



# Return to Washington Heights

by Richard Kalfus

I grew up with the sounds of German/Yiddish accented English. We children of Holocaust survivors, often referred to as “second generation survivors,” were usually amused and frequently embarrassed by the *foreignness* of survivors *as they* translated German sentence structure into English structure. I remember hearing my mother talking on the phone to a friend from her same small, rural town, speaking half sentences in her regional, Mannheim German dialect, but finishing a sentence in perfect English.

Nowhere was this more apparent than in Washington Heights, the home to the largest number of German/Jewish Holocaust survivors in America. Nearly thirty thousand German Jews settled here during and after the Holocaust creating a unique community where they preserved their Jewish identity, while at the same time feeling grateful to call themselves Americans.<sup>1</sup> My parents were among them. They were not orthodox Jews in a neighborhood of many observant Jews; I would watch them, and “being a real American teenager,” I saw them as Jews who were out of touch with the *real* world. Those orthodox German Jews seemed to have transported with them religious customs and rituals of a time when Jews lived in isolated ghettos. At the same time, I was acutely aware that it was their (our) Jewishness which marked them/us in Nazi occupied Europe as enemies. I became sadly aware of this quite often in the neighborhood, in a subway or bus, I noticed the tattooed numbers of an Auschwitz survivor on their arm. When quite young, I would hear the whispered voice of my mother, “don’t stare.”

My parents spoke very little of their loss of family and community. I learned little directly from them, but felt their pain on a daily basis. I learned later in life that they simply wanted to protect me from

<sup>1</sup> Ogilvie, Sarah; Miller, Scott. *Refuge Denied: The St. Louis Passengers and the Holocaust*. University of Wisconsin Press., 2006. 76.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Celan. <http://poemhunter.com/poem/fugue-of-death>

what they never would forget: parents murdered in a French Nazi concentration camp, a brother's young wife and young children dying in a cattle car on the road to Auschwitz. But they couldn't always keep those horrific images locked away inside. They had experienced evil to such a degree that keeping consistent silence from their son was impossible. As I grew older, perfected the German I had heard at home, learned to read and write in German, and then studied the Holocaust in college seminars, it seemed I was destined (happily so) to a 40-year career as a college professor teaching both German and Holocaust/Genocide studies. Some friends would point out that this was not a "healthy combination."

Having studied the Holocaust, not only in relationship to my upbringing, but also extensively in graduate programs in the United States and in seminars with research grants in Germany, Poland and Israel, I soon realized that I needed a different form and vocabulary to express the Holocaust experience. This certainly was not unique. The poetry of Poet Paul Celan touched me deeply. This tortured genius of a poet distorted everyday language and form to express the brutality, the sadism of Nazi guards and the suffering of the incarcerated Jews ("*black milk of daybreak we drink it at sundown/we drink it at noon in the morning we drink it at night/we drink and we drink.*")<sup>2</sup>

I was also intimidated by Theodore Adorno's frequently quoted condemnation of Holocaust poetry: "To write poetry after the Holocaust is obscene."<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that this quote, so frequently cited, was not to be viewed, according to Adorno, as, in itself not the definite answer to the limitation of poetry when writing a Holocaust poem. I took heart in Adorno's qualifying statement on Holocaust poetry:

Perennial suffering has as much right to expression  
As a tortured man has the right to scream; hence it  
May have been wrong to say that after the Holocaust  
You could no longer write poems. But it is not wrong  
To raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz  
You could go on living.<sup>4</sup>

Adorno touches on a central theme of the Holocaust poet to recognize that however individuals may have survived, they will forever be plagued with guilt—a guilt which will be like a festering wound never completely healed. Such a thought brings to mind the writers and poets such as my revered poet, Paul Celan, whose suffering was channeled into great literature. The list is long and includes, Kafka, Primo Levi, Jean Amery and many other creative literary giants. Guilt tainted the soul and remained a permanent fabric of their lives.<sup>4</sup>

In an essay by writer/poet Jane Hirshfeld, she writes, "I discovered support for finding a passionate voice in writing poetry." One reason to write a poem is to flush from the deep thickets of the self some thought, feeling, comprehension, question, music, you didn't know it was in you, or in the world.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Hirshfeld, Jane. "Why Write Poetry?" <http://www.PsychologyToday.com/blog/one-true-thing/> 2, 3

<sup>4</sup> Oard, Brian. <http://mindfulpleasures.blogspot.com/2011/03/poetry-after-auschwitz-what-adorno.html>. 1-9

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, pp 110.

I began writing poetry in an attempt to give expression to the feelings I felt for the suffering my parents endured like many thousands of others. I was haunted by the pictures I saw and the eyewitness accounts I read over the years: Gerda Weisman Klein, rescued by a German-American soldier (her future husband) who found an 80-pound skeleton; and the dying Jewish concentration camp inmates who stuffed their emaciated bodies with any food they could get into their mouths at liberation. I felt a powerful connection with lives of these victims. I experienced a mirror of my own face, and I wrote the following poem:

### **An American Son**

“Dad you gobble up your food  
Like a vulture eating his prey.”

How can I invite Tommy for dinner  
when you eat like this?  
I was thirteen at the time—a sensitive boy  
who knew nothing of what my father endured  
at the hands of the Nazis.

Why was I kept in the dark  
about the darkest chapter  
in the life of a father I loved?

It was my American-born mother  
who understood him so well.  
She knew his fear  
in giving voice to the past  
and burdening his American son.

So he kept the years of suffering  
of a family lost  
to himself.  
It was years later when I learned  
that by protecting me  
he was protecting himself  
in order to live on the present  
and not in the past.

The following poem is dedicated to my return to Washington Heights, New York City, the home of my youth. It is a reflection on the premise that, regardless of how far one has traveled away from the experiences—both good and bad—of one’s youth, the past experiences remain solidly in the present. This is, in my case, revisiting my family’s and my own painful Holocaust past.

## Return to Washington Heights

Is it self-indulgence to think  
our personal life-stories  
have relevance for others?  
Are we perhaps only healing ourselves  
when we reach into the reservoir  
of the past?  
Can we speak to others about events  
that have special meaning  
only for us?

So it is when I reach into my Holocaust past,  
*marked* forever by these events.

Nowhere is this more evident  
than in Washington Heights,  
Manhattan's upper west side neighborhood  
where the largest number of German Jewish Holocaust  
survivors in America lived and tried to rebuild their lives  
while never forgetting the loved ones left.  
Is it guilt that hovers over their lives?  
I have returned to Washington Heights  
to the streets of 22 years ago.  
I marvel again at the beauty of Fort Tryon Park  
majestically overlooking the splendid Hudson River.  
I hear German accented English and, as in my childhood,  
am struck by the humor of New York Jews,  
mixing Americanisms with German regionalism.  
(The Mannheim German is so very different from that of the Berliner.)

I see 80 year-old Mrs. Dingfelder raised in a Black Forest farm village,  
sitting, in in a lawn chair,  
in front of her 6 floor apartment building  
quite lost. (Memories of the trauma of the past or simply old age?)  
I hear ghetto blasters marching in front of her.  
There goes Mr. Marks entering the Kosher bakery.  
I don't need to go inside to know what he is ordering:  
the family's braided Chale for the Sabbath.  
I continue to be touched by orthodox Mr. Simon  
walking to Saturday services,  
without money and with his apartment keys hanging from his belt.

On Friday services, I stand with others and chant the Kaddish.  
I—for the grandparents who died in Gurs, a French Nazi Concentration Camp.

I—for the Communist uncle shot in the streets of Karlsruhe by Nazi thugs.  
I for the Polish uncle, sister-in-law and their two young children  
who died in a cattle car on the road to Auschwitz.

I finally *enter* the memory of our old apartment  
with a view of the majestic George Washington Bridge,  
a symbol of the freedom America accorded my parents and me as their son  
who could live, without the threat of starvation, isolation and gas chambers.

I am home . . . and yet a home never quite released from memories of those Jewish  
immigrants, torn from their comfortable Jewish/German lives  
faced with the challenge of rebuilding lives in New York's Washington Heights  
and raising a son with only them as a connection to family lost.

It is by now quite clear to the reader that by taking the initiative in recapturing the past through poetry, a new world has opened up through the creative power of the poetic word. I make no claim of being a gifted poet (to be sure, a novice one at best), but I do know that I have gained insight into the “reach of the Holocaust” touching the soul of all of us—survivor, second generation survivor, and anyone recognizing the long-term destructive influence of an event which diminishes the humanity of all when racism, in every manifestation, denies the rights granted to others.

Of the many images I have described, it is the one of Mrs. Dingfelder which touches me most. Let us listen to the words of another survivor, Ilse Marcus. She was a young girl on the ill-fated SS St. Louis turned away both from the shores of Havana, Cuba, and then the Florida coast. The ship returned to Europe and the passengers were dispersed among allied countries of Holland, England, Belgium, and Switzerland. Many survived the war, but not all. Mrs. Marcus lost her entire family and she, having survived Auschwitz, immigrated to New York City and settled in Washington Heights. Her words are a final testimony of how the Holocaust past remains for many a constant reality of un-paralleled loss wherever they may have settled.

In an interview in her apartment with Miller and Ogilvie, authors of *Refuge Denied*, an amazing long term study of the passengers from the SS St Louis. Mrs. Marcus told them:

“Don’t be deceived by the pleasant view,” she says to Sarah and Scott, waving in the direction of the trees. “When I sit in my chair by the window, this is not what I see, these pretty green things. I only see the faces of my family. I have been in this apartment for more than fifty years, and every single night I have sat in that chair and gone over and over again in my mind the events of the past. I am filled with guilt. . . . In that chair, I sit and worry over all the *whys, if onlys and what ifs of my life.*”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> An American Son. Submitted for review. <http://www.poemandpetryblog.com>

In commenting on the few photographs scattered about the room, Mrs. Marcus says, “All the pictures are of my family . . . all of them were killed. I surround myself with the dead. Their story is my story.”



Kalfus as a boy

And my story could never serve as a comparison to Mrs. Marcus' life, filled only with the guilt of survival and the loss of everyone dear to her. And yet I had the need to share with the reader this poem of a past childhood in a world where the Holocaust of the past was, alas, an integral part of my growing-up years—and far beyond.