

# Love: The Biggest Act of Resistance

By Rosalyn Kliot

My name is Rosalyn Kliot and I'm a child survivor of the Holocaust. I was born in occupied Poland just before Germany's surrender to the Allies. I'm also the child of survivors. My parents were in a concentration camp and escaped shortly before the end of the war.

When I was young, my parents didn't talk about what they'd lived through. The word Holocaust was never used. They whispered about the war, with each other and their friends, but not to their children. They wanted to shelter me and my siblings. But I became curious about the dark shadow that seemed to hover over my family's life. I began to notice that my family lacked some essential elements common to most other families, such as relatives, family gatherings, photographs, and history. I wondered why my sister and I had no grandparents, and why my parents frequently spoke in whispers or in a foreign language when my sister and I were in the room with them.

When my dad retired, he began writing his 400-page memoir, an eyewitness report of his and my mom's experiences during the Second World War which he later donated to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.. After he died, I contacted the Museum. They had decided to translate the book into English, and sent it to me 20 pages at a time. I admit it was easier to read the book and digest its contents in small portions. I found it difficult to understand the horrific and overwhelming details, the losses for which no amount of grief can ever be sufficient.

I'm going to share with you the contents of his memoir and his eyewitness report of what he had seen. It's more than a history about tragedy, war, and genocide; it is also a love story between my mom and dad. My parents met and fell in love in a concentration camp. Their greatest act of resistance was to hold on to their humanity and love amidst hate and horrific conditions.

My parents were both from Vilna, Poland, though they didn't know each other before the Holocaust. Prior to the Second World War, Vilna was a cultural mecca and an educational center, with theaters, concert halls, museums, galleries, libraries, universities, synagogues, and churches. Approximately half of the population was Jewish. The Jewish population was diverse, from the very religious and orthodox to the secular. My parents both grew up in middle class, secular families. They celebrated traditions, but rarely attended religious services.

In 1938, just before the beginning of the war, my mom, Vera, was a teenager. She loved sports, hanging out with friends and boyfriends, and going to movies, dances, and outdoor concerts. She had a sister, Sonia, who was four years younger; and a brother, Abrasha, 12 years younger. My mom's parents owned a shop, where my grandfather was a tailor, and my grandmother was a dressmaker and designer. A maid helped with the household chores. My mother's grandparents owned a farm, and on Sundays the family would go out to the country to gather fresh vegetables and fruits to bring back home. It was a good life.

My dad, Leon, was 11 years older than my mom. He came from a very large and prominent family. He had seven brothers and sisters, and numerous cousins, aunts and uncles. His father owned a soap factory, employing both Jewish and non-Jewish people. My dad's older brother regularly played poker with the city sheriff.

As a teenager, my dad was active in sports and played soccer in an amateur league. He enjoyed hiking in the woods, camping, writing poetry and reading. When he was 12, his mother died and his father soon remarried. My dad moved out of the home and went to live with an older brother. He joined a boys' club, similar to the Eagle Scouts, where he learned survival skills: how to build a fire, make shelter, and identify edible plants in the surrounding woods. These skills and his independent streak would serve him well during the war. Sometimes there were attacks on Jewish children in Vilna, but my father's team of athletes were tough and self-confident. They were rarely bothered.

My dad was happy in Vilna. In fact, when he was a teenager, an uncle in New York invited him to leave Europe and come to America. My dad turned him down, saying, "Why would I leave, when I have such a great life here?" Eventually, prior to the war, he married his first wife, Manya, and owned a hardware business.

While my parents didn't directly experience much antisemitism — prejudice against Jewish people — there was a cloud of antisemitism that had hovered over Poland and much of Europe for centuries. Jews had historically been blamed for diseases, economic downturns, and war. The Nazis fed on this tradition, stoking fears. Beginning in 1933, the Nazis passed anti-Jewish laws that restricted Jewish people's abilities to participate in social activities and professions. These laws became progressively worse and resulted in the isolation of and violence against Jews.

Then in 1939 the Second World War began when Nazi Germany invaded Poland. At this time, Vilna was not occupied by Germany, but by Russia. Hitler and Stalin, the Russian dictator, made a pact to divide Poland. While most of the country went to Germany, the northeast section, where my parents lived, went to Russia. Vilna was now called Vilnius and was considered part of Lithuania. In 1941, Hitler broke his pact with Russia and invaded the rest of Poland, Lithuania, and other countries in the region.

Now Jewish people were required to register with the government, to wear Jewish stars, and to adhere to early curfews. They were restricted from doing business with non-Jews, continuing their education, or practicing their professions. The Nazis' intention was to isolate the Jewish people, designating them as the "other." In a very short period of time, the oldest and poorest parts of the city were being sectioned off as ghettos.

Nazi SS officers appeared at both my parents' family's houses. They told them to take only what they could carry and form a line heading to one of the two ghettos. The Nazis said not to worry as they would be gone only a short while. They purposely lulled them with lies in an effort to keep everyone calm. My mom's mother had her children put on layers of clothing, not knowing how long they'd be gone.

When they arrived in the ghetto, each family was given a room to share with others. Sometimes there were eight or twelve people living in one room. The ghetto was crowded far beyond capacity.

Food became a scarce luxury, adequate sanitation did not exist, and disease was rampant. Periodic executions took place inside the ghetto and mass killings began in which innocent men, women and children were taken out to the Ponary Forest, shot, and left in mass graves.

Back in the ghetto, underground resistance activities kept hope alive and achieved a semblance of normalcy. In secret, teachers were teaching children, poets were writing poetry, writers were keeping journals and diaries (some of which were discovered after the war), and artists were creating art and making false papers for those who planned to escape from the ghetto. Resistance went on in the surrounding woods, where Jewish partisans fought with makeshift weapons.

During this time, the Nazis were selecting people for slave labor outside the ghetto. My dad was assigned to work at an airfield which the Nazis used as a refueling station for their planes. There he became a saboteur. He'd siphon out the gasoline from a plane, leaving only a small amount, and then fill the tank with water. He'd watch the planes take off, knowing they would eventually crash. Some of the siphoned gasoline was then smuggled back to the ghetto to be used for fuel and some to the woods where Jewish partisans were engaged in resistance.

The airfield's Polish supervisors were collaborating with the Nazis. They grew suspicious and arrested my dad. He was thrown into the Polish jail, where he believed he'd be executed. However, his brother heard about his arrest and sent a bribe to the sheriff, who had been his poker buddy before the war. My dad was released and returned to the ghetto.

Now Manya, my dad's first wife, was pregnant, and she and my dad decided to escape. They had false papers that showed their religion as Christian. My dad was light skinned and had red hair, and Manya was blond, so neither of them fit the Nazi stereotype of what it meant to "look Jewish." They crawled through a tunnel to escape, and then moved from village to village. My dad even took a job now and then. At one point he was working for a sheriff in a village.

Manya gave birth to my half-sister, Rosalie. When the baby became ill, my dad and Manya returned to the ghetto to seek medical attention. It had been seven months since they'd left. My dad wrote that what he found on his return was unimaginable. Dead bodies lay in the filthy streets. People were starving and emaciated. But what was most apparent was that people were gone.

It was now 1943 and the ghetto was targeted for liquidation. Everyone was removed from the ghetto and sent to either a concentration camp or killing center. Each of my parents was selected for a concentration camp. Manya stayed in hiding with Rosalie in the ghetto.

My parents still didn't know each other at this time. They and their families were pushed into a cattle car, squeezed together like sardines, without food, water, or sanitation. They were sent to Klooga concentration camp in Estonia, almost 400 miles north of Vilna. There they were processed: their clothing was removed, their heads were shaved, they were doused with gasoline to kill lice (which carry a highly contagious disease

called Typhus), and they were given work uniforms and wooden clogs. My mother was sent to work in the kitchen and my dad worked in a factory. They were used as slave laborers.

Shortly after entering the camp, my dad learned that Manya and Rosalie had been found by the Nazis and were executed.

Life in the camps was harsh and unpredictable. Each day brought the risk of being shot, starving to death, dying of disease, or being sent to a killing center.

My dad and a group of about 75 prisoners began to plan an escape for the entire camp. The Nazis grew suspicious and moved prisoners from one sub-camp to another to keep them separated. But my father never let go of the idea of escape.

My dad and mom saw each other frequently, became friends, and, in time, they fell in love. This was itself an act of resistance. The Nazis wanted to dehumanize Jews. But love makes us human. In my opinion, the biggest act of resistance, of staying human, is to love another person.

The prisoners heard that the Russian army was now pushing the Nazis further west, and the Nazis were liquidating the camps as they retreated. My dad convinced my mom to escape with him and a group of about 21 other men. My mom wanted to take her family, but her mother was too weak, her sister Sonia was ill in the infirmary, and the other prisoners wouldn't allow children, so she couldn't bring her little brother Abrasha. My mother's mother gave her blessing and convinced her to escape.

One night in September, 1944, after the guards got drunk and the dogs stopped barking, my mom, my dad, and the other prisoners cut through the barbed wire and ran into the dense woods. My mom was the only woman to escape and she was pregnant with me.

For a brief time my parents were separated, but they found each other again. The Nazi guards were now after them, hunting them with their dogs. My parents could hear the dogs in the distance. They ran into a barn with a huge hayloft and burrowed deep beneath the hay. Soon the Nazis entered the barn, stabbing at the hayloft with their bayonets. My parents stayed silent, hardly taking a breath. Overhead a whirring sound grew louder; Russian planes were flying over. The Nazi guards quickly departed, giving up the chase.

My parents ran north towards Russia. They survived by foraging in the woods until they found abandoned farms where they lived on rotted vegetables and potatoes. When they saw a Russian train carrying soldiers west, they climbed into an empty car, hoping the train would carry them home. Finally free, my parents were determined to head for their home in Vilna, which was now occupied by the Russians.

When they arrived in Vilna, my mom saw curtains blowing in the window of her old home. She knocked on the door and found it occupied by the former family housekeeper, who wouldn't let her in to retrieve family photos or mementos.

After surviving camps and being rescued by the Swedish Red Cross, my mother's sister Sonia found her way back to Vilna. Other than Sonia and a few distant cousins, my mom's entire family was murdered. Her little brother, Abrasha, age 10, was murdered in Auschwitz. My grandmother was murdered at Stutthoff, and my grandfather died in a camp in Germany. My dad also lost most of his huge family. A niece survived by hiding with false papers. A half-sister survived the Ponary massacre; when a bullet grazed her head, she fell, faking death. Later she climbed out from under the dead bodies, ran into the woods, and hid at abandoned farmhouses.

My parents journeyed from Vilna to Lodz, Poland, where I was born shortly before the end of the war. After Germany surrendered, my parents brought me to Heidenheim, Germany, which was now under American control. My dad found work as an administrator with the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration assisting refugees in displaced persons camps.

In 1947, my parents and I left for the United States. We sailed from Germany to Boston Harbor, and eventually settled in Skokie, Illinois. My parents were struggling with grief and the onset of what we now diagnose as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, while building a life in a new country. After a few years, my dad purchased the first of his three retail stores. My parents worked together, and my siblings and I were mostly raised by a succession of housekeepers and nannies. I grew up with little supervision, and a great deal of freedom.

In the early years, my parents rarely spoke about their experience during the war. They were trying to shelter us. I sensed that something horrific and unspeakable had happened to my family, and sometimes my imagination ran wild, but I never could have imagined what had actually occurred during that period in history and in their lives.

Information was parceled out in disjointed fragments, without much context, continuity, or chronology. I picked up bits of information by eavesdropping on random conversations between my parents and their friends.

On Sundays, survivors from many European countries, speaking many different languages, would gather at our house to socialize. This remarkable group of souls included shopkeepers, an engineer, entrepreneurs, an actor, a buyer for a major department store, a physician, a physics professor, a mechanic, Jewish partisans and resistance fighters, and a Catholic couple who were in the French resistance. They were a surrogate family, replacing all those immediate and extended family members that had been murdered.

What held this group together was their common history in the war and the Holocaust. They shared experiences, and sometimes played cards, often calmly discussing events that seemed to me, the eavesdropper, almost impossible to believe. And yet they demonstrated a great joy of life, dancing with gusto and laughing often, even through their tears. Sometimes they held dinner parties and dances at hotels in downtown Chicago, where they dressed "to the nines." They raised money for charities that assisted European refugees and bonds for Israel. I was too young to appreciate who they were, this cosmopolitan group of survivors of genocide. But now I see them as heroic.

When I was about 14, I was poking around a kitchen drawer and found a photo of an infant who resembled my sister Esther. The photo had been cracked in hundreds of places, like a piece of old, fine porcelain. I brought the photo to my mom and asked who it was. She grew very quiet, and then told me it was my father's first child, Rosalie, for whom I was named. My dad carried this photo in his shoe throughout the Holocaust. After the war he glued the shattered pieces back together to recreate the face of a child about whom he could not speak. My mother cautioned me never to mention this photo to my father.

Over the years, my parents would refer to the war, disclosing more and more disturbing facts. I also began to ask deeper questions. Sometimes my parents started in the middle of an event and worked backwards; other times they started at the beginning and skipped over essential, but unspeakable details. I would hopelessly try to determine which event came in which order. Eventually I pieced together their story, creating order out of chaos, a process I would continue as an artist.

I began doing art as a toddler, scribbling on the floor until my mom presented me with crayons and paper. She nurtured my passion for art making. Perhaps sensing that there was some dark secret lurking within my family, I sought the beautiful colors of crayons and later paints. Art making was a joy, a place of comfort, peace, meditation, and healing. I was able to insulate myself from that dark cloud which sometimes crept into our family.

Now, along with my lifetime of work as a counselor and therapist, I'm an artist. For the last few decades, I've been working mostly in the medium of collage. I put together bits of fibers, papers, and found objects, which for me are the metaphor of a fragmented history.

In many ways, my creative process is like my experience growing up as a child survivor, and as the child of survivors of genocide; multi-layered as a collage, these fragments and loose threads of information are woven together to create something richly textured and full of complexity.

I am forever grateful to my parents for encouraging my passion for art making. But there were other gifts. From my parents' example I learned to never give up. They showed me I might not be capable of changing my situation, but I could choose how to think and feel about it. I have the power of response. My parents also taught me the importance of compassion and empathy. One day I said I hated geometry and my geometry teacher, and my mom stopped me. She said I shouldn't use the word hate, that hating only creates more of the same. She understood that we reap what we sow.

I speak about the Holocaust today so that we understand what can result from hate and bigotry. I speak for my family members who never had a chance to speak. I speak because it must never happen again.

Words are powerful, but so is silence.

I am an immigrant and a refugee because people believed lies and propaganda, and acted upon them. Because of these lies, the few survivors of my family inherited a legacy of genocide. But hovering over the dark shadow of this legacy was the moral imperative to live life fully and joyfully. Life: the precious gift bestowed upon the surviving members of my family. I do not take any part of it for granted.