’s family did not experience the Holocaust directly, “half of [her children’s] family – and Jerry had a big, large, extended boisterous family – was perfectly normal” (10/25).

Although telling her children was hard, she knew telling her grandchildren would be even more difficult. Debbie has two children: Jacob Aaron and Margaret Sarah. Jacob was born on May 6, 1994, and Margaret on July 2, 1996. Kathy gave birth on June 19, 1998, to William Ronald Hirsch, who has since been diagnosed with autism. Vera “never really faced [her grandchildren] one on one” (10/25). She was invited to Jacob’s Hebrew School when he was in fourth grade. He heard the story as part of his class, and since has shown much interest in reading biographies about Wallenberg. Margaret is much more outgoing and Vera has fed her small pieces of her experience at a time. William, at the age of nine, has just developed functional speaking skills. “It is a big thing for him to be able to say, ‘I love you mommy and daddy’” (10/25). So if he can ever fully comprehend the story, it will take a long time. Not telling her grandchildren early was for the benefit of both grandmother and grandchildren: “I think that American children of privilege mature much later. I did not want them to not understand, misunderstand or be burdened with something they weren’t ready for” (10/25). But each grandchild receives as much as he or she would like to know and each will carry that portion of the story for the rest of his or her life.

For 37 years, no one but her family knew that Vera was a Holocaust survivor. Late in the summer of 1983, she received a phone call. The man on the other end of the line explained, “An organization is putting on a commemorative event to celebrate the second anniversary of the honorary United States citizenship given to a Swedish diplomat, Raoul Wallenberg. Do you know who he is?” Vera laughed, “If I didn’t know who he was, you wouldn’t be talking to me today” (10/25). She told her story publicly for the first time at Rider University before 600 people on October 5, 1983, to celebrate the man to whom she owed her life.

After she began speaking, Vera’s activism became instrumental to the development of her voice as a mother, a grandmother, a speaker, and a survivor. She became a regular lecturer at Rider University, Mercer Community College, Richard Stockton College, and The College of New Jersey. Vera later became Dr. Goodkin when she received her doctorate of Education in English from Rutgers University. Vera Goodkin accepted a teaching job at Mercer County Community College where she taught English and French Literature for thirty-four years. She worked closely with Paul Winkler and the New Jersey Commission on Holocaust Education. Recently, she wrote a family memoir, *In Sunshine and In Shadow: We Remember Them*.

*Growth of Voice: “We have come full circle. When I first started talking to kids, I went to see a seventh grade class in Ewing of gifted kids. I try to keep my presentation age appropriate. Perhaps I have gotten better with the years. Even then I would try not to scare young kids. It just doesn’t serve any purpose. When I was finished, one of the little hands went up, a pudgy little hand, seventh grade boy and he said to me, ‘do you think it could happen here?’ You could knock me over with a feather. I was looking at him and I said, ‘you know what? I am going to be a coward and I am going to throw this question back at you. What do you think?’ And I will never ever forget what he did. He said, ‘My heart says no, but my head says yes.’”<sup>15</sup>*

A woman who is not afraid to speak.

*Layer 8: Vera now says, "Keep in mind that we are all human beings first. Only then do we have gender roles, only then do we differ economically, educationally, intellectually, whatever. Because that is the commonality. And if we remember that which unites us, our differences won't make that much of a difference." 16*

On the outskirts of Lawrenceville, New Jersey, in Vera Goodkin's beautiful home, an empty coffee cup and two half eaten cookies lie before me. As our interview comes to a close, I realize I am out of questions; I also realize the answers I am searching for most do not exist. The questions of what if, why, and could it happen again cannot be answered. As I sit before Vera, I realize how much her story has become my own, how we have converged into a woman together—a single voice: she through watching me develop as she told her story, and me through watching her unfold her story. I have learned through the interviews I can help convey the story of Dr. Goodkin's life, as her story has become mine—one I shall carry for the rest of my life. The traumatic events of the Holocaust helped shaped Vera's identity. They are not her identity, but have dramatically affected it—just as her story is not my identity, but has affected who I am and whom I shall become.

She exposed to me a past I knew existed but I could not find. She offered me a voice—her voice—that comes not from tragedy, but the women who emerged through her. We have both endured: she, atrocities; I, the unfolding of time. I am her layer nine and she is my layer one. She is the survivor, and I will carry on her memory: the voice of her grandmother, the voice of her mother, and her voice—the voice of Vera Herman Goodkin.

*Growth of Voice: Ashley says, "You never lose what's behind you. And as much as some people try to lose it, it can't be lost. Because as much as it's a story of when you were a child, it's a story of who you are right now. And it's a story of who you are as a person.*

*So for me this has been a main turning point – being able to sit with you and have this conversation helps me to understand a lot of my history, which isn't specifically my history, but my human history, that I didn't know before. So I hope to piece that into the story too, because this is a story about you, but" – Vera interjects softly, "Seen through you." I quickly reply, "But a lot of your story feels like it has come into me. Yours is a story that I will carry with me and hope to be able to share with as many people as possible because to me it's important to the future of our world. From the stories I have heard, like sitting in a prison and listening to some of the women talk, your story is completely separate from theirs, but to me it is especially a story worth carrying on, just as their stories are. Because like you said there's not many people who are carrying on the stories that need to be shared. Even if I help your story grow a little bit or I share it with one person, then it was a worthwhile thing. Then I made a difference. Then I carried on your voice." 17*

We are women who are not afraid to speak.

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations cited with a numerical date are from interviews with Vera Herman Goodkin at her home in Lawrenceville, New Jersey.

<sup>2</sup> Interview. September 27, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Interview. October 18, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Interview. September 27, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Interview. October 18, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Interview. October 18, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Interview. October 25, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Interview. October 18, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Interview. September 27, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Interview. October 18, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Interview. October 18, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Interview. October 25, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Interview. October 25, 2007.

<sup>14</sup> Interview. October 25, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Interview. October 25, 2007.

<sup>16</sup> Interview. October 25, 2007.

<sup>17</sup> Interview. October 25, 2007.