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Acknowledgments

This book began as an undefined search, not only for answers but for what questions to ask. Just as I have had to make the journey within to acknowledge and heal my own pain, I have travelled in the company of four wonderful women who willingly shared their pasts with me, their sorrows and longings, their triumphs and courage. I am deeply indebted to Kitia Altman, Jasia Romer, Erna Rosenthal and Basia Schenkel for their willingness to confront their experiences of trauma and allow me to use their stories. The struggles and achievements of these women fuelled my courage to follow my own path.

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Foreword

In this book, Anna Rosner Blay continues the journey she embarked upon in her well-received *Sister, Sister*. Whereas in the earlier work she focused on the Holocaust experiences of two survivors – her mother and her aunt – and their legacy, this time she explores what we might be able learn from survivors about coping with major problems of a more ‘everyday’ nature.

The author chose four women whom she knew and respected. She believed that by listening to their recollections about migration and adjustment to Australia, she would be able to extract the essence of their resilience and wisdom, gained in the Holocaust and applied in their daily struggles throughout the years that followed. Anna believed that the responses of these women to the challenges they faced would teach her how to deal with the traumatic upheaval she was undergoing in her own life: the breakdown of her marriage.

Anna did not consider that the women’s Holocaust experiences were directly relevant to her relatively commonplace trauma. ‘How can I compare my own troubles to those of people who *really* suffered?’ she asks. How could these measure up against the enormity of what they had been through? Therefore she set out to ask her interviewees only about their post-Holocaust adjustment difficulties.

The tension between Anna’s view of herself as suffering only ‘everyday’ difficulties, as against the extreme traumas the survivors had endured, gives this book its unique strength. Her dilemma is that she *wants* to learn from the Holocaust, surely a most powerful teacher with regard to trauma and its consequences, yet she does not allow herself to, because she feels that her own hardships can scarcely compare.

But to Anna's surprise, the four women do not distinguish their Holocaust and post-Holocaust traumas as distinctly as she did. She has to acknowledge that the *themes* of the women's predicaments and her own are not so dissimilar. In a sense, the fact that humans have only a certain repertoire of responses to traumas generally, and that the Holocaust highlights them so sharply, is precisely why it can be such an insightful source of learning in our lives.

Of course it may be countered, 'Yes, but the *content* and the *intensity* of the traumas, and of the responses to them, are so much greater than in ordinary life.' On the whole this is true, but there is another point to consider. It is that survivors struggled to survive, so that they could later struggle with everyday problems, and at last fulfil their ordinary human desires for love, family, achievement, self-esteem and meaning. Whereas during the Holocaust the immediate concern was survival, the ultimate goal was similar to Anna's – fulfilment of one's being. We should remember that if 'ordinary' life goals are not achieved, life can come to appear meaningless and futile, even to the point of suicide.

In the end Anna does learn from the survivor women, but not exactly in the way she anticipated. The importance of this journey, which the reader is invited to share (and to partake of much incidental wisdom in the process), is that it clears the way for us all to learn from the Holocaust without feeling overwhelmed by its scale and losing sight of our own importance. The book is another step toward freedom, while at the same time honouring memory.

Paul Valent

Dr Paul Valent is a retired psychotherapist, who founded the Child Survivors of the Holocaust group in Melbourne, and the Australasian Society for Traumatic Stress Studies. He has written texts on traumatology and is the author of *Child Survivors of the Holocaust*, now in its second edition.

'The second tunnel rises to a doorway of daylight and the Garden of Exile and Emigration. Stepping into the garden is like stepping off a yacht after days at sea. The cobblestone floor is tilted and its square plantation of 49 six-metre concrete columns leans away from the horizon.

Nothing feels quite right.

Disoriented, you pitch into the "trees". The forest unmasks exile: it is not paradise or heaven, but a foreign land where learning basic things anew is dizzying ...'

KATHRYN McNESS, on the work of architect Daniel Libeskind¹

'The conclusion of the war, the liberation of camp inmates, and the resettlement of refugees had not meant an end to the effects of the Nazi atrocities.'

AARON HASS, *In the Shadow of the Holocaust*²

Her lamp goeth not out by night

The floor of my kitchen was breaking up. Cracks were appearing and growing wider. Water started to seep in between the crevices. I sat up with my heart pounding. I tried to slow down my breathing. It's only a dream, I told myself. But images from earlier dreams intruded, images of water lapping around my feet and rising so swiftly that I felt I was drowning.

Was I falling apart? I didn't really know what was causing my distress. I kept getting up in the morning and facing each day armed with a grim determination to do what had to be done: going to work, looking after the household, dealing with difficult relationships. The pages of my diaries were full of swirling despair and unanswered questions. But a vague idea kept haunting me. During wakeful times in the night I wondered: How do people pick up the broken pieces of their lives and mend them? How is it possible to emerge from trauma and begin a new life?

My search for answers was diffuse at first. I didn't really know what I was looking for, but I thought it was out there somewhere beyond myself. I began to seek out several women who had known me since I was a child, women whom I considered courageous and strong despite their increasing age and health problems. They had survived the Holocaust just as my parents had, and I wanted to ask them how they had managed the process of recovery after years of suffering. With the idea in the back of my mind that I would like to record their stories in a book, I explained that I would not be questioning them about their Holocaust experiences, but was interested in the period after the war, from 1945 until the early fifties.

These women, like many others I could have chosen from among my parents' friends, had lived through horrifying experiences, yet somehow they had collected the shattered fragments of their lives after surviving the war. They made a new start, finding a mate, searching for a place to live, bringing children into the world, and learning new ways of existing that were totally alien to them.

I am not a clinician or a therapist. I started out with a sense of curiosity and a few set questions, but on the whole, the time I spent with each woman was a series of conversations or, more accurately, a spontaneous outpouring of all kinds of memories. Sometimes they told oft-repeated anecdotes; sometimes there was a rush of stories from the heart which were jumbled and disorganised, accompanied by intense emotion. On occasions I had the feeling that they were going into territory that had not been visited for a very long time. Or else instead of thrusting forward there was a holding back, a reluctance to explore what was hidden. I was grateful for whatever they were willing to share and respected their requests not to probe areas that were uncomfortable.

These were not clinical interviews. I didn't cover the same territory with each woman, nor spend the same amount of time, although certain common themes began to arise. Now and then I had to fill in gaps in areas that were hidden or unspoken. But I was always careful to tape-record and transcribe our conversations, and to stay true to the information the women entrusted me with. In these times of increasing revisionism and distortion of history, I felt it was important for this work not to be seen as fiction or exaggeration. I have made minor changes to enhance fluency and to smooth out the natural hesitations and repetitions of direct speech.

This book, however, is not only about the lives of four remarkable women who survived the Holocaust. After some months of talking and writing, I realised that there were deeper forces at work here than I had been aware of. I found myself searching for information about the process of transition, of rebuilding a life after major upheaval. I felt a growing personal compulsion to read books about finding the strength to heal and move on. I bookmarked sites on the internet about trauma and recovery. I participated in an email group of children of Holocaust survivors around

the world who shared their thoughts about living with shadows and empty holes.

It became clear to me that in talking to the women I was also searching for a way to start rebuilding my own life – that my enquiries reflected my own need to know how to begin again, after deep trauma. The main trigger for this search was the breakdown of my marriage of thirty-three years. During the process of writing I was struggling to redefine who I was and what it meant to start a new life alone. Fears about the future jostled with memories from the past as I sought to find some kind of balance while my world spun out of control. I began to reread, with gloomy fascination, the dusty diaries I had kept from my teenage years. I didn't quite know what I was searching for, but it seemed important to find out who I had been at that stage of my life, what I was like, why I had made the life choices I did. I also read my later diaries, discovering repeated patterns and forgotten incidents which I had apparently erased from my memory. As I kept reading and remembering I began to see that, having been born to two Holocaust survivors, I was connected to feelings of loss and grief that were not my own. It was not only my difficult marriage which had brought me to this threshold. I was inextricably linked to my parents' past. Even though I had not heard or considered the term 'second generation' when I left home and married, it was clearly a burden I had carried for a long time.

For some years now I have been re-examining areas that had until then been too painful to touch. Through reading, through joining groups interested in the same quest, through therapy, research and meditation, I have come to an awareness that the difficult regions of our past need to be acknowledged and worked through in order for healing to take place. I have written about the miraculous survival of my mother and my aunt in my previous book, *Sister, Sister*. During the process of writing it I began to confront, for the first time in my life, the real impact and horror of the Holocaust, and the legacy which had been handed down to me. Part of my motivation then was to explore my background and try to understand how, as a child, I had been influenced and shaped by ancestors I had never known, and by having been born into a family of survivors just emerging from their grief and suffering.

This time, when I began to talk to the four women I interviewed for this book, I knew that being a child of survivors coloured my perceptions and gave me a heightened sense of compassion for what they shared with me. And yet their histories and the circumstances of their new beginnings were completely different from mine. The unspoken messages of my childhood taught me that nothing I suffered could be as bad as Auschwitz. Initially I resisted the impulse to write about my own experiences, as I didn't want to elicit comparisons. But I realised that I shared with these women certain similarities in our feelings and struggles to overcome a traumatic past. It was not only about the legacy of the Holocaust. As they talked to me of their hesitant first steps in a new country, of their struggles and their moments of hope and joy, I searched their faces for signs and hints of how they had actually achieved this amazing feat. Through small actions and minor triumphs, they had succeeded in rebuilding and renewing lives that were once in tatters. I wanted to learn from them and emulate them.

My search was not just about surviving (I knew already how to do that); it was about the fundamental question of how to live in a way that is joyous and meaningful. That's what I went to the survivors to find out. I wanted to explore the untold stories of those who managed to start life anew from the ashes, and to trace their daily triumphs and sorrows. I knew that how they coped would be related to their inner makeup and their childhood experiences before the war. Although all who suffer are scarred in some way, there are some who can continue to function normally or even gain strength through their experiences, while others find daily life an ongoing struggle. It was important for me not to take on their griefs and disappointments (as I seemed to have done with my own parents) but to disentangle and acknowledge what was mine. Hence the threads of their stories and mine are intertwined, but very separate.

There are no tales here of public heroism, no grand historical events and breathtaking exploits. These are the quiet, forgotten daily fragments of a growing mosaic of what it means to endure and flourish. Only when you look at it from a distance can you discern an overall image. But when you examine the tiny pieces more closely, you can marvel at the intricacy and creativity of each piece, and observe how, though unique, it fits into a

larger pattern. The voices of the women speak to us on both the individual and the collective level.

When I was a young student at school I was given an art assignment: to create a work of art out of small pieces. I experimented with dried beans and lentils, but wanted to make something more substantial. I went to talk to a family friend, Martha Ash, who was a survivor and a well-known artist in Melbourne. Though short of stature, she was filled with energy and enthusiasm. Her small bright eyes darted over everything she saw, taking it all in, seeing the potential for transformation into works of art. (Her specialty was mosaics, and her large works can still be seen around Melbourne; for example, the magnificent six-panel mural *From Creation to Redemption*, at Temple Beth Israel in Alma Road, St Kilda.³)

In those earlier times Ash was exploring new materials and was very excited with the possibilities of ceramic tiles she was importing from Italy. I followed her down a long corridor leading to her glassed-in workroom at the back of the house. She scooped up handfuls of richly coloured tiles, which glowed radiantly in the sunlight pouring in through the windows. I fell in love with the various shades of blue: azure and cobalt and aquamarine. I was delighted when she told me I could use whatever I needed to make my mosaic. She taught me how to cut the tiles into shapes with special cutters, and how to glue them onto a board in flowing patterns. From these bits of coloured stone I created a new visual world of light and shade.

In the mosaics of the lives of the women I talked to there were shadows and darkneses difficult to distinguish, but other areas shimmered with light and reflected radiance. I set out to gather the various recollected fragments of their journeys out of suffering, and to reassemble them into a narrative mosaic that was both simple and profound. In a chair or a lamp, a gift or a kind word, a child's smile or the snatch of a melody – in these random and mundane realities lay the seeds of a future which was full of promise, life, and even (at precious times) joy.

Strength and dignity are her clothing

April 1999. It's twelve days into the war in Kosovo. I watch the daily news with grim absorption. Shivers of recognition run through me as I hear of the deaths of thousands of civilians, populations fleeing their homes, the systematic rape of women and the setting up of concentration camps.

The Kosovar Albanian refugees haven't suffered the horrors of death camps and years of imprisonment that Jews suffered during World War II, but the conditions they live in are dreadful. Daily I see images on television of weary families trudging for miles in rain and slush, not knowing what awaits them. They walk for days, sleeping alongside the roads and railway lines. They are hungry, cold, frightened. When they manage to cross the border they finish up in camps housing thousands of people in tents, which offer little protection from wind or rain.

The scenes of loaves of bread being thrown at random into the crowds of people, their arms waving desperately, send shudders through me. They remind me of scenes of more than fifty years ago when the Jews were the ones who were hungry, uprooted, devastated. Today the eyes of the world are upon the Kosovars. I watch the military manoeuvring on my television screen, but what stays in my mind are the staring eyes of the refugees, the old women with tears streaking their cheeks, the children in layers of colourful clothes gazing in confusion at the inhospitable world around them. How do such refugees cope? Not knowing if they'll ever see their homelands again, torn swiftly from everything that was comfortable and familiar, how can they begin to think beyond their everyday needs of food, water, shelter? Is it possible to start anew in a foreign country

and live a normal life once again? Will the grief of loss and suffering continue for ever?

These are my thoughts when I confront the reality of my continuing life of day-to-day concerns, a relatively comfortable and mundane existence, while on the other side of the world human beings are living in torment. Although we have the illusion of living in a progressive and civilised society, all around the world there continue to be outbreaks of violence and war. Refugees, asylum seekers, queue jumpers – whatever we call them, they are human beings who are dislocated and frightened, looking for a way to begin their lives again.

How do you collect the shattered pieces of a broken mirror and put them back together, without the reflections of your own fractured face leering back at you? How can you handle these jagged fragments and not suffer deep cuts that bleed? What do you do about the splinters that lodge in secret recesses and refuse to budge?

Those who survived the Holocaust experienced unimaginable suffering and losses. Most of them were between fifteen and thirty-five years of age in 1945. After liberation, survivors hoped that their struggles were over, that life would go back to the way it was. But the men and women who emerged faced all kinds of pressures. Not only did they have to cope with their grief over the loss of family and friends, and come to terms with their own horrifying experiences; they also suffered the dislocation and disruption of having to move to totally unfamiliar environments and face the demands of building new lives. They were often sick and malnourished. There was the unfinished mourning for the losses of those around them. In countless cases their whole families had been wiped out. They were dislocated, their homes gone, their neighbourhoods destroyed. Many wanted simply to get on with life once again. They were desperate to recover some sense of normalcy and to begin families. Added to that were the demands of travelling and adapting to a new country, learning a new language, being faced with new customs and new responsibilities. Often they believed ‘others’ were not interested in their Holocaust experiences or their traumas. The only way to continue to live was to try to put the past behind them.

Now, as these survivors age, long-suppressed memories of trauma seem to surface, poignant and painful as ever. Even though they insist that they were not special or courageous, they could never put their ordeals totally behind them and pretend they hadn't happened. There is no way you can ever 'get over' trauma. But despite that, they did what they had to do: start their families and get on with the job of living. Yet for these women, the time of transition and huge change was extraordinary. Emerging from years of horror, scarred and grieving, they were somehow able to resume functioning, to give birth to children and to create new communities. Nothing about this was easy. Nothing could happen quickly. Few outsiders had the time or inclination to ask them how they were coping. There was no such thing as grief counselling or therapy to cope with trauma; or if there was, survivors tended to see searching for help as a sign of weakness or even mental illness, a crutch not needed by someone who had survived and conquered death.

Well-meaning people tended to say, 'You are in a new country now, full of opportunities. The war is finished, this is a new beginning for you. There is work for you to do, plenty of food to put on your tables, houses for you to live in. This is a country of safety and security. Be happy!' And of course, all that was true.

Australia in the fifties has been portrayed as a place of optimism and boundless potential. Jobs were plentiful and life was good; people built houses with big backyards in the suburbs, led a complacent lifestyle and cared little about problems beyond their local community.

In reality there were the hidden struggles, the undercurrents of fear and the far-reaching effects of trauma, which didn't just go away in this wonderful new country. But to admit any serious emotional damage would imply that the effects could be passed on to their children – virtually a victory to the Nazis. The survivors wanted their children to be happy and healthy, so they tended to protect them from the past. This, of course, was an illusion. The war changed their lives forever and influenced the way they brought up their families. Grief was not talked about; suffering was silent and private.

When I was a child I borrowed a picture-book from the local library. There were no words on the pages, yet this was no ordinary children's picture-book. For a start it was all in black and white. It began with the photo of a bunch of flowers, sitting prettily in a vase. The next page showed a closer view of one flower, a blossom with petals and a stamen and intricate filaments. Turning the page you saw a close-up of the centre of this flower; and page by page, the image was magnified into amazing patterns and designs which you could never have seen with the naked eye.

Halfway through the book, the photo of the bunch of flowers appeared again, but this time the photographer stepped back from the image to record the table that the vase of flowers stood on, then the room itself, then the room through the window as seen from outside, then the house, and so on, moving further and further away until I became giddy with trying to hold the reality of the subject in my mind. Oceans and landforms swirled, mists rose around the shrinking earth, and the emptiness was dotted with pinpoints of stars.

From this vantage-point, how could anyone care about a bunch of flowers? When faced with such vastness of scale, whether physical or historical, how can you hold in your mind all the individual details that have disappeared utterly from view? And yet they exist, as real and significant as before. I kept turning back the pages to the start of the book, to reassure myself that the flowers were still there, clear and perfectly formed. It all depended on the photographer's point of view, and how close he was to the subject. As diverse and strange as each image seemed, it was linked inextricably to all the others by a common reality.

I used to think that if I could only get far enough away from something, or else close enough to see its hidden secrets, then maybe I could understand it a little better and make sense of its place in the world. Human beings throughout history, in every country on every continent, have experienced great joys and enormous griefs; they have loved and suffered, have fallen and raised themselves up again. As in the photographs of a single flower, we all have a deeply private interior, often hidden even to ourselves, yet each of us is one among many, all struggling to extract meaning out of life and sense out of chaos.

The handful of women in this book, who came across huge oceans to begin a new life, all share a link – one perhaps not evident even to the people closest to them, but a powerful connection nevertheless with every other refugee, immigrant and exile. And yet each of them is different, individual, distinctive, living with her own memories and her own private struggles and joys.

When asked how they survived, the women tended towards one answer: luck. They didn't believe they had been particularly clever or deserving; it was pure chance that they had not died during the war. They knew that numerous others who were brave, resourceful and strong had perished. Providence played little part in their thinking; indeed, it could be said that many survivors (though not all) lost their belief in a God who could let such things happen. Most thought it was luck, or chance, or fate, or countless miracles and split-second decisions which had saved them.

The extension of this view, however, leads to a long-term underlying anxiety that life is always a lottery, that good things can be taken away in a moment, and that loss and pain are never far off. There is nothing one can do to protect oneself and one's family from the uncertainties of a world that can go mad. However secure your life seems, it can be threatened in a moment by capricious misfortune. Thus, in the midst of the abundance and safety of a sun-filled country, these women lived with uneasiness and fear. Unwittingly, they often passed their insecurities on to their children. The women were grateful for the new start and thankful that they had escaped from death, but there was always a shadow.

It wasn't paradise.

As a child living in Melbourne, Australia, I took it for granted that I was surrounded by people like my parents who spoke Polish, or English with a foreign accent. They had all migrated to Australia in the late 1940s or early 1950s. Their families were small, as they had lost most of their relatives. Many of them had only one or two children, and it seemed normal that these children were the focus of all their dreams and hopes for the future. These survivors came together on weekends or in the evenings, talking, laughing, eating. They celebrated each other's birthdays and loved to have a party. Their children were included. Social

networks were established, and remained a strong force in their lives for over half a century.

I knew very little then about the Holocaust or the fact that these people were survivors. They were just the familiar faces around me, the substitute extended family I lacked. With the passing years many of them have died, and I watch the numbers in the group around my parents shrinking. As in the general community, the women tend to outlive the men, and they never lose their zest for living, their love for their families and their desire to make the best of life. Four of these women shared their stories with me, and were willing to retrace memories that were often painful. All of them had known me as a little girl and had held me in their arms. They sang songs and twirled me round as they danced. They fed me, told me jokes and dried my tears.

Today these women are vulnerable and becoming more feeble; most suffer from ill-health and hidden anxieties. But in my eyes they are also strong, resilient and heroic. I felt impelled to talk to them and to hear their stories.

The first woman I spoke to was Erna Rosenthal. She hasn't changed much since I knew her when I was a little girl. Her face is still unlined, and her broad cheeks fill with colour as she speaks. Her ready laughter erupts many times during our talks, but so do her tears. During my first visit she offers me a cup of tea and a plateful of warm freshly-prepared apple fritters, just like my mother used to make when I was a child. She sprinkles sugar generously over the top. Any thoughts I have of leaving as soon as the interview is over disappear. She offers me 'real' tea made in a pot and delights in watching me eat.

Erna speaks slowly and clearly, occasionally needing to stop and search for a word, but mostly expressing herself in correct if simple English. One thing I soon notice is that my idea of limiting the discussion to the period just after the war is not workable – how can you discuss what state you were in and compare your situation, without talking about where you came from and what you experienced?

But remembering traumas from the past is not easy. When they do tell their stories, survivors often come back again and again to certain

themes, trying to piece the fragments together, to be truthful but without upsetting the listener. So the conflict between the meaning of the spoken words and the demeanour of the person talking is sometimes marked.

In 1961 William G. Nielderland, foremost psychoanalyst in the field of treating survivors, coined the term 'survivor syndrome'. Among the many symptoms he described was survivor guilt – guilt for having survived when others had not. 'Why am *I* alive? Why not my sister and brother ... my whole family?'

Right from the start, Erna takes care to explain her survival. 'The only thing I can say is that all through the war, with everything I went through, I haven't done anything that I feel ashamed of, that I can ...' She pauses, searching for some way of putting it. 'Let me say, my conscience is clear. I haven't done any harm to anybody, and my conscience is clear.' She wants to be sure that I understand this. What messages has she received in earlier times from uncomprehending bystanders? What kinds of questions have been asked of her, as of so many other survivors?

She goes on: 'There were people who worked as *kapos* or police, who stole bread from their mates, who took positions of power and treated other inmates badly. After the war they were accused of working for the Gestapo. But you see, whatever happened, I didn't push myself. I was just kind of going along, and I was the lucky one. But I didn't fight for it, you see. I didn't do anything extra to survive: I didn't fight, I didn't push, I was just *bierna*, passive. Because of circumstances, that's what happened, and I stayed alive. I was just lucky.' Again and again, survivors have attributed their continued existence to luck, or to miracles. Few of them believe they were any smarter, or stronger, or more quick-witted than the countless friends and relatives who were murdered. Few of them saw themselves as heroes. They would feel guilty if they did.

The second friend I talk to is Kitia Altman. In recent years she has become well-known for her work at the Jewish Holocaust Museum, for her sensitive writing, and for her courageous encounter with revisionist historian and Holocaust denier David Irving. In February 1993, during a television interview on *A Current Affair*, Kitia challenged his claim that there were no gas chambers in Auschwitz. He maintained that

the survivors had very fallible memories forty years after their wartime experiences and therefore couldn't be relied on as witnesses. He conceded that some Jews *had* unfortunately died, but denied that there was ever a plan for genocide. In a calm but strong voice, Kitia reminded Irving that she had been there in Auschwitz; she had seen the smoke billowing from the crematoria chimneys and smelled the acrid stench of death. His academic background and verbal dexterity were no match for the passion and persuasiveness of her testimony.

When she meets with me she is suffering the after-effects of a bad cold which has laid her low for weeks. She leads me into her kitchen and potters around, setting out cups and saucers. 'Tea or coffee?' she asks, using the long-honoured ritual of serving a drink to lubricate the conversation. Beginnings are hard. While Kitia is sitting at a cloth-covered table in a typical kitchen in the leafy suburb of Caulfield, her mind is being propelled backwards through decades, encountering a series of jolts as the past collides with the present. We stir sugar into our tea and she asks me to cut myself a slice of chocolate *babka*, the rich yeast cake from Aviv cake shop in Glenhuntly Road which is a staple for occasions of entertainment and celebration. She encourages me more than once to take another slice. Beginnings are hard.

My request to hear about her life after the war brings a bitter smile to her face. She lifts one hand to smooth down her dark straight hair, cut bluntly to frame an oval face. Her eyes glitter with the energy her body no longer displays.

She takes a deep breath and begins her story: 'I was born in Poland, in Będzin, not exactly a metropolis, but a little city. My parents travelled abroad, my family were professionals, so it wasn't a *petit bourgeois* environment. My brother studied in France, and that's where I was going to study. The young people of my extended family were all students in tertiary education. They were leftist, so the environment I was brought up in was outward-looking and broad-minded.' Kitia turns aside, unable to control a hacking cough which leaves her breathless for long moments at a time. But she wants to continue talking, reluctant to let the irritation in her throat stop her from grappling with words.

Despite the hoarseness of her voice her words are clear, carefully enunciated, with the edges rounded off by her Polish accent. The sentences are meticulously constructed, her writer's mind hearing the rhythms and cadences of a language now almost as familiar to her as her mother tongue. Sometimes the echo is there before the word emerges; she searches within to find the right combination of sounds. At other times the words flow out forcefully, a steady stream filling an empty riverbed that has been waiting for just such a break in the weather.

It is important for her to let me understand from the start that she didn't come from some tiny *shtetl* or an uneducated background. Her world was rich and colourful, and no one imagined that life was going to change so dramatically.

I remember Jasia Romer as a slim, self-contained person, softly spoken and always friendly to me and to my parents. On a breezy day with clouds scudding across the sky, I walk down a side path through a sanctuary cool with ferns and azaleas, to reach her front door. It is hidden from the street. From the moment I enter her home I sense a reluctance to speak openly about her past, although she has agreed to meet with me. 'My story is not unusual,' she had told me on the phone. 'Every migrant has faced the same difficulties at the beginning.'

Nevertheless she is very hospitable, offering me tea and chocolate-covered orange peel in a little glass bowl. We sit side by side on stools in her neat white kitchen. Her slim hands quietly prepare the tea; her face seems determined to stay calm and controlled.

Jasia's thinning hair has been carefully styled. The fine wrinkles around her mouth and eyes don't disguise the face of the younger woman I knew when I was a child. She was one of a large group of friends that regularly included my parents. I never questioned the fact that they spoke with strong accents and made mistakes in their English.

The main quality Jasia exudes is composure. Her words are measured and her voice remains controlled and quiet. Although she has said she won't have much to talk about and needs me to prompt her with questions, once she begins she is able to remember many details about her life during the years after the war. There are moments when she sits quietly

in response to a question, and little ripples of memory chase each other across her smooth forehead. Sometimes a smile suddenly lights up her face as she recalls a long-forgotten moment of delight. But mostly she is grave, quietly spoken, holding back the emotions that could threaten to overwhelm her if allowed free rein. Intellect and reasonableness dominate her conversation. The longest silences are when she confronts, once again, the loss of her husband Franek six years before.

‘It was like an amputation,’ she tells me. ‘He would have been able to answer all your questions so much better than me.’ Her lower lip quivers just for a moment. ‘We had a wonderful relationship throughout our marriage. We could understand each other’s thoughts without words, and finish each other’s sentences. He was such a good husband ...’ Every day she lives with the loss, the emptiness. Is it like that for every woman who outlives her husband? Or do survivors who have bonded in shared knowledge of the horrors of evil and suffering, living through the dark years together before emerging into a new and flickering light, feel the loss even more keenly? Certainly I have noticed that such couples, even when they constantly bicker and reproach each other, have a deep need to stay connected, intertwined with their shared awareness of life’s fragility. How much harder, then, must it be for those who truly loved their partners, who saw their own soul reflected in the other’s eyes?

But Jasia doesn’t dwell on the places where the pain vibrates beneath the surface. At first she does not want her real name to be used. Neither she nor her husband ever recorded their testimonies, despite encouragement to do so. He had always been definite about it: there was no use talking about the past. But there seems to be more here than an understandable reluctance to excavate painful memories of the past. It has been recognised that traumatic memory differs markedly from normal memory, which is usually in the form of a story or tale, the details of which eventually fade. Traumatic memory, on the other hand, does not exist as a coherent narrative but as a fragmented emotional and psychological experience which doesn’t fade, and can bring about suffering with fresh immediacy every time it surfaces. The original traumatic moment may be deeply engraved in memory, and can be triggered by countless insignificant reminders which can cause a traumatised person to relive, again and again,

the original horrifying event. For Jasia, as for others, it was of course more than just a single moment; there were countless such moments, repeated over years of terror. In some way, it was as if she and her husband feared that the Nazis would discover where they lived and come to finish the job they had started ...

And thus she is not sure she has anything to offer, apart from tea and chocolates. Her story, however, is as rich and complex as that of every woman who has survived and come to this country. And the many obstacles, the suffering and the hunger, are never totally absent, even in a quiet apartment with a marble-top counter, white floor tiles, thick carpets and soft curtains.

The only time I detect a yearning note in her voice is when her only son telephones her. *Synku*, she calls him, my little son. *Synku*, did you have a hard day? She talks to him in Polish, but tells him nothing of the loneliness of her own day. While she speaks on the phone, I recall the last time I heard that word, *Synku*. It was in the opening movement of Górecki's Symphony No. 3, known as the 'Symphony of Sorrowful Songs'. The movement's centrepiece is a setting of the Holy Cross Lament, a fifteenth-century Polish prayer. This strangely powerful music, which blends echoes of the Holocaust with Christian prayer and folksong, always reduces me to tears. ('My son, my chosen and beloved, / Share your wounds with your mother ...') In the third movement, a mother again mourns for her lost son, perhaps lying somewhere in a ditch, wounded, cold, bleeding. The fact that she may be Mary grieving over the death of Christ in no way detracts from the way I identify with the archetypal mother's fears for her child.

I wait for Jasia to finish her phone conversation with her son.

Jasia came from Kraków, just as my mother and father and countless dead relatives did, and she had been locked up in the same ghetto at the start of the war. As she tells me these fragments the strands of connection grow stronger. Her husband-to-be, Franek, used to live in the same large apartment on Limanowskiego Street as my parents. Its rooms were shared by many families, and Franek's bed was made up in the entrance hall. The apartment block was right on the edge of the ghetto, near the gates. Even though the main entrance to this building was outside the ghetto walls,

the residents had access in and out only through the internal courtyard. Jasia laughs at the strangeness of being able to look out of the windows onto the 'normal' world outside the ghetto, while incarcerated in confined quarters. Soon these prisoners, including Jasia, Franek and my parents, were transferred with many others to the brutal Płaszów concentration camp, graphically depicted in the film *Schindler's List*. In a moment of intense hope and romantic optimism, Franek and Jasia made a pact that if they survived they would meet at the house of Stasia, a cousin who had Aryan papers and was relatively safe. Stasia lived in a large building near Wawel Castle in Kraków. The image of the soaring castle by the river stayed with them, even though within a few days all the men and women in the camp were brutally separated.

I never looked too closely at the blue numbers tattooed on the women's arms, but today, afraid of being too invasive, I ask Jasia if I can write down her number. Without looking she recites it to me in a quiet voice. It is A-26800. 'Your aunt Janka,' she tells me, 'must have been ahead of me in the queue. She had a lower number.' (My aunt's number was A-26259.) I feel a momentary shiver at the image of hundreds of women, cold and hungry, terrified and brutalised, standing in a queue to be branded like cattle. And the fact that I'm linked to these women by fine threads of connection keeps drawing me back into their lives.

There is another grisly fact which links Jasia inseparably with my aunt. When Schindler was granted permission to draw up a list of 1100 slave workers (800 men and 300 women) for his new Brinnlitz factory, a Jewish prisoner named Marcel Goldberg was placed in charge of the list. Those who wanted to be on the list had to pay a bribe, and this was mostly in the form of diamonds. The names of those who couldn't pay, like my aunt, were removed from the list. She had told me how she was sent instead on a death march towards Germany, nearly perishing from cold and hunger. Jasia says matter-of-factly: 'My name was also crossed off by Marcel Goldberg because I didn't have the big diamonds he asked for.'

Her mouth tightens at the memory. Was it just fate that kept her away from the relative safety of Schindler's factory? The greed of others? There are never clear answers to this kind of question.

So Jasia was crammed, together with my aunt and countless others,

into sealed cattle-trucks without food or water, to arrive days later in the hell-hole of Auschwitz-Birkenau. 'We were together in the same group of women who were on their way directly to the crematorium – she might have told you this – a hundred of us girls from Płaszów. We didn't realise, of course, that that was where we were heading. The Germans were yelling at us to hurry, hurry, pushing us along with their whips and their shouts, but another German came towards us, looked us over, and said to the SS man in charge, "Take them back, they can still work. They look strong; they can work some more." So there I stayed with your aunt until we were forced, in the last days, to go on a death march. I finished up in Ravensbrück.' I know from my aunt's story that there were weeks of plodding through the snow, hungry, barely alive. Jasia's forehead is creased with pain. She remains silent for a long time.

Basia Schenkel is much more upbeat and energetic than the others. Her hair is cut fashionably short, and is tinted a modern shade of auburn. Although her face bears the lines of her advancing years, her lively movements and enthusiastic voice recall a much younger woman. As she talks to me, she bustles around the kitchen, preparing a cup of tea, putting cakes on a plate – round chocolate-covered honey-and-ginger cakes imported from Poland – and darting off to find a book or a newspaper article to show me. She believes we should be positive in life; her words, however, don't always match the thoughts flickering behind her eyes. She's proud to declare her age and knows she's lived through a lot. Her husband is a gruff, complaining man whom she cheerfully banishes from the kitchen. Basia's great love is the theatre, and her joy in acting comes through whenever she starts to recount her interactions with someone. Dialogues are performed unselfconsciously, with Basia taking both parts. Her cheerfulness is nevertheless not light-hearted. Her aliveness and strong spirit show her determination to cover over past tragedies.

She gives the impression of not wanting to dredge up anything that is too painful or might bring back bad memories. A good sense of humour and an ability to entertain have earned her many friends and admirers. 'Let's not talk about that,' she says whenever the conversation seems to be veering towards a precipice. For her, the war years are long gone and

best forgotten. And it's not only facts and events which are skirted; I have the sense that feelings, too, need to be kept under tight control. A smile or a joke often belies a deeper pain. Like many survivors, Basia has chosen not to dwell on the suffering of the past, but to accentuate the happy moments.

She sums up the war years in a straightforward way. 'During the war I was hiding. I left my parents behind and I escaped to the Russian side. When the war started between the Germans and the Russians, we had to go into hiding. I was sent to Siberia but I ran away – it is a long story, and I don't like to talk about it. I met my husband Leon in Lwów after I ran away, and then we came back. I never admitted I was Jewish.' She pauses to check my reaction; I wait for her to continue. 'I was just a young girl,' she sighs. Her face is calm.