GERDA LEDERER

Gravity of the situation

Earnestness is the wellspring of being. Whether its origin lies in a childhood of loss, fear, and uprooting, or in a present of homelessness, solitude, and sentimental reminiscence will always be puzzling and will remain one of the many hidden, unanswerable questions. The gate to life – for many victims of the Holocaust not only a gift, but also a way to access a foreign self, a self they were condemned to consider undisputed fact and which envisaged lifelong isolation in loss and spiritual nomadism. When the sweet soil of home, the first non-human family, suddenly tears open and reveals a ghastly abyss of horror and hatred, an individual needs more time than a human life provides to overcome this deep pain. Gerda Lederer is very earnest. It is almost spooky. But sometimes she becomes sarcastic and sharp-tongued, and you realize how much she loves life and survival.

"I was born in 1926 and spent the first twelve years in Vienna. We lived at Mariahilfer Straße 55. There was this passageway that led to a monastery garden. Our apartment building had windows to the garden. There were these big, beautiful chestnut trees. The apartment was on the third floor, second staircase." Gerda tells her story with an almost uncanny calm. She is so accurate in her details that her sobermindedness and the quiet charisma give away the tidiness of her spirit and body. "My father ran a men's garment shop on the left-hand side of the passageway; my mother was the owner of a glove store on the right-hand side. We were four – my parents, my older sister Lieselotte, and I." Gerda talks as if she was on stage at the Burgtheater. It is the melody of another time, a different time. The sound of a diction that conjures both beauty and melancholy.

"I finished the school year in March, 1938 in Vienna. In September we escaped the city with one small valise each. We had to leave everything behind. The apartment, the car, the businesses. My father had a permit for the journey to France and had bought boarding passes for the voyage to Santo Domingo. So, we got on a train to France and waited in Paris for eleven months. We were eventually told that we would receive the visa to America and fled from Marseille to New York."

When Gerda arrives in America in August, 1939, she is barely thirteen. "Something I want to stress, since I believe there is never enough recognition for it, is the incredible readiness with which friends, relatives and acquaintances helped the refugees in their time of need. So many people reached out to others back then. Somebody got us a furnished apartment in New Jersey. Someone else came to pick us up from the ship. Sometimes I had the feeling that you just put your trust in people who were essentially strangers, a sort of trust that goes beyond the power of imagination. Someone was handed the child of another person to save it from deportation. You suddenly gave your jewelry and all the money you had to a complete stranger." Words of gratitude, humility, and appreciation. From the point of view of a child who had practically no childhood at all.

"I long regarded English as a horrible language. It seemed to me as if someone had butchered French and called the product 'English.' But we learned it fast. We were forced to catch up. We moved from New Jersey to the Bronx. My sister and I ended up in a high school. I was still far too young, but Lieselotte got me to go with a little trick – she was a bit of a fibber. Somebody had told her that you wouldn't learn anything in an American school and that the faster you get through it, the better off you are." In Austria people lovingly called Gerda's big sister "Liese." But with

an English pronunciation, that sounded too much like "lice" and so they changed her nickname to "Lee." "She was cocky. And clever. And she taught me algebra in no time." As it turned out, this mathematical discipline was to play an important role in Gerda's life.

Gerda chooses her words with particular care when she talks about her family. She forms sentences that produce unconditional love and respect. They bear witness to how vital trust and confidence in your loved ones must have been. "My father was a loving, good-hearted person. He always wanted what was best for us children. It was a tough time... Even in America certain things remained off-limits to us which others just took as a given." Gerda remembers one particular incident when they were looking for an apartment in America: "My parents wanted to rent an apartment in the Scarsdale District, and when my mother, who was blonde and blue-eyed, found a suitable place, she met with the realtor. The lady offered her to sign the contract on the spot, but my mother wanted my father to inspect the apartment beforehand. When my father – who looked like a regular *Stürmer*-Jew – entered her office, the realtor refused to rent the apartment to him. It was disappointing: out of the frying pan into the fire..." Survival does not immediately represent life and so-called safe havens are not safe from the squalls of unsteadiness: These were insights and disappointments which uprooted people had to stuff into their backpacks which were already heavily laden with psychological traumata.

After graduating from high school, Gerda studied mathematics and physics at New York University. Her day job was at Bell Laboratories in Manhattan's West Village; at night she attended the university lectures. "I supervised a laboratory where batteries were stored. I had to measure values and record the results. I did translations for a while, because the Army found German documents one day and needed summaries in English." As with so many displaced people, Gerda's language was both her safety buoy and her leaky ship. Trapped in the vocabulary and verses of the perpetrators; free in the syllables and sentences of their home. Curse and gift alike. Inner conflicts in their most perfidious manifestation. An ambivalence that gutted its bearers and never truly disappeared from their heads.

Gerda was part of the Austro-American Youth. That was where she met her first husband, Georg from Döbling. "He was about six years older than me, but came to America much later than I did.

First he fled from Vienna to England and then to Australia. After our wedding we moved to the Catskills." The Catskill Mountains are a classic destination for New York vacationers – the region is better-known for its landscape than for its entertainment. "We were drawn to this region for one particular reason: It looks like Austria! Even gentian grows there." As much as outsiders think they know about the scope and tragedy of the fate of uprooted people, it is also upsetting to see the small embers of homesickness and longing make their way through the uprooted thicket. "We lived there for about five years. Then we got a divorce. Oh, how I loved the mountains... But my husband at the time said – not without reason – that life on the countryside has its disadvantages and that we run the risk of raising our children to be country bumpkins."

After their escape from Vienna, Gerda's parents promised each other never to return to Austria. "They always stressed that nothing, absolutely nothing, would ever make them set foot on Austrian soil again. And then, one day, they suddenly packed their suitcases and went back to Vienna. And from that point on, they visited Austria once every year. To my greatest surprise, my father would even have retired and moved to Austria for good to live in an old people's home. My mother, however, was against leaving America, and, of course, without her, he didn't want to move away either. My father never felt as much at home again as he did in Vienna. He never felt as happy again as he had been in Austria."

For a long time, Gerda's father did not want to see the signs of the time. Shortly after their escape from Vienna, he proclaimed that he would never speak any language other than German. Or accept any place other than Vienna as his home. He even denied that people in Austria

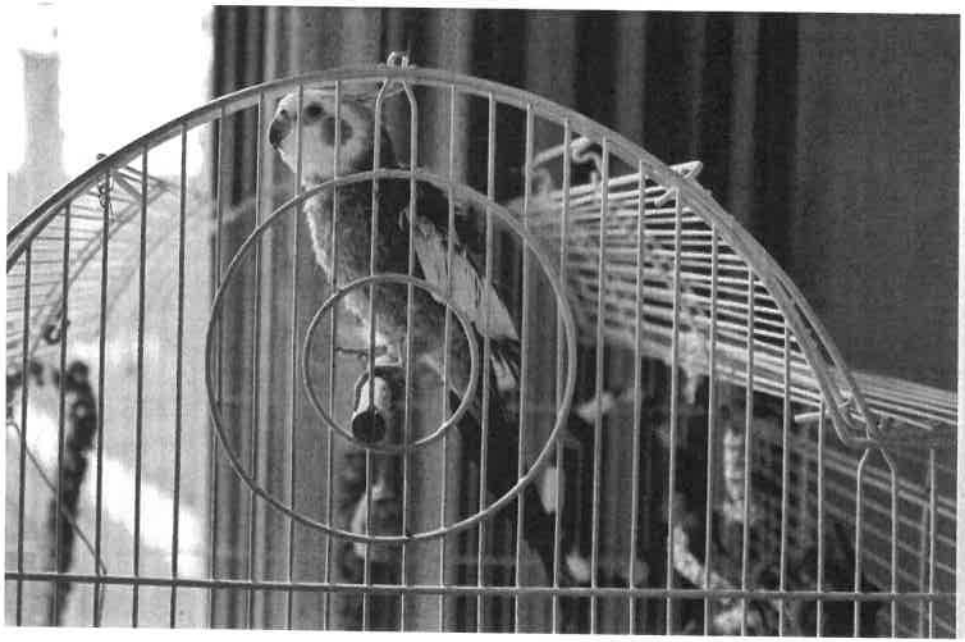
wished him ill. He wanted to stay. At all costs. Until the end. "One day, my fifteen-year-old cousin Ernst came to us with blood in his face and told us that they forced him to wash the street. But, instead of getting down on his knees to do it, he squatted. The man supervising the scene pushed him to the ground and yelled, 'Kneel, you Jewish pig!' Then, Ernst jumped up and slapped the man twice. As a consequence, Ernst was beaten by several overseers, and lay there unconscious for a while. My little cousin Heli had to watch all this from her window and couldn't stop crying." As Gerda's father sees the beaten boy, he understands for the first time how merciless the Nazis were. "If these people are capable of torturing and beating a child, we can't stay here any longer," said my father and started organizing the papers for our departure.

Gerda was an inquisitive, curious child. "On the day before my sis-

ter's first day of school, we took a stroll through the streets of Vienna with our cousin, who was six years old like Lieselotte and was also to begin school the next day. The two girls were so happy and proud, and were incredibly boastful about their situation. They had their lunch-baskets for the ten-o'clock break and were simply intolerable, from my point of view. I wanted to go to school as well – which they knew – but they explained that I was too young for that. 'You're only four and they are six years old,' my mother said. It took me only about two streets to realize – with my intelligent and four-year-old mind – that in two years' time, I would also be six and ready for school. I ran up to my sisters and proudly

said: 'In two years, I am as old as you. So there!' And my cocky sister answered: 'In two years, I will be two years older than you again. So there!' Oh, how I badly wanted to go to school at that time."

When Gerda finally starts elementary school at Gumpendorfer Straße, she quickly falls in love with the German language. "Our teacher for the first three years told us children again and again that he would have been an actor at the Burgtheater. He used the classroom as his private stage. He gave me a lifelong love for the German language. I learned ballads like *Bürgschaft* and *Die Glocke* by heart and with such a passion. I still remember the stanzas. 'Von Dionysos dem Tyrannen kam



Morros der Strolch, er trug im Gewande verborgen den Dolch. Da muss ich schon fragen, wäre es nicht besser, er hätte genommen ein Küchenmesser, da hätt' er im Notfall noch können sagen, ich hab es zum Schleifen wollen tragen. Aber nein, einen Dolch hat der Idiot genommen und wie er vor den Tyrannen gekommen, hat er sich ganz verblödet benommen anstatt sich zu entschuldigen und zu verteidigen, geht er noch her und den Tyrannen beleidigen...' You only remember the unimportant things. You've long forgotten the important things!" Gerda bursts out laughing. An ounce of melancholy mixes with her exhileration about her flood of words. It is the seriousness of survivors that knows that the hand of a smile is always firmly placed in the hand of melancholy.

Gerda is overcome by a feeling of warmth and bliss when she thinks about the Vienna of her childhood days. It is as if a small music box opens, plays a melody, and has small figurines spin in the three-quarter time of a Viennese Waltz and her heart. Again and again. Around and around. Until the music gradually slows and fades. And eventually dies away. Here, the gap opens up, the break in her life – the end of a carefree and happy-go-lucky existence and the beginning of brutality and loss. "We were members of the Vienna Ice Skating Association, and I liked it so much. I watched my parents dance on the ice, in the middle of the rink. They played music on the Sundays and they spun on the ice for hours."

And today – what are some of the feelings and impressions when the mind connects with the former home? "What I find particularly fascinating about Austria is the beautiful nature. I always enjoyed skiing when I was little. I have to admit that a change has occurred within me. Years ago, I did not like Austrians very much, because

they reminded me too much of the political climate of the 1930s. And this attitude hasn't changed in the heads of so many. But in the course of the past seven or eight years, I have softened my views of Austria. Today, I have no negative feelings or mistrust toward it." Some years ago, Gerda participated in the Austrian initiative, *A Letter to the Stars*, in which Austrian students and Holocaust-survivors in New York met in person and which created a platform for dialogue and a mutual exchange of ideas. "I am still writing e-mails to a young man from Salzburg who asked me about my experiences at the time. Some months after our meeting in New York I visited him in Salzburg and spoke at his school."

Gerda barely uses German when she talks to her three daughters from her first marriage. And yet, they understand their parents' mother tongue. "My husband was always very set on having our children visit Austria to get to know the country and its culture. I have mixed feelings about it – Georg does as well. You cannot forgive the people who have done this to you. But forgiving isn't really the challenge here. The descendants of the perpetrators are innocent. That's what you have to understand."

When Gerda and her husband Georg realize that the problems of their relationship are bigger than themselves, they agree to a "trial separation." At the time, Gerda teaches at a school in New York and learns from a newspaper ad that Northern German secondary schools are looking for math teachers. "I had great doubts about going to Germany, of all places. But Georg assured me that Northern Germany, especially, is very liberal and not anti-Semitic at all. And so I accepted a position at Heilwegschule in Hamburg to teach mathematics. I spent the year 1972 in Germany." During that period, Gerda meets her second husband, divorces Georg, and remar-

ries. A German. Non-Jew. Strange. Almost grotesque.

Nobody is born without a family tree. People are products of former generations, which they can lean on in questions of identity. For Jews, these roots are particularly deep – even if religion plays a minor role and orthodoxy, an insignificant one. The invincible Jewish spirit and Jewish tradition have survived. In spite of it all. In spite of the Holocaust. Jews feel a great responsibility toward keeping Jewish traditions alive and passing on the *ésprit* of Jewish thought to the next generations. If the last link in this chain of tradition, lore, and ideology shatters this very chain, sometimes a haze of betrayal is left hanging over the heads of the chosen people.

"My second husband was the perfect proof that prejudices are obsolete. He had a big heart and a great deal of intelligence toward his fellow human beings. He was tolerant, open-minded, and grew up in a different, new Germany. Everything was wonderful with him. All of my Jewish friends and also my parents liked him." It is a testament to one's courage to stand by one's relationship with a non-Jewish German. This step proves that nothing is more powerful than love.

The Austro-American Youth was Gerda's home for many years. "My sister and I were lucky enough to be cared for by our parents. Our mother and father paid the rent and put warm food on the table. Many others, however, arrived in New York all alone at the age of fifteen, and had to find work. There were many, many people in the Austro-American Youth who had to succeed in life with extra courage and proficiency. What connected us all was our common values, the same ideas, the same lack of resources. And being rejected and expelled. The Austro-American Youth – that was our home away from home. We sang together, played dodge ball together, and went on excursions together. The people from the Austro-American Youth were of more use to me than the girls in my high school. They just cared about their hair and the color of their lipstick. But my friends from the Austro-American Youth, they were the ones whose company I really enjoyed, where I felt at home."

Recently, Gerda joined a "language club." "I have a lot of friends who were born in German-speaking countries, but whose ability to speak German almost completely disappeared upon their arrival in America. One day, during a game of tennis, a friend of mine told me about the 'language club,' whose members met once a week in a restaurant and had different mother tongues. French, Spanish, German, Italian, Russian, Chinese, and Hebrew. The group would divide and sit at seven tables, where they would speak the respective language. Every visitor chooses where they want to sit. So I went there and noticed how interesting this concept was. I told all my German-speaking friends about it afterwards, and, lo and behold, all the people I told you about before who did not want to speak a word of German – all these people suddenly came and sat down at the German table. And speak German quite well today." Gerda herself is a member of the "language club" to brush up on her French. "I can already speak German. But the French that I remember from my one year in France is scarce and rusty." Possessing a will to live sometimes means to be in constant motion. Always on the lookout for new challenges. Do not let things come to a standstill. Gerda is one of those survivors who are physically active and intellectually thirsty. Restlessness and dedication seem to be her catalysts; curiosity and thirst for knowledge seem to be the engines.

That Gerda is serious does not mean she has surrendered to the Holocaust. It is more like an awakening to life. Her personality, her essence, her habitus are inseparably tied to her childhood experiences, the expulsion from her country, and her "home away from home." The warm light that used to emanate from her non-human family – the home soil she has come to love – had to expire almost entirely in order for her to rekindle its embers – from far away, from a safe distance. Darkness never occurs entirely, but has always left a few tiny gray windows open. The love for her home and for her life was stronger. And ultimately, triumphed in the duel with darkness.

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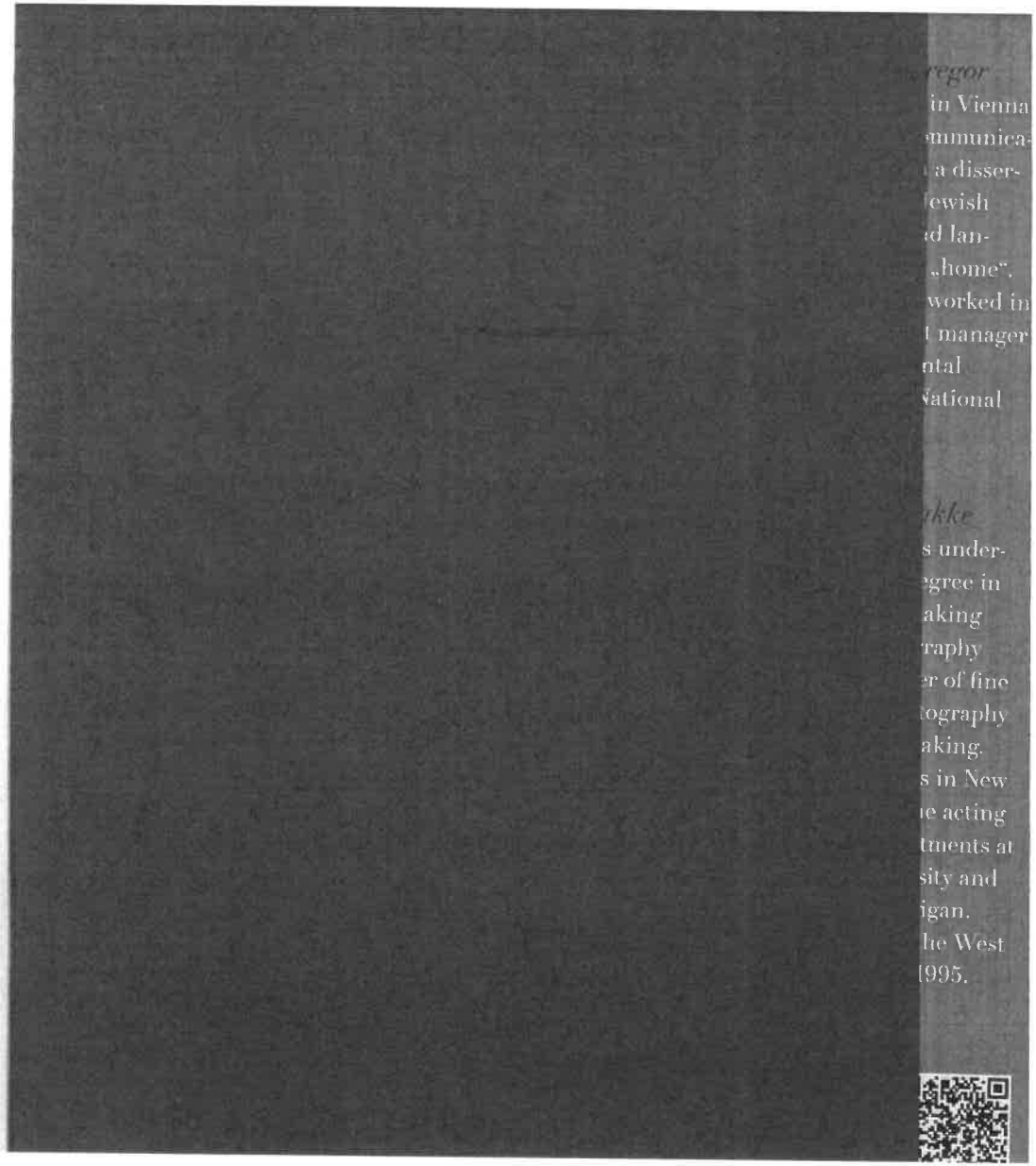

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