Memoirs of Holocaust Survivors Residing in South Florida

The Quest to Being

Holocaust Survivor Judy Rodan's Memoir

As told to Bobbi Kaufman

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Published by
The Sue and Leonard Miller Center for Contemporary Judaic Studies
and The George Feldenkreis Program in Judaic Studies

The George Feldenkreis Program in Judaic Studies
College of Arts & Sciences
University of Miami

University of Miami
The Sue and Leonard Miller Center for Contemporary Judaic Studies

University of Miami

Miami, Florida 2024

The information in this book is presented in good faith. The words in this book are the words of Judy Rodan as she recalled her personal experience in the Holocaust. This is her story and her truth.

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Proofreading by Linda Wank and Betsy McCormack
On the cover: Judy Rodan with her mother, grandmother, father, and brother. c. 1941.
Printed in the United States of America

FOREWARD

"For the survivor who chooses to testify, it is clear: his duty is to bear witness for the dead and for the living. He has no right to deprive future generations of a past that belongs to our collective memory. To forget would be not only dangerous but offensive; to forget the dead would be akin to killing them a second time.…

"... I have tried to keep memory alive…I have tried to fight those who would forget. Because if we forget we are guilty, we are accomplices."

- Elie Wiesel

As time goes on, the number of Holocaust survivors alive today is rapidly dwindling. With their passing, the incomprehensible cataclysm known as The Holocaust, or Shoah, is fast morphing from a 'lived memory' into a 'historical memory'; from a personal experience of 'those who were there' into impersonal commemorative monuments and museums.

All too soon, there will be no one left to offer first hand testimony of what it was like to actually be there when all hell broke loose; all too soon, even those who knew and heard directly from the victims of the Nazis and their collaborators, will be gone.

It is, therefore, a matter of great urgency that we gather and preserve for future generations as much primary documentation and testimony as possible about the lives and experiences of those heroes who survived the Holocaust, managed to build new lives, and were willing to tell their stories.

Memoirs serve as a very important means of preserving these testimonies. Several years ago, Holocaust survivors began approaching Bobbi Kaufman, asking for help writing their memoirs, describing their lives before, during, and since the Holocaust. She began working with the Holocaust Memorial Miami Beach (HMMB), writing the memoirs of Holocaust survivors who were docents and contributors to the memorial. This collaboration was instrumental in her developing a series of in-depth, book-length memoirs. Six books were completed and uploaded onto the HMMB website and the HMMB created lesson plans for each book to be used in teaching about the Holocaust.

Now, in collaboration with the HMMB, the Sue and Leonard Miller Center for Contemporary Judaic Studies, and the George Feldenkreis Program in Judaic Studies of the University of Miami, the series has been named Memoirs of Holocaust Survivors Residing in Florida. The existing books were graphically redesigned and several new books have been added to the collection, with the objective of continuing to expand the series. The complete series will be freely available to the public in digital form on the HMMB and Miller Center and Feldenkreis Program websites.

Our hope is that this series will make a significant contribution to the growing literature of Holocaust survivors' memoirs and serve as a tribute to their ability to make new lives for themselves while never forgetting.

Dr. Haim Shaked
Director, The Miller Center and Feldenkreis Program
University of Miami

DEDICATION

To the many people who risked their own lives to save mine during the Holocaust. I am forever grateful for your love and kindness.

- Judy Rodan

MY CHILDHOOD

I was born May 1, 1938, in Berehove, Czechoslovakia. I became an orphan when I was six years old.

My childhood home was a happy home. It was just me, my mother, and my little brother, Lacika, who was three years younger than I was. There was a sister named Eva who died at age four. She died before I was born.

In 1942 when I was four years old my father was drafted into the army. He disappeared from our house and never returned. My mother always believed he was alive because postcards from him kept coming. There was just a message, "I'm fine. See you soon." That was it. They were not postmarked so she never knew where he was stationed or where the postcards came from. I can't remember my father at all.

I understood that my father was missing because my mother kept talking about him, showing us pictures of him with the violin he played. I have no recollection of my father except somehow I remember the music—him on the violin and my mother on the piano. They played Vivaldi. They had an ensemble and played for all their friends. There were always friends coming and going in our home. Our home was filled with music, friends, and singing, but my mother was always waiting for her husband to come home.

I lived with my mother in a house on one side of my grandmother's barrel factory and my grandmother lived on the other side of the factory. My grandmother's house was much bigger than ours. Her husband renovated it in the 1920's and made it very modern. Our house was smaller but we had beautiful furniture, paintings, rugs, and a grand piano. I remember my mother sitting me at the piano and wanting me to play the scales.

My grandmother and her brother inherited the barrel factory equally. Her brother was always angry that he had to have a woman as his partner. My grandmother was the heart and soul of the company. They manufactured wooden barrels which were very popular, very necessary. At that time there was no corrugated cardboard or plastic drums so everything was stored in wood. In 1929, 1930 when the Depression hit Europe and the factory was not doing well, my grandmother decided to open a carpentry shop to make some money. She would invite carpenters to bring in their wood and work in the factory using her machines. The factory was located near the forest which provided the wood, and near the railroad which was convenient for shipping the barrels. The factory had over 300 employees. My grandmother would often travel to Budapest to meet with lawyers and government officials.

On each side of the factory were small homes for the factory workers and their families. There was a school, a dispensary with medication, a nurse, and professionals to take care of the people. The workers' houses were individual houses, small houses but they each had a kitchen and an

indoor bathroom that was unusual at that time. It was the husbands who worked in the factory—very few women worked there.

We had to walk past the factory when we went to and from my grandmother's house every day so the factory workers' children became our friends. I must have had Jewish friends, but I don't remember them. I remember the worker's friends because their food was delicious! My brother and I would go to their houses and eat the stuffed cabbage, the *kopusta*, and whatever other *hazarei* they had. My grandmother was an orthodox Jew. She was very kosher. I never knew why her house had two kitchens but then I figured it out: one was for dairy and one was for meat. I don't think my mother was that religious but I am sure she kept a kosher home. Workers' cooking was not like Kosher cooking—it was different and we liked it! We would come home for lunch, it was always lunch—dinner was small—and we wouldn't eat. My mother would ask, "Why don't you eat?" My little brother who told everything said, "This is not as good as over there."

Actually, my mother was a great cook. She made delicious pastries and cakes and cheese danish that I liked. My mother put on weight but at that time weight was good. If you were thin it was considered not healthy. My grandmother was diabetic. She did her own insulin injections. I don't remember her diet, but I do remember she said she had to eat butter for her diabetes. At that time they ate fat for diabetes.

My grandmother took care that we were always very well dressed. My mother, little brother, and I would go on the train to Budapest with my grandmother. There was a store we would go to on each trip where these ladies took our measurements to make our clothes. I don't remember any clothing ever being bought in a store; everything was made for us in that shop. The custom was to dress the children, boys and girls, in the same style. I had a navy blue skirt with a white blouse and a jacket over it and my brother had a navy blue pair of pants with a white shirt and a jacket over it. There was a hat for each of us. Being in Budapest was fun. We went to lots of different places, to parks and to the Danube River. We went for ice cream and to the cafe houses. There was an outdoor children's theater in the summer. My grandmother would always buy us toys and dolls. Lacika, who was this mischievous, raucous child, really, really massacred my dolls!

My brother and I played all kinds of games. We would pretend he was a horse and I would be an elephant and we would act it out. Sometimes he would be the doctor and I would be the sick one. I remember one evening on a walk in the park my brother and I walked behind my mother and her friends and we jumped on their shadows. My little brother was an adorable, loving child. He was everybody's favorite. He was the love and the joy of the entire factory—my grandmother's factory. The workers at the factory taught him all the dirty words and he would repeat them. (My uncle Eugene would also teach him

those words.) He was a very, very loving child, but he had stories. He would run in all disheveled, dirty, wet and would say, "I just saw a big monster out there! It was so big with three heads!" My mother would sit him down and tell him, "You know, my dear, we only have need for one head. Nobody needs three heads. Maybe there was too much sun and you saw it that way. Tell the truth. Always tell the truth." And to me that was very important—the truth. So when I had to tell my assumed name and all the names of my assumed family I had butterflies in my stomach because I wasn't telling the truth as my mother instructed us.

My grandmother's maiden name was Berta Reisman. She was first married to a man named Adolph Stark. They had one child, my mother, Elizabeth. Stark was a soldier in World War I. He died either in that war or from the Spanish flu. Berta then married Nicolas Neufeld a widower with two children of his own—Aranka and Tibor. They are my mother's step-siblings. Berta then had two children with Neufeld—Eugene and Zsuszi. Nicolas Neufeld died very young. My grandmother was widowed two times before the World War II. I understand that my mother was a bit difficult at a young age and so was sent to finishing school in Switzerland. Perhaps my mother was sent to Switzerland because my grandmother was trying to start a new life with her second husband.

My uncle Eugene was born in 1923 or '24. When he was 19 or 20 he was a young, good-looking guy. Eugene was everybody's love. He was the kind of man that when he walked into a room everybody stood up to hug him because he emanated all that love. Ida was his girlfriend. One day Ida, a beautiful actress, came to visit him and fell asleep on the couch. My grandmother saw this beautiful girl on the couch and made Eugene promise never to marry her. "For my son it is not good to have an actress for a wife." And he swore never to marry her. He did not marry Ida because he adored his mother and he swore to her. Eugene loved Ida and their lives were probably connected until his death.

MY FATHER

All I know about my father is information I picked up over the years. I did not speak about my family and nobody spoke to me about my family for 50 years, maybe more. The only way I know anything about my family is because my younger son said, "Mom, you've got to have family! It is impossible that you shouldn't have any. That you only have one aunt and uncle left—impossible!" In the 1990's he found one of my father's brothers. This uncle knew very little about the family but I did learn a bit about my father from him.

I learned that my father was one of seven brothers. His name was Ludwig Lebovic. My name at birth was Lebovic, but I would never know the correct spelling because at age six my name was changed. His mother's maiden name was Lowenkopf. My father's parents were very intent on educating their children. They sent my father to study agronomy (farming) at the Sorbonne in Paris. As a young man he loved Paris. When he finished his studies in five years he forgot to go home! So they sent another brother to fetch him, but he also liked Paris and stayed. There was another friend there and the three of them had a wild time. There are all kinds of stories about his stay in Paris. Then it was finally time to go home. The parents had a rule: Each child when he graduates is given a home on their land and is expected to work the land, farm it. Agronomy.

I learned more about my father many years later on a trip to Israel with my husband when I met a first cousin named Angela. My aunt Zsuszi had put an ad in the newspaper in Israel, "Who is alive here from my family, the Lebovic family?" The woman who answered the ad turned out to be Angela Weiss who was not only my first cousin, but also Zsuszi's best friend at school. Angela is my cousin on my father's side and Zsuszi is my aunt on my mother's side. Angela was so loving and kind on our first meeting that I was overwhelmed—family! Angela is a radiologist and her husband was a director at Hapoalim Bank.

As we sat and talked Angela told me that her favorite uncle, of all the uncles she had, was my father because when he was in Paris he would send her gifts for every birthday. She said, "On one birthday—imagine in Czechoslovakia receiving a big box and when I opened it it was a Limoges tea and coffee set. Cups, little tiny doll cups, and in each cup was a bonbon!" She said she never received a gift like that in her life. She said her husband could give her diamonds and it would not mean anything like those bonbons in the Limoges cups.

MY PARENTS MEET

Zsuszi and Angela had been friends in school. When my father returned from Paris, Zsuszi and Angela who were nine and eleven years year old, decided that Angela's uncle and Zsuszi's sister, Elizabeth who would become my mother, should get married. The wanted to make a *shidduch*. They didn't say anything to Elizabeth because she was busy with her music. They told my future father about this beautiful woman, she plays the piano and you play the violin, so you can give concerts…. He was not interested in meeting anybody. But, they insisted so much that finally, to get them out of his hair, he said, "Okay, let's go." They said, "No. You have to get an appointment. You have to be dressed. You have to buy flowers. You have to buy chocolates like the bonbons you sent me." He said he would not do anything like that but they insisted so much he finally washed up and got dressed. Angela tells me, "Your father was walking very fast. We had to practically run after him. We stayed in back of him to make sure he got there. We picked a little bunch of flowers on the way. They met and we stuck around to see how long he would stay. We said to one another, "If he comes out real quick—no good. But if he stays awhile—that's good." It became a romance and they married.

When they married they had to go live in the farmhouse my father was given by his parents and work the land. This was not my mother's cup of tea. She was a city girl, she was a traveler. But she had to go. Angela told me that in order

to move to the farmhouse my mother said she wouldn't go without her piano. The piano was black, a grand piano, likely a Steinway. It would not fit through the farmhouse door so they had to take the roof off the house, lift the piano, put it in the house, and then put the roof back on. But she had her piano. I remember sitting under that piano and feeling the vibrations.

There was a terrible accident on the farm before I was born. My four year old sister Eva fell into a tub of boiling water and died of third degree burns. Probably my mother was so traumatized that they left the farm and moved to the city. My father may have commuted to work on the farm.

We never learned where my father was after he was called up for the army in 1942. I believe he may have had typhus and was in a hospital on the border between Czechoslovakia and Russia. Either the Russians or the Germans set fire to that hospital. Whether my father died in that hospital or in battle, I am not sure.

MY GRANDMOTHER SENDS THE CHILDREN TO SAFETY

My grandmother wanted to send her children away for safety. We had a relative, Aunt Rose, who was living in Far Rockaway, New York. I believe she must have been a sister of Nicolas Neufeld. She and my grandmother corresponded. When Rose wrote to Berta in a letter, "Send

me the young ones who want to come to the United States. I will take care of them," the only one who wanted to go was Aranka. Her brother, Tibor, did not want to go. Aranka was eighteen years old. She was a real orphan; she lost her mother at childbirth and then her father, Nicolas Neufeld, died very young. Even though Aranka was the only one who went to the United States, this relative could not take care of her. I don't know why. So Aranka went to work as a maid for the first year in the United States until she learned some English. Aranka's life in the United States was not a cup of tea at first. She got together with a man named Frank Ray whom she met on the boat on the way to the United States and he invited her to go to Detroit, Michigan. They married and had two daughters.

My grandmother sent her younger children, Zsuszi and Eugene, into hiding in Budapest. She wanted to send my mother, my brother, and me away, too, but my mother would not leave—she was waiting for her husband to come home. So my grandmother made arrangements to send me to safety. I knew nothing of the plan.

I remember looking out the window from my grandmother's living room out across the patio where my brother and I would play, and seeing a group of men standing in a row. The men were dressed in suits and hats; I am sure they were Jews. On the ground behind each of them were piles, bundles, of shiny things. The bundles were shining in the sunlight. I didn't know then what the shiny things were, but later on I figured they must have been the jewelry and other valuables the Jews were ordered to give to the

Germans. This was probably the day that I was parted from my family.

I AM TAKEN FROM MY HOME

My grandmother had a Christian friend named Mrs. Varjas. Mrs. Varjas's husband was the foreman at my grandmother's barrel factory in Berehove. Mrs. Varjas lived in Budapest but would often come to see her husband in Berehove. During these visits she became very good friends with my grandmother. Mr. Varjas may have commuted to Budapest which was probably not more than a three hour train ride. I believe he was called into the army. They had a grown daughter who was married and not living with them.

I believe my grandmother must have chosen Mrs. Varjas to take me to safety. I don't know why Mrs. Varjas accepted the big job of taking care of me, but I did learn, many years later from my aunt Zsuszi that Mrs. Varjas said one time to my grandmother, "Let me take Judy for safekeeping until you can come to Budapest."

The same day I saw the Jewish men lined up outside, Mrs. Varjas came to my grandmother's house to take me to Budapest. My grandmother told me I would be going on the train with Mrs. Varjas. I loved that train. My brother was angry because he liked the train as well. My mother and grandmother told him he was too young to go with me.

My grandmother said to me, "We will come to Budapest tomorrow on the train and will bring all your things. Listen to everything Mrs. Varjas says. Whatever she says you have to be obedient." I was a very obedient six-year-old. Then my mother and grandmother hugged me with their usual hugs.

I left my house with nothing. I think it was springtime going into summer because I was dressed very lightly—I did not have a coat, nothing. No suitcase at all. In retrospect this was not supposed to be fleeing from home, it was to be just a train ride with this lady. There was to be no evidence of a final parting—just like 70 years later when I left Venezuela.

On the way to the train Mrs. Varjas took out a piece of paper and said to me, "You have a different name now." At first I thought it was a game, a pretend game. But it was for real. I was obedient. She instructed me that my name is now Jaydu Katalin. The train station was quite close to my grandmother's house and as we were walking she was telling me and making me repeat my new name, my mother's new name, and my father's new name. Instead of one brother she gave me the names of three brothers. She drilled me on them. Once I was on the train I was Katalin.

I had no papers, no identification. You had to have papers to cross the borders, and I didn't have any. I remember that Mrs. Varjas covered me with something and told

me to lay down and put my head on her lap. When the gendarme came for the tickets he said, "What's that?" And she answered, "Oh, she is a sick child. She was up all night with fever." I was ready to say I'm not sick and I was not up all night because my mother told us never to lie. But I was told by my grandmother to obey, to be obedient to Mrs. Varjas, so I let it go. I didn't understand, but I let it go.

My father.

My mother.

My mother, my brother, my grandmother, me, and my father.
I am the only one to survive the Holocaust.

My uncle Steven Reisman is holding my little brother, Lacika. Lacika was killed in Auschwitz when he was three years old.

My parents.

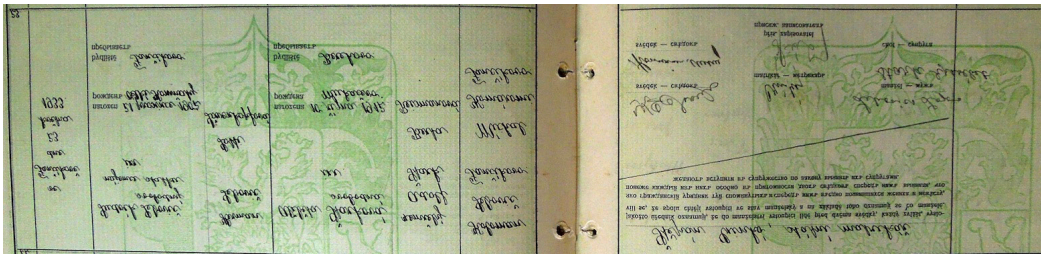
My father, his brother, and a friend from Paris.

My grandmother and my uncle Eugene.

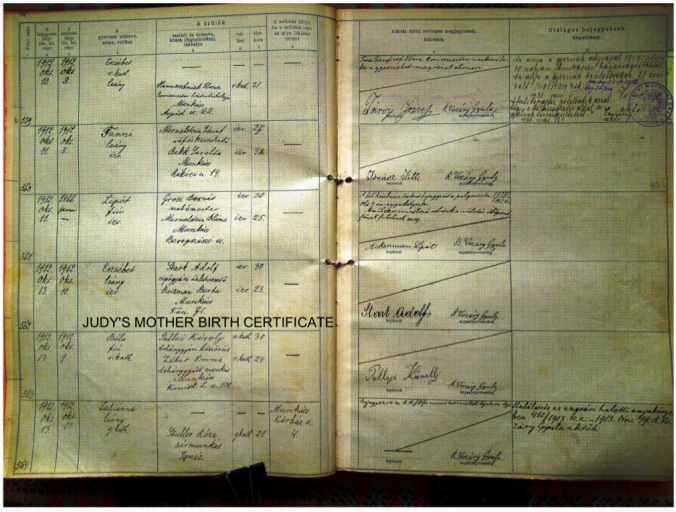
My uncle Eugene, my mother Elizabeth, my grandmother Berta, my aunt Zsuszi. c. 1928.

Tibor, Eugene, Nicolas Neufeld, Aranka, Zsuszi. Tibor was killed in the Holocaust.

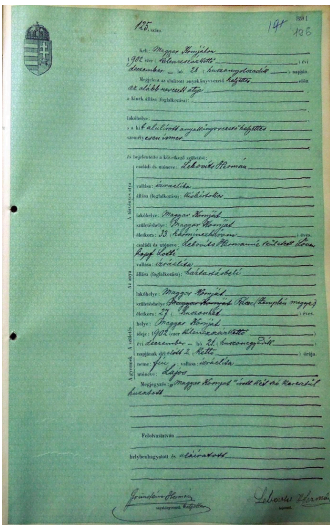
The brick factory that became the second ghetto.



My parents' marriage certificate.



My grandparents' marriage certificate.



My father's birth certificate.

IN HIDING IN BUDAPEST

In Budapest we went to her apartment house. It was a tall, dark brown, brick building with a courtyard in the middle. As we walked through the entrance there was this delicious smell—women were cooking jam in big cauldrons in the courtyard. I remember in Berehove we did the same thing. When fruits were in season in the spring and summer we would start cooking marmalade and putting the fruit away for the winter.

Mrs. Varjas's apartment was on the main floor facing the entrance. She took me down to the basement which I guess was a bomb shelter. The steps were very steep. It was very dark, no windows, no light. This is where I would stay most of the time. Mrs. Varjas would leave me there alone and go upstairs. She would bring down food for me. Every once in a while I would go up to her apartment where she taught me to wash dishes and sweep and mop the floor. She had one bedroom. The few times I slept in her apartment I slept on two chairs she put together as my bed. We would run down to the basement when there was bombing or when there were sirens. I heard sirens many times.

I think she was hiding me. When people came into the basement I was not supposed to talk to anybody. I was just supposed to lay there and be quiet. Mrs. Varjas was a logical, very serious lady. She kept very much to herself. There were no friends around, only her daughter who came to visit. I only saw Mr. Varjas one time, and then I never saw him again.

On several nights Mrs. Varjas would be very, very ill. There was no bathroom in the apartment—there was just some kind of bathroom out in the courtyard. One night, when I was sleeping on the chairs she asked me to help her use the chamberpot. I knew she was in deep pain so I started massaging her legs and feet the way I used to massage my diabetic grandmother's feet. Mrs. Varjas was not sweet and loving like my grandmother, but she did say the massage helped.

I do remember a visit from Eugene's girlfriend, Ida. It is possible that my grandmother had given Mrs. Varjas a package of jewelry and told her that Zsuszi and Eugene were in Budapest and should they need anything she is authorized to give them some of the jewelry. Money was not currency then, only gold and precious stones. Many years later my aunt Zsuszi told me that Ida, Eugene's lover, went to Mrs. Varjas and said Eugene was in trouble, that the Germans had him and she had connections to free him. Mrs. Varjas may have given the jewelry to her to free

Eugene. I did not see any exchange of the jewelry, and I have no idea what the jewels were. I do not know if Ida used the jewels to help save Eugene. I don't think the jewels helped Zsuszi because she spent a year in Auschwitz.

I don't know how long I was at Mrs. Varjas's house. I don't remember what I wore, I don't remember anything Mrs. Varjas had for me. I don't even remember ever having a bath. I was never allowed to go outside. I just know that my mother, grandmother, and little brother did not come for me. My grandmother had promised me they would come to Budapest to meet me but they never came.

My grandmother's house became the first ghetto in Berehove and my family was trapped. When the house and the grounds became too crowded, everyone was moved to a brick factory which was the second ghetto. Everyone in the ghetto was taken to Auschwitz including my mother, brother, grandmother, uncle Tibor, and his wife and children. The way I remember them is with love and caring and kindness. I did not watch them grow sick and suffer; they just disappeared.

THE CONVENT

I'm sure Mrs. Varjas knew the danger she was in by keeping me which is why she decided to take me to the convent. I had started school in Berehove and I loved it. When Mrs. Varjas told me, "Tonight you are going to school and you will stay at that school." I was so happy and excited. I welcomed the change. The convent, *Sacre Coeur*, was part of the Notre Dame d'Sion. It was run by the Catholic Jesuits.

There was no transportation, so we walked. The convent was atop a hill outside of Budapest. The hill seemed like a mountain to me, of course I was very little. It was dark, there were no street lights, only a moon, a full moon. There was the pathway. When we reached the building what I saw was a very tall gate, an iron gate. I believe it was a square gate. When someone opened that gate from the inside the screeching, the noise, was very, very strong. The iron was not lubricated enough in times of war. Two nuns came to greet us. I didn't know what a nun was; I found out later. Dressed in black and with these beautiful white headdresses that shone in the moonlight. The black was all black, but that headdress stood out. I had never seen it before.

They were speaking a language, French, that I was not accustomed to. Although I had no memory of my father, I remembered a few words my father tried to teach my brother and me, French words for greetings and for the food we were eating: *bonjour, comment alley vous, bonsoir,*

simple language, so I realized this is the same language, but not fully understanding anything. Mrs. Varjas said goodbye to me and again I asked, "When are my family coming? Where is my mother? My grandmother?" I was still asking for my father because we were waiting for him. And my little brother—when are they coming?" And she said, "Soon." It was always soon.

She left and the nuns hurriedly took me inside. They closed the gate—again that shrieking noise. The place was very, very dark. What I remember were these dark walls on each side. I didn't see anybody else, just the two nuns and myself. The nuns were carrying these glass flasks and that was the only light.

They took me to a room, made me undress, and give me a new set of clothes, black from the neck all the way down, which I was not used to. My mother dressed me in flowered prints and pastel colors, like little girls were dressed. I had never had anything in black. I was a little upset by that, I was not used to it. The clothes were rough on the skin, not like my mother dressed me. But I was not complaining—I didn't know how.

They kept asking me my name and that is when I remembered Mrs. Varjas practicing with me and making me repeat Katalin. "That is your name. You are Catholic." They didn't ask me about my religion. They just asked me my name. *Nome, nome, name*. And I said, "Katalin." And they said, "Katalin, Katalin!"

They took me to a large room that was also very dark. The only light was from the little flasks the nuns were carrying. I saw a lot of beds. They took me to a little bed and told me to get undressed. I don't remember if I had pajamas, or a nightgown, or what they gave me to sleep in. "Go to sleep. We will meet at five o'clock in the morning." I was thinking, "How will I know when it is five o'clock!" There was a big bell they hit with a stick and everybody got up. All the other girls looked at me and started to speak in French and I couldn't get their French at all. I just said *bonjour, bonjour, bonjour*, because that I knew, I remembered.

They dressed me the second day again. They gave me a red belt to put over the black. I was so happy! Finally a color! Then they gave me a grosgrain ribbon, it was like a necklace, and at the end was a white cross. I had never seen a cross before. They explained to me, with hand gestures, to take care of this because this comes from an elephant's tooth. (Elephant in French was similar to Hungarian so that I understood.) And I loved elephants! I adored that necklace.

We were taken to the church, the chapel. Also very dark. We had to get on our knees to pray. After the prayers we went into this mess hall where we ate. Again we prayed, said grace over the food. I only remember this mush, this thing that later on I figured was oats. I ate it because Mrs. Varjas said that eating oats was going to give me beautiful

skin and beautiful shiny hair. She gave me the same food when she was hiding me. Tasteless completely, colorless completely. I believe it was the unprocessed oats from which they made oatmeal. But it was hot and good to eat.

There were no boys in the convent, just girls. I never counted the girls, I only counted the beds. I was always counting things. I got to 90 some-odd beds. They were top and bottom, just two layers. All the girls slept together. I believe we were similar in age, six or seven years old, but some girls were much taller than I was. I always looked at the length of their hair. I had braids. Most of them did too, but some of the braids were much longer than mine so they must have been older. The nuns did the braiding. Sometimes the braids stayed in for a few days. I don't know if we had lice or not. Probably did. Bathing was not an everyday custom. There was like a tin tub of water you had to step into. They would scrub you down with some kind of harsh thing. I don't remember if everybody got fresh clean water, but probably not. It was cold, it was cold.

The girl who slept in the bed above mine was named Naomi. She may have had asthma; her coughing and wheezing kept me up at night. She was my friend but we never spoke of where we came from; we never spoke about life. Probably her name was not even Naomi—that's what she was told to be called. She may have been Jewish. I'll never know.

Because I couldn't sleep, my favorite activity for the night was to climb under every bed and give like a hit on the mattress that woke up most of the girls. Of course all hell broke loose and the nuns would come in with the lamps and find out it was me who did it. Of course the next morning I would be taken to the Mother Superior's office, and have to take off the red belt and the beautiful necklace. Not only did I have to give up these beautiful things in my life now, I also had to kneel on pebbles in the corner of the Mother Superior's office. Kneeling on the pebbles, stones, really hurt. She would give me a lecture on discipline, on how to behave. I didn't understand much of it because I didn't really understand what I did that was so wrong and why I was given such harsh punishment. I had never been punished at home.

If you did something bad you had to give up that necklace for a week. And if you did something else that same week you had to give up the red belt for a week. After the week I would get them back until I would do something mischievous and would have to give them up again. I never really had the two of them at the same time, anytime that I remember.

The nuns were not caressing, the kind of caressing I got at home. They were strict, they were disciplinarians, and yet there was some sort of kindness in their eyes. I loved to look at their eyes. Somehow they all had these glasses that had no rims. Just a piece of glass. I couldn't imagine why they all had the same glasses.

Sometimes we would hear a siren warning us that motorcycles were coming up the hill. There would be three men on the motorcycle: a driver up front and two in the back. I believe they were Nazi SS. We were supposed to run outside and line up straight at attention. They taught us how to be at attention, in a row, very straight in front of the building. And these men would come out of the vehicle and with a stick they would point at each one in the row. As we were pointed to we had to say our name out loud. One by one. That was a very fearful time for me. One time the Mother Superior appeared when we were lining up to see if the line was straight. Somehow in a bit of confusion she popped a piece of candy in my mouth. Candy in the convent was unheard of, it didn't exist. That candy gave me a sugar rush so I could blurt out my name with no problem. I never noticed if she gave other girls that candy. The Mother Superior carried a little tin box that was beautiful, different colored enamel. And the candies were in there. Later on I saw it on her desk. But I would never dare to ask for a candy.

In the convent children could be seen but not heard. We were not supposed to ask questions. We were not supposed to ask for anything. We were just supposed to listen. We couldn't talk much amongst each other either, just basics. We could answer the questions in school. But only answer the questions, not ask them.

I learned how to read and write. They drilled us on arithmetic. That's about all. We would draw. When we finished a whole page of writing, proper writing, at the end we would draw a little picture at the bottom of the page. There were no colors

there, just black and white. But I remembered crayons from home. Our only exercise in the convent was climbing trees. We never left the convent, there was no going out at all. We were not to be noticed.

At first everything was very foreign to me. But I got used to it and I started to feel solace and peace. I felt protected there. Yes, I felt alone and I was anticipating the day I would meet my family again. That was my dream.

A lot of people came to the Mass on Sundays. I believe they were the families of the other girls. I never had anybody come for me. The nuns taught me how to sing on stage, how to say poems on stage, how to dance on stage. When we finished the pageant we put on each week all the girls would go off stage and be with their families. Since I had no one to stay with, the nuns kept me up on the stage and they kept me singing and dancing and saying poems. I could never figure out why I had to stay alone on the stage.

The other girls didn't like me very much. And I realize why: I heard questions, "Why does she stay on stage and why can't I stay?" They also liked to be on stage. But then the nuns explained, "Their family is here. They have to tend to them." I was jealous of them and they were jealous of me. I am grateful to the nuns because now I can go on any stage and not feel fear.

CONFESSION AND COMMUNION

Soon enough I learned the catechism, and the Catholic prayers which we said three times a day. Of course in French. The nuns were drilling me all the time on how to say them properly. I believe I learned the French language quickly, but I did not have the proper French accent. I learned how to kneel in prayers, I learned how to make the sign of the cross. I learned all the customs of Catholicism.

We went to the chapel three times a day to pray. On Sunday we had Mass. On Sundays we had the visit from a priest, a Catholic priest dressed in that golden gown with that high apostolic hat. He had a very soothing voice. I loved to hear him.

Then the day of the First Communion came. This was a big deal. All the parents would come and there would be hot chocolate. It would be like a feast.

For Communion we wore the same black dress but that day we could take off the big black apron we always wore. The apron covered us completely all around and tied in the back. It was full as a dress but a bit shorter than the dress which was long. Nothing in our hair. Black shoes, black socks. There was a slip under the dress, a full slip. There must have been panties, but I don't remember that.

For Communion we had to make sure we had the necklace with the cross and the red belt that day. That was the difficult part for me because I was always doing something wrong. They reminded us, "Seven days until the Communion, six days until Communion. Behave, because that day you have to have that cross."

We were supposed to write down all our sins on a piece of paper that they gave us and that paper was to be presented to the priest Communion day before he would absolve us. We were shown the confession box which was like a dark brown hut. They said there would be three steps and told me which step I had to kneel on for my height. The priest would come in to the confession box from the other side. I would not be able to see him because there would be a wooden lattice separating us.

The nuns told us we had to write our name on the top right hand of that piece of paper—our name, where we were born, the names of our father and of our mother. I was coached to say a complete lie about all of them. I was taught new names for everyone in my family, I was taught three names of three brothers when I only had one brother. I knew it was a lie, the whole thing was a lie. I cannot write that down. I was taught by my mother not to lie. So the paper is blank. I felt an inner shiver when I heard the footsteps of the priest. They all had wooden shoes; they let you know they were coming with their footsteps. I also heard his *bonjour* and I recognized his voice. This is the priest who came in every Sunday to give us Mass. He was one of my favorite people because he spoke

so beautifully. We could never get near him because he was a man of God. He was in this beautiful gown, glittering. He made a big impression on me.

When he said that *bonjour* I didn't care any more if he was going to ask me my name or that I didn't have anything on that paper. But he did not ask me my name. He asked me, "What's your favorite sport?" Well, it was beautiful. I said, "I like to climb trees." He said, "What?" I said, "I like to climb trees." He said, "What trees?" There was a little window. I said, "That tree." He said, "Go out and climb that tree and then come back and go into church and receive Communion." Of course I ran, climbed that tree, and I felt so good! This man saved me.

THE PIANO

Because my mother was a pianist and wanted me to be a pianist, she had me practice this exercise to open my hands so I could reach the octave. She had me practice it all the time. So, in a moment of leisure in the convent I was doing the exercise. When the nun saw what I was doing and said, "You play the piano?" I said yes. So she took me into a room in the convent and there was a little piano there—not like my mother's grand piano at home. And she gave me the book to play the scales. I was not reading music yet but I remembered Do, Re, Mi, Fa, Sol, La, Ti. So she left me there and told me to practice for one hour. I had no watch. I didn't know what an hour was. In the convent there was a bell to wake up, a bell for breakfast, another bell to pray in the chapel, another

bell to run out and do exercise, another bell to go to school. I had no notion of day, time, or month, nothing.

As I was practicing, not liking it at all—an hour of that is boring—all of a sudden I overheard one of the nuns say to the other, "*Its sort morts,*" which means they are all dead. I started to cry. Those words struck me that it must be my family they are talking about because they never come. They never came. Nobody came. I couldn't ask the nuns questions, it was not allowed. I knew internally what happened to my parents, to my family, but I couldn't say it. So this is why I knew, but I decided, in my childhood fantasy, to believe that someday I would find them. That they have to be somewhere. And of course that didn't happen. For the first time, all the tears just came out. The tears fell on the piano. I started to get very nervous because we had to keep everything very clean, spotless, in the convent, and I didn't have anything to clean the piano with. I never touched a piano again. I never cried except that one time in the convent. And I never cried after. I had inner strength. Now I am a crier, but at that time—no way!

Later on I realized the great risks that the nuns, the priest, and Mrs. Varjas took to save me. All my life I've been very grateful to them. I could not reach out to them from Venezuela after the war because they were behind the iron curtain. But in my thoughts I always say a special thank you to them. Later on, when I was doing well, I tried to reciprocate to all the people who helped me.

LIBERATION

I was in the convent when the war ended. The nuns walked me to the big iron gate. I saw this young girl at the gate—I thought it was my aunt Zsuszi—but I was not sure. I was not sure if the man with her was my uncle Eugene. They were not recognizable to me—neither of them. Zsuszi was very, very thin. No hair. Gaunt looking. Her legs were bruised. I remembered my aunt the way she used to look.

She gave me a hug—a hug I remembered from my mother. Our family had a hug that would hug you and never let you go. That is when I realized it must be Zsuszi. I remembered Uncle Eugene had beautiful dimples, beautiful expressive blue eyes, and a smile on his face all the time—this wasn't the same person. I believe he was bedraggled by the war. We didn't speak the same language. I only spoke French; I had forgotten all my Hungarian or Czech. Eugene did not speak French. I finally recognized him when he hugged me and spoke to me in Hungarian. Then I realized my past.

Zsuszi never spoke about the Holocaust. I did not learn any details about her being in Auschwitz until after her death in 2009. I do not know what happened to Eugene during the war because he never talked about it. He may have been in a labor camp and he may have been in hiding. Ida may have helped him, I don't know. She left Budapest after the war, moved to Montreal, Canada, and married a doctor. I don't know how she survived the war.

I went to live with my uncle Eugene in Budapest. Eugene was living the life of a big shot. He would go out with a whole entourage of friends and I imagine with his girlfriend, Ida. He would dress in a tuxedo to go out to dinners and nightclubs. He hired a maid to take care of me and teach me. I could not be enrolled in school because I had no documents, no papers. At his apartment they could not bring in a bed for me because I did not have documents to be living there. I slept on two chairs put together. The apartment was under Russian control and the concierge was watching who was going in and out.

This picture of my uncle Eugene and me was taken in Europe shortly after liberation.

This picture of me was taken shortly after we arrived in Venezuela. I am holding the doll my new uncle, Leslie Gonda, gave me.

LEAVING EUROPE

After liberation my aunt Zsuszi returned to Budapest where, by chance, she met Leslie Gonda at a mutual friend's house. My aunt Zsuszi fell in love with Leslie Gonda. Leslie was living in Switzerland hoping to make his way to the United States. When a friend showed Zsuszi a picture of Leslie with a girl sitting on his lap, Zsuszi got jealous and angry and married a very nice man named Bandi. That marriage did not last. When Leslie learned from his mother that Zsuszi was divorced, he came for her. They married and went to Switzerland to study. When Zsuszi and Leslie wanted to leave Europe they could not get a visa to the United States so they got a visa to go to Venezuela instead. Zsuszi said, "I cannot leave Europe without Judy. She is living with Eugene—he is a bachelor, he carries on every night! It is no life for my niece." Two years passed until Zsuszi and Leslie were ready to go to Venezuela and to take me with them.

Eugene explained to me that I was to go to Paris where Zsuszi would meet me. So I was sent to Paris—alone. I remember getting on the train in Budapest. As I looked out the train window I saw Eugene with Mrs. Varjas, and they were both crying. I saw him giving her a bunch of red roses. Later on I realized why she was crying—even though she was stern and disciplined me, she had a big heart. She took a big, perilous risk hiding me and caring for me.

I had to cross the border going to France and I had no papers. Leslie had a friend, Geza Salgo who was a football

player who never wanted to study, so he paid Leslie to tutor him. Geza went on the train with me. He was very outgoing. On the train he asked, "Who here has a little daughter?" He found a lady who was traveling alone from Budapest to Paris. On her passport was a picture of her ten-year-old daughter. The daughter's name was Katalin and my assumed name was Katalin, so it matched. A problem was her daughter had light hair and I had dark hair. She agreed to help me. She put a coat over me and told me to lay down on her lap. When the gendarme asked, "Who is that on your lap?" She replied, "Oh, she is sick." Again I was sick—which I was not. That is how I arrived to Paris.

The ship my aunt, uncle, and I took from Le Havre to Venezuela.

When I got to Paris, Zsuszi and Leslie were waiting for me. My new uncle, Leslie Gonda, was so nice to me. He received me with a little doll with a flat head—a little thing I kept forever. Many years later I learned that he told his friends, "I was married for three weeks and all of a sudden I found out that I had a beautiful nine-year-old child I had to take care of!"

We stayed in Paris for four or five days. My aunt who had a good life before the war was all of a sudden very poor. In our pension in Paris she was cooking on a little hot plate under the bed because cooking in the rooms was forbidden. Whatever she cooked tasted so delicious! One morning my aunt woke me up really early saying, "We are leaving, hurry up and get dressed quickly. Wash your face and hands and brush your teeth." (My uncle was a fiend for toothbrushes. He gave me three toothbrushes at a time.)

We went by train to Le Harve. When we got to Le Harve my uncle bought three tickets to sail to Venezuela on the SS *Columbia*. The money for the tickets must have come from his trafficking in cigarettes on the black market. Zsuszi and Leslie had affidavits but I did not have any official papers. They did not tell me at the time that because I had no papers they may have had to leave me behind. But Zsuszi said, "I don't leave without Judy."

In Le Harve we had to find the consul right away. Zsuszi had the name of Angel Corrao, the consul of Venezuela in Le Harve. She had instructions to go to a certain nightclub and look for Angel Corrao where he spent most nights. At the

nightclub we were taken into a little room. In walked Corrao, a big, dark man. I had never seen anyone so dark. He addressed us in French.

For me to travel I needed a *titre de voyage*. My aunt explained, "My husband and I and our niece want to go to Venezuela. She is an orphan." He asked when we wanted to go. She answered, "My husband is already at the pier waiting for us." The ship, the SS *Columbia*, was leaving that day. Corrao called in some guys and gave them instructions, "Open the drawer and bring me the papers that say *titre de voyage*. Go to the second drawer and bring the stamps and the stamp pad. Hurry. Take my car. Hurry!" The men arrived with the papers and the stamps and Corrao started writing. He put my hand and fingers on the ink pad. He did the same for my aunt because she was my representative. The papers were long, legal size, so he folded them five or six times so they became like a booklet. He gave them to my aunt and she fell off her chair. I believe she fainted. Corrao picked her up, called his people, and said, "Let's go to the hospital immediately." My aunt was holding onto those papers for dear life; she wouldn't let them go. She had a bag with her but she did not put them in the bag. I did not then understand the importance of a *titre de voyage*. At the hospital I hear Corrao giving instructions to the doctors, "Stand her up. She has to go on a boat. The boat will sail in two hours." I remember the two hours. The boat was to sail at seven.

Corrao took us to the pier in his car. There I saw a man dressed in white who may have been the captain (I didn't know what a captain was.) Next to him, smiling, was my

uncle Leslie. The ship started to move without us. They put us on a little boat and we caught up with the ship. Somebody dropped a rope ladder. So from that little boat we climbed up; first me then my aunt. On the top was my uncle Leslie. He took my little hand in his big hands. I can never forget that feeling of strength, of security. His smile. From then on I knew that everything was going to be all right.

My uncle Leslie had graduated as an agronomist which is one way we were able to get into Venezuela. The other way we were able to get into Venezuela was by saying we were Catholic.

I had almost nothing with me. I owned two dresses, perhaps some underwear, perhaps some shoes. My mother's step-sister Arnaka had sent care packages to us from Detroit. In one package there was chocolate, sugar, and the two dresses for me. I had the toothbrushes my uncle gave me, but no toothpaste. I felt very free. Very free.

The ship was not a luxury liner; it was a freight carrier. The women slept in one part of the ship and the men in another part. We slept on cots, beds, stacked three high. I was with Zsuszi. She slept in the lower bunk and I slept on top.

All through the trip everybody was sad, unusually sad. I don't know who they were, Jewish or not, but they were all immigrants. Poor people. Some cried. There were no other children. I was the only one. For fourteen days on the ship I entertained the passengers by singing and dancing. I sang only in French. When I was in the convent there were no

boys so the nuns taught me to dance the waltz with a broom as a partner. On the ship I couldn't find a broom but I found a stick and I danced with the stick just like they taught me in the convent. My uncle said I was the highlight of everyone's day.

ARIVING IN VENEZUELA

When I arrived in Venezuela with my aunt and uncle in 1947 I was nine years old. The day after we arrived it was Carnival time. One custom of Carnival is big trucks with loads of candy would drive from street to street and throw candy to all the children. Coming from Europe in war time where candy was impossible to get—when I saw that I fell in love with Venezuela!

At first I lived with my aunt and uncle in a pension, like a bed and breakfast. Shortly after we arrived my aunt and uncle went to live in the interior of the country where he would work as an agronomist. There was no schooling in the interior; for school the kids had to be sent to another town by bus and the schools were not good. So I did not go with them. I was on my own.

SCHOOL IN VENEZUELA

I lived for a short while with a nice couple named Garcia. Zsuszi and Leslie would come to visit me maybe every five or six months. Then I was placed into a convent—a Venezuelan convent, Catholic. Everybody was very nice to me. I learned Spanish there.

The next year, 1948, my aunt Zsuszi got a letter from her step-sister Aranka in Detroit asking, "Why is Judy in a Catholic convent? She is Jewish." So Aranka came to Venezuela and took me to a Jewish school in Caracas. The director at the school, Dr. Gross, spoke to my aunt in French. I had no papers. No questions were asked. I was enrolled in the school. I believe the community paid my tuition. I was happy at the school. I went to synagogue, but it didn't mean much to me. I could read the Hebrew but it always made me very sad. If I could hang out in the courtyard with the other kids I would go.

LIVING WITH THE ROITMAN FAMILY

Now that I was at the Jewish school they placed me to live with a very nice Jewish couple named Johanna and Ihil Roitman who had no children. I called Mrs. Roitman *tante*, aunt, in Spanish. She had a beautiful voice. She taught me Hebrew songs and Yiddish songs. Mrs. Roitman had a brother who had two children. We would spend weekends

at the brother's house. His daughter, Judy Glijansky, was the same age as me. We were born the same month. We became very good friends. We are still friends! Many years later Judy would help me reinstate my American citizenship.

There are different stories of why I left the Roitman house. One story is that they wanted to adopt me but they couldn't because I had family and my family did not agree. The other story I learned from a letter Mrs. Roitman wrote saying she loved me and was very sorry to let me go but when a family came from Romania and they had no place to live she needed to give them my room. For many years I felt guilty that they couldn't adopt me and I had to leave them without a child. When I learned the real cause—they needed my room—I was so relieved! I was so grateful to them and I gave them all the love I could, even after I was married. They eventually adopted a little girl.

LIVING WITH THE KASWAN FAMILY

When I left the Roitmans I went to live with the Kaswan family that was much more fun. They were poor, but they took me in. They had two boys—Eddie and Moises—one about a year and a half older than me and one a year younger. There was a fifteen-year-old daughter, Nora. The mother, Rosa, was a wonderful lady, a widow, a hard worker. Not only did she have three kids, she also had a sick mother, Yente, she was taking care of on her own. She never complained. I tried to help her because the nuns had taught me how to

clean, how to wash dishes, how to wash clothes, how to iron.

While I was living at the Kaswan house one of their relatives from Romania came to visit. She took me to a synagogue that was in a colonial house in the center of Caracas. She was a big woman who spoke only Romanian. She held me to her side all through the prayers but when the rabbi announced that all those who have parents living can leave the room she started leaving the room. I wanted to leave also, but she told me to stay. That is when I first heard the word *Yizkor*. I didn't know what it was until years later. How did this woman know that I had no parents and made me stay to say *Yizkor* for my parents and my family? A mystery.

The younger Kaswan boy, Moises, and I were a team! It was my job to throw water on him to wake him up every morning while the bus was waiting outside. It was fun. The older son, Eddie, became an extraordinary doctor. I remember him always studying, day and night. He was very serious but the other son was playful—always running around, always joking.

I recently had lunch in Miami with Eddie and his wife—more than 70 years after I lived with his family in Venezuela. Eddie said to me, "I knew you were alone when you came to our house and I opened the door and saw this beautiful little girl with very sad eyes…. But what happened to your parents?" I said, "Eddie, you don't know?" I never told anyone. I kept it a secret. I didn't want to say I was an orphan. Whatever Eddie's parents knew they never talked about

it. They respected my silence. Now, at age 86, Eddie is saying to me, "Why did you leave? I cried and I cried when you left." I asked, "Why did you cry?" He said, "Because I wanted to marry you."

I never told anyone I was an orphan, I did not want people to feel sorry for me or think I was 'different.' I always wanted to have friends and be part of the group, so I remained silent about my past.

The reason I left the Kaswan's house is that I had to go to the United States. Unbeknownst to me, my mother's half-sister Arnaka and her husband, Frank Ray, had been trying for five years—from 1947 until 1952— to get me a visa to go to the United States. They had to send all kinds of information to the State Department including IRS forms for ten years to prove they could support me. It was a very thick dossier. They were finally successful and I had to go.

I was thirteen years old when the visa came." I just remember the people I was living with telling me I had to take a plane to the United States. I loved Venezuela and I didn't want to leave. I did not know who I was going to. I only vaguely remembered the name Aranka as the name of the person who sent care packages to us in Budapest after the war. I may not have wanted to go, but I always remembered my grandmother telling me, "Just obey. Follow instructions."

NEW YORK

I had to travel by myself to New York. Zsuszi and Leslie could not come with me. Zsuszi and Leslie knew the American baseball players who practiced in the interior so they asked them, "Please take care of my niece on the plane to New York. She is traveling alone." So the people who took care of me on the eight hour flight from Caracas to New York were the baseball players. They were talking to me in English. They taught me three strikes and you're out, and foul ball… They taught me one word I remember distinctly: *remember*. When I got off the plane in New York all the baseball players were my buddies! My uncle Eugene and his girlfriend, Pearl, met me when I got off the plane. I loved Pearl from the first moment we met. We sat down to eat. I didn't like the food, but I started to eat because he told me to eat. When Eugene started to talk about my mother I said, "I remember." And they exclaimed,"This kid speaks English!"

After the war my uncle Eugene had stayed in Budapest where he had his own manufacturing business. It was going to be taken over by the Russians. His foreman, a good person, warned him in a nightclub, "You have to get out immediately. I have somebody waiting for you to take you by car because tomorrow morning the Russians are going to put you in jail." Eugene said, "Why? I haven't done anything." The foreman said, "They want your factory. Don't go back to your apartment because they are already at your door waiting for you. Come with me and I will take you to

the people who will take you to safety. Get on a boat to get out of here." I understand that my uncle traveled on the boat in the tuxedo he was wearing in the nightclub. Eugene was supposed to get off the boat in Cuba but he did not want to stay in Cuba. When he found out that the boat was sailing to New York he convinced the captain to let him stay on the ship and go to New York. Because he arrived in the United States illegally, Eugene was detained on Ellis Island for nine months. Trying to get him out, Aunt Rose went to Marty Blau, an immigration attorney. There she met Pearl Alterson, a paralegal. Aunt Rose showed Pearl a picture of Eugene. Pearl liked his picture so she agreed to help him. She went to Ellis Island with Rose and when she saw Eugene she fell in love with him. Aunt Rose said to her, "This is the man you have to marry."

When I arrived in New York Eugene was living in a residential hotel. He rented a room for me. I was terribly impressed—a whole room to myself! I arrived in New York with two dresses, a shirt, and a pair of bluejeans someone helped me buy at Sears Roebuck. I was so proud of those bluejeans because they were American! Pearl took me shopping at Gimbels, a department store on Fifth Avenue. They had floors and floors of children's clothes. She bought me a whole new wardrobe. She showed me how to dress, how to comb my hair properly. No make up but a little powder. I was 13 years old in 1952.

DETROIT

My uncle explained that I couldn't stay with him because he was not married. It was not proper for a single man in New York to be taking care of a youngster. So the idea was for me to go to Detroit where Aranka, her husband, and two daughters were waiting for me with love. Eugene took me to Detroit. It was like a party when we arrived. He and his sister Aranka loved each other very much. Eugene went back to New York but promised to visit.

Aranka's family fixed up a little room for me. My uncle Frank decorated it with museum postcards. He was a very cultured man—he wanted me to know the works of art that are in the museums. There was even a flower pot! It was a lovely room.

I did not really have any possessions. All I brought to Detroit were some books in Spanish, the clothes Pearl bought for me, a ring my girlfriend gave me with her initials on it (I kept that forever), and a couple of gifts the Kaswan children gave me: little things like a bracelet. I had a toothbrush, some notebooks and pencils. I did not have a hairbrush but I did have a little comb. Living in so many different places sometimes I had my own space and my own things and sometimes I didn't. It depended on the family.

I went to school in Detroit, the Durfee school. They put me in a lower grade until I mastered English and then they put me in my proper grade. I played sports—I joined the baseball team because I knew all the baseball terminology! I had a chance to work a couple of hours a day after school. I really liked working. First I worked in an office and then in a candy store. The candy store sold candy but they also had short-order cooking—hotdogs, hamburgers, sandwiches. It was right across the street from the school and all the kids would meet at that candy store after school. There was a juke box and we would all dance to it. It was a party with friends every day. It was great.

Aranka had two daughters, Evelyn and Alice. Alice was three years younger than me and Evelyn was three years younger than Alice. When I asked them what they knew about our grandparents they knew absolutely nothing! Aranka was completely mum about the family. Uncle Frank must have gone through some things also, but he never spoke of the past.

Aunt Rose Goldstein invited Evelyn, Alice, and me to spend the summer with her at Far Rockaway Beach. Aunt Rose and her sister Berta were very industrious. They taught us how to embroider and how to crochet. They had a knitting store on the beach where all the women would meet and have coffee and learn how to knit. We had a great time there.

Aunt Rose was very perceptive. She realized that three girls together when two were sisters and one was a foreigner—that was not good. Aunt Rose explained that Aranka already has two daughters and Eugene and Pearl have no children. She knew that Eugene was a diabetic and would have difficulty in creating a family. So she decided that I should go live with Eugene and Pearl. Eugene called me and said, "Aunt Rose says you have to come back to New York and live with me and Pearl because now we are married and we are allowed to have you. Are you willing?" Of course I jumped at the idea at first. I was thrilled because I loved Eugene, but then I cried all night before the flight because I loved these people, too. When I saw my aunt Aranka cry I felt so bad. But I went. It was one more going to another place.

NEW YORK WITH EUGENE AND PEARL

After my sadness I was thrilled to be with Eugene and Pearl. We lived in an apartment at 2042 Stanford Avenue. A one bedroom apartment furnished beautifully. I slept on the couch in the living room. But it was really home. Really home. It felt like really home. The first time. I was very happy living with Eugene and PearI. They were angels to me. Just to be with them felt like love. They were both working so I would make dinner for them every night.

I went to high school in New York. I had wonderful friends. I had a boyfriend named Stanley. I was very independent in New York. I went on the subway and trains by myself.

In New York Eugene's business was not going very well. Some people from Venezuela who were in New York looking for a lumber expert to work in their factory in Venezuela offered Eugene a good contract. When Eugene came home and said he was offered a very good job in Venezuela I said, "Let's go." When he asked Pearl, who did not own a passport and spoke no other language than English, she said, "If Judy says let's go, let's go." We left for Venezuela in 1955. I was sixteen and a half or seventeen.

GOING BACK TO VENEZUELA AND MEETING LESLIE RODAN

While I was in Detroit my aunt Zsuszi and uncle Leslie left Venezuela and went to Canada where they had a tobacco farm. After a few years when the tobacco business was not good, they returned to Venezuela.

And so when we were all back in Venezuela my aunt Zsuszi starts saying, "On Sunday let's go to the beach." So we went to the beach and she introduced me to these guys. There were seven or eight guys. They seemed a bit old to me; I was right. While we were having lunch Zsuszi said to me, "You see that one over there, that's the best one." I said, "For what?' She said, "Talk to him. He is very smart, well read, cultured, and he speaks some English. He speaks Spanish and you speak Spanish. So what's the problem?" As we are talking he comes over and introduces himself, "My name is Leslie Rodan. In Spanish it is Ladislao, but in English,

which I understand is your language, it is Leslie." Well, not so bad. He speaks some English. Big accent, but good English. So we were talking and we had coffee and then we went for a swim. That was it. The following Sunday my aunt said, "Let's go to the beach again." I said, "No, I have a lot of homework to do. No. You go, enjoy." And she insisted. So since she insisted, I went. Again he came over with his bunch of friends. Now everybody is kidding around, horsing around. Then the phone calls start and he is asking me out on a date. I think I was 17 already. I'm not going out on a date because I have my boyfriend in school who wants me to move to Holland with him and his family. But I didn't tell Leslie that; I wasn't that stupid. I said I can't, I have a commitment that day, I'm so sorry, maybe next time. So he called another week later. My aunt said, "Why don't you answer Leslie's calls? He is calling you inviting you out. What is wrong with that?" I said, "You like him, you go out with him." (I felt bad for years, even now, that I was so fresh and so obnoxious to my aunt.) My friend Judy said she saw Leslie on the beach and he was a nice guy. "But he is too old," I said. She asked how old? I said, "I don't know, but he is old." Anyhow he kept on calling and finally I said yes and went out with Leslie. He kept coming every night to go out. But first he had to play chess with my uncle Eugene while I got dressed. My uncle loved to play chess but he was not such a good player. Leslie was a real good player. And who won? Leslie. After the game we were allowed to go out. We kept going out and I started to like him. Not only did I like him, I started to love him as well. I looked forward to the

evenings when he would come and pick me up. My uncle did not like losing night after night at chess. Leslie said, "Your aunt Pearl is always so sweet, but your uncle Eugene doesn't seem to like me. I said, "Yes, he doesn't like you. Let him win once." He said, "That is not honest. I can't cheat. That is cheating." I said, "You want to go out with me? Lose!" Leslie let Eugene win that night. My uncle Eugene gave me a big hug that I will never forget. Leslie and I got engaged.

At the time I was going to an American school to finish my education. I needed less than a year of school to graduate, but I did not graduate because I fell in love with Leslie and he did not like the idea of me going to school. He was jealous; he wanted me all to himself. I went to the school counselor to ask him what to do. He listened and asked questions. He said, "Your grades are all A's and from what I gather you have all the education you will need with what you went through. I did not tell them my real story. I just said that I came from Czechoslovakia and I am in love and my fiancé is upset when I go to school and friends come over. The counselor suggested I should follow my heart. I left school that day. My uncle was terribly upset, but my fiancé was happy.

Before we got married I had to go back to the United States for two months to keep my American citizenship. I would really miss Leslie, but I did not want to be alone with him until we were married. When I got back the first thing he asked me was, "Which is the first day we could get married? It must be no later than the end of September." I said, "Why?

Are you pregnant?" He loved all those things about me. We chose September 29, 1956. Leslie was 32, I was 18. I now became Judith Nemes de Rodan. (My uncle Eugene had changed his name from Neufeld to Nemes and I had taken his name.)

I finally had a home and a family of my own. Leslie and I had three children: Ronaldo, Lizbeth, and Louie. I thought I wanted six, but stopped at three because of their mischievousness. The first thing I did when my first child was born was buy a piano, but I didn't want any part of the piano. I never played the piano again after I made the mess of the piano at the convent. I tried for a while to play the violin because I wanted to remember something of my father, but I stopped because I found it too difficult.

LESLIE'S FAMILY

Leslie was from Kosice, Czechoslovakia. His mother, Serena Rosenberg, was a very young widow. She had four sons: Nicolas, Emery, Eugene, and Leslie. She had a clothing shop on the main street in Kosice which is how she was able to raise her sons. When the war began Leslie built a bunker to keep the family safe, but because his brother Eugene was very sensitive and had lung problems and would not do well in a bunker, the family put him a hospital thinking he would be safe there. He died in the hospital probably from typhus or perhaps he was shot. This was a trauma Leslie lived with his entire life.

Leslie and his brother Emery were in hiding throughout the war, sleeping on trains and in old train stations. I do not know how their brother Nicolas survived the war; he never would speak about it. Leslie's mother hid for a while in the bunker that Leslie built at the family home. When that was no longer safe she disguised herself as a peasant woman and went into hiding in Budapest. When the war ended, purely by miraculous chance Leslie found her walking on the street.

In 1948 Leslie, Nicolas, and Emery, along with their mother and Emery's wife, Rose and their son, Robert, who was born in Paris, came to Venezuela.

Before the war Emery studied medicine in Bratislava for five years. After the war he studied for two more years to be a dentist. In Europe a person had to be a doctor before they could be a dentist. He did not want to leave Czechoslovakia thinking he would be safe there because he was a professional, but his brothers convinced him to come to Venezuela. Emery worked as a dentist in the Venezuelan interior in conditions that were so poor he would sometimes be paid with live chickens or eggs. On weekends he would travel by bus for several hours to spend time with the family. He was having such a hard time that Leslie's mother insisted that the brothers invite Emery to work with them in their business. The brothers started a company called *Los Hermanos Rodan*, Emery worked with them for a while but then he immigrated to Canada with his family.

Leslie had a lot of family in Israel, but we never went to Israel. I would say, "No, no, no. I don't want to go. I don't think I will find what I am looking for." Leslie did not know what I was talking about. What I was hoping for in my young life, in my childhood fantasy, is that I would find my parents somewhere, and that it would most likely be in Israel. I was afraid to go to Israel and not find anybody and be disappointed. That is why we didn't go until 1972.

Our engagement.

Our Wedding.

Leslie is being led to the chuppah by Eugene and Emery.

My wedding in 1956. I was eighteen.

With Leslie's mother at my wedding.

Leslie's friends at our wedding. I first met them at the beach.

From left to right:
Leslie Gonda, Pearl Nemes, me, Eugene Nemes,
Zsuszi Gonda. The child in front is Louis Gonda.

Leslie and I led a good life in Venezuela.

Leslie and I at our son Ronaldo's Bar Mitzvah.

Leslie with brothers Nicolas, and Emery.

Portraits of Leslie and me.

Our son Louie's family.

Our daughter Lizbeth's family.

From left to right seated: Ronaldo Rodan, me, Nathan Schonfeld, Lorena Gonda, Steve Kirala
Standing: Lizbeth Schonfeld, Nicole Rodan, Ilana Rodan, Jacob Rodan, Louie Rodan, Daniel Schonfeld, Melanie Schonfeld.

OUR PRINTING BUSINESS

Leslie and Nicolas then started a company that printed business forms. It grew to be the second largest printing company in the country. They made pre-printed forms, business forms for invoicing, payroll, inventory, statistics…. They printed certificates and checks, even airline tickets. Leslie worked in administration, I worked in the sales department. I had a lot of people under me, but everything still had to go through my hands. At one point we had 64 salesmen out on the street whom I was constantly tracking. I did collections on top of that. I never missed a day of work.

In order for me to work as an executive I had to become a Venezuelan citizen. So I went to the American embassy and asked what would happen to my American citizenship if I became a Venezuelan citizen. The lady told me I would lose it. She put a paper in front of me and said I must write my affidavit that I am renouncing my American citizenship. Of course I was very sad. I thought citizenship in the United States was very important. I remembered the five years that Aranka and her husband had fought to get me into the United States. So I wrote in the affidavit that I am being forced to renounce my citizenship; that I was writing it under duress. The consul was very angry at me. She asked for my passport. She said she was annulling my passport, and she did. A few years later I began to look into getting back my American citizenship. My friend Judy, whose parents I used to visit on the weekends in Far Rockaway, New York, was now an immigration attorney

living in Texas. I asked her for help. When I told her I wrote the letter in the consul's office under duress she said we had a case. It took about two years until I heard from the State Department. They sent me my entire, very thick, dossier from way back and they said it was a mistake in the Caracas office to annul my passport. So I was still an American citizen!

GOING BACK TO SCHOOL

At age 52 when my kids were grown and already had university degrees, I felt safe enough to ask my husband for permission to go back to school. My life long dream was to study philosophy. I was talked out of studying philosophy in my young years because, "Who hires a philosopher? You don't make enough money to live on."

Somewhat reluctantly, my husband agreed. I had a full time job and a full-time household to run, so I enrolled in night classes at the university in Caracas. I did five years of philosophy and earned a degree. When I finished the five years, one of my teachers offered further study of two years of Latin American philosophy which sounded very appealing. I went for those two years as well. This created a lot of problems in my family. At first my husband agreed to it, but it was a little difficult for me to be away four nights of the week and of course I had to study. It took a lot of patience and a lot of explaining to my husband that I had to do this. When I finished the seven years of study I was 59 and I wanted to study law. I had a lot of the credits

so it would have taken just a couple of years to do law. My husband was not angry about it but he asked if that is what I wanted to do now after all the hardship we had. I realized no, I'm not going to do it.

PSYCHONEUROIMMUNOLOGY

So I went to the next best thing which was to study psychoneuroimmunology. Psychoneuroimmunology is a science for wellness, for better health, for prevention of illness, and for dealing with illnesses, as well as dealing with emotional issues. I enrolled in psychoneuroimmunology classes taught by research doctors, and in classes taught by experts in Bach flowers. Bach flowers were developed by Edward Bach, a medical doctor in England who believed that some symptoms of an illness are often caused by emotional states. In the 1930's he made herbal remedies from flowers. He learned that by treating peoples' emotions with these remedies, their unhappiness and distress could be alleviated.

One of my friends, a gynecologist, was also studying psychoneuroimmunology. One day I said to her, "Psychoneuroimmunology has to be available to help the poor people who are not able to afford it." She was very enthusiastic, but asked how we could do it. I said, "We just do it!" We got a third person to join us, a pediatrician practicing homeopathy. Slowly, we got a few more people together: a dentist and a psychiatrist. All of a sudden we were fourteen!

We started to train each other and went together to all the courses that were available in wellness, healing, pain management, and depression management. We decided to open a center in my office and devote one day a week to receiving poor people from all over to help them determine what emotions they needed to work on—whether it was fear, anxiety, guilt, anger, grief, depression, things like that. Many of these people were suffering with devastating diseases. Many were children.

All the therapists had to give up a full day without working in their practices, meaning they would give up practically twenty percent of their income. But they did it gladly. We did not charge the clients.

Word spread, and soon over one hundred people would come to my office for our Wednesday sessions. Clients would come for eight weeks at a time. A session would start with some light food—sandwiches and fruit. Then there would be a talk about an emotion. (I was always the speaker.) Each client would then have the opportunity to speak with a therapist. After each session we reviewed how each client (we didn't call them patients) was progressing. At night I would review the therapists' suggestions and make up the Bach flower formulas for each client. The next Wednesday each client was given the formula that was made specially for them. The Venezuelans believed in it, they trusted, and they healed. Those healing sessions were a beautiful time in my life.

My husband helped me with the formulas. He understood Bach flowers because he took all the courses with me. I would buy small amber 100cc bottles from a large bottle factory. We always had two or three thousand bottles in stock, but we went through them very quickly. I would import the Bach flowers from England, Mexico, and the United States. Our funding came mostly from my uncle Leslie Gonda's investments, but my husband and I also contributed.

When the government no longer allowed meetings of more than ten or twelve people at a time, we began to see clients by appointment. I even set up a system where clients could call me at home. During the floods in 1999 we would go to find the clients wherever they were—sometimes they were living in parking lots. For many years I did everything I could to help these poor, proud people. It finally ended when violence in the streets made it impossible to carry on.

ZSUSZI AND LESLIE MOVE TO LOS ANGELES

On a trip from Caracas to Canada, Zsuszi and Leslie Gonda stopped in New York to visit their friends from Berehove, Alex Vari and his second wife Ibi. Alex's family had owned the brick factory in Berehove that became the second ghetto. In New York Alex was working for the Brack family as a butler and Ibi was working as a maid. The Brack family owned a factory that made Dan River bedding linens. When Brack got the concession to manufacture the linens in Venezuela, Zsuszi and Leslie decided to go into business with him. They went into the linen business in Venezuela. They made uniforms for nurses and doctors and also sold uniforms to the government. Soon, Zsuszi and Leslie started to put up industrial buildings. They were doing very well. In 1960 when the word on the street was Venezuela would become communist, they left their property and moved to Los Angeles. They were immigrants again.

Zsuszi and Leslie entered Venezuela as Catholics and as long as the family lived in Venezuela they lived as Catholics. Their children were brought up Catholic; they were taken to church every Sunday by the maids, not by my aunt and uncle. The children were confused, they would ask, "Judy's family is Jewish, why are we different? Why do we have a Christmas tree and Judy brings us gifts every night of Hanukkah?" Later, my uncle said that one of the main reasons he moved to California in 1960 was because he wanted to be able to tell his children the real truth about the family.

My uncle was very strict and austere and refused to talk about the past. He always forbade my aunt from speaking saying, "Don't talk about it, it's gone. It's finished." Zsuszi used to dream that every night her mother would come to her bed and sit and talk to her. Zsuszi wanted to tell everyone, but Leslie would not allow it. He thought it would hurt her. He didn't want her to have any pain.

Leslie Gonda had two sisters, Magda and Luci. They survived the Holocaust because they were very industrious and were good at sewing. After the war, when the Russians came in, the sisters somehow disappeared. Leslie had detectives searching everywhere for them, but found no traces of them at all. They were never found, never heard from again.

Leslie Gonda had a brother named Steven. He survived the Holocaust in a labor camp. He never got over the loss of his two sisters. It was a very difficult life for him. He came to Venezuela and decided not to be Jewish anymore. He claimed he was an atheist, but guess what? When I was nine years old he taught me the *Hatikva!*

One day when I was at Zsuszi and Leslie's house in Los Angeles, my cousin Alice brought out some letters she found when her mother, Aranka, passed away. They were written in Hungarian. My uncle Leslie could read them. This strong, serious man, never fooling around, never showing weakness, began to cry as he read a letter saying, "I have never read any letter with all this love in my life." My grandmother was writing letters to her step-daughter Aranka with so much love, caring, and kindness, and good advice for her new married life.

My uncle went on to talk about an agreement he had with his father in Hungary early in the war. His father told him, "I have to wear the yellow star on my clothes but you don't look Jewish, don't wear the star. And if we happen to meet on the street and the SS or the Arrow Cross get near, you don't know me and I don't know you." He went on to tell us about the encounter that occurred on the street one day: His father was carrying some sacks that he bought for his little store. He sold these little sacks—that was his business. They met on the street and talked briefly when an officer comes and says to Leslie, "Young man, what are you doing with this old Jewish guy? Stay away from him." Leslie said, "I don't know who this old Jewish guy is." And he spit on his father. He never saw his father again. So this was in him all this time.

During the war when Uncle Leslie was in a labor camp a Hungarian priest came to the camp and said to Leslie, "You don't look Jewish. I'm going to baptize you because all those other people here are going to be killed." So that is how Leslie survived. When they moved to Los Angeles Leslie told this story to his rabbi. The rabbi told him, "Under Jewish law if you have to lie to stay alive, it is not a sin. You are still a Jew. You were born of a Jewish mother. Nothing changes that." When Leslie heard this he felt more able to tell his children the truth about the family. After he told his story, my uncle Leslie became much looser, he smiled more. There was a new difference in him. He became a strong supporter of Holocaust education and a donor to hospitals and medical research all around the world.

My aunt, Szuzsi.

Zsuszi and Leslie Gonda.

The Gonda family are benefactors of medical institutions, museums, and charities around the world.

My cousins Lorena, Lucy, and Louis Gonda.

LEARNING MORE ABOUT MY PAST

I said to my cousin Alice, “We have the letters and the memory of Uncle Leslie crying as he read them, but where is all the memorabilia of your mom?” She said, “I was young. I was moving from Detroit to California and I gave it all to the Salvation Army."

I have only one thing that belonged to my mother, a tiny little teacloth. When my grandmother packed Aranka’s hope chest with all the beautiful things she made for Aranka’s trousseau, somehow my mother’s teacloth got mixed in with the other linens. Aranka took the hope chest with her to the United States before the war. The teacloth is embroidered with the letters S and E. The S is for Stark, the E is for Elizabeth. My mother’s name was Elizabeth Stark. My daughter has the teacloth now.

A cousin of my mother told me this story: After the war my Grandmother Reisman’s brothers, Carl and Mickey, went back to their family house in Berehove, Number 3, right next to my grandmother’s house. The house was completely ransacked. Carl kept insisting, “I made up a box and I put it up in one of the wooden slabs in the ceiling between the living room and dining room. They got a ladder and they found the box. In it were family pictures and jewelry. With that jewelry the two of them, with their new wives, were able to live a good many years until they could get to Israel and then the United States. The pictures I have of my parents may have come from that box.

When I came out of Europe I did not have any pictures of my family. I would say that about 50 years later some people gave me some pictures. I recognized my mother's picture and I recognized my little brother's picture, but I did not recognize my father's picture. There are some pictures of me taken after the war that I got from Eugene. He would not talk about how he got the pictures.

ZSUSZI AND EUGENE PASS AWAY

I would go to the United States four or five times a year to check up on my children and grandchildren and also to visit my aunt Zsuszi and uncle Leslie in Los Angeles. The bruises Zsuszi got on her legs at Auschwitz stayed with her all her life. When I would visit her she would ask me to massage her legs. She said I had the best hands for massage. Whenever I would ask her how she got the bruises she would change the subject. Zsuszi never talked about the Holocaust.

When Zsuszi and Leslie became older I went to see them three, four, five times a year, so often that the top floor of their house was called Judy's House. In 2009 I went to Los Angeles on Yom Kippur, something I would not usually do, but Zsuszi's daughter Lorena told me it was time to come; her mother was not responding. I took a prayer book with me. I looked in on Zsuszi in the morning then went upstairs. I was praying when all of a sudden I had a feeling I had to go back down to see her. I had just prayed *Avinu Malkeinu* and I started to sing it to her. My aunt opened her eyes and she sang it with me. I don't

think she ever sang it in a synagogue at all. That was a surprise. A lovely surprise. I was there when she died. It was a very sad day.

My daughter, Lizbeth Schonfeld, was very well-known for her work in film. She made a Holocaust documentary, *La Ausencia*, featuring survivors' testimonies, archival footage, and recreated scenes of the Holocaust. At my aunt Zsuszi's funeral in Los Angeles a gentleman approached Lizbeth and said, "Do you know what your great-aunt did for your mother?"And he told her this story: Zsuszi was in hiding with a family in Budapest, the Hurvog family. Zsuszi was friends with their daughter, Vera, who was married to Alex Vari at the time. Zsuszi was living under a false name and identity. One day, Zsuszi realized there was no food so she went out to trade her ring for some bread or whatever was available. She was not wearing the Jewish star on her clothes. Someone must have pointed her out as a Jew. She was caught by the Hungarian Arrow Cross. They knew her name—Zsuszi Neufeld. She said that was not her name and gave them her new, false, name. They asked her, "Where is Judy?" She knew where I was but would not tell. So they beat her on the street and took her to the police station. At the police station they questioned her for three days and three nights but she would never tell where I was. Apparently they knew about the whole family's whereabouts. So they sent her to Auschwitz. In Auschwitz she got terrible bruises on her legs. She was in Auschwitz for about a year, until liberation. She was in Auschwitz because she protected me.

I don't know anything about Eugene's whereabouts during the war. He would never talk about it. His old girlfriend, Ida, came to visit me on my honeymoon in New York. I do not know if she got the jewels my grandmother gave to Mrs. Varjas, or if she was able to use them to save Eugene. I will never know. I do not know how she survived the war in Budapest.

My uncle Eugene died in 1963. He was forty-seven years old. My aunt Pearl passed away very young from breast cancer; she was not yet forty years old. I brought my three children up from Venezuela to visit her in New York when she was very ill, on her death bed. I really loved her. We had a terrific, terrific relationship. We could sit and talk for hours, four or five hours at at time. She taught me a lot.

MY HUSBAND PASSES AWAY

I was passionately in love with my husband. Yes, he was jealous, he just wanted me for himself, but I was okay with that, I had the same need for him. He was my father figure, my lover figure, my husband figure, my teacher figure.

Leslie had a condition called Ankylosing Spondylitis, an inflammatory disease that causes pain and stiffness in the spine and eventually causes the vertebra to fuse. Even though Leslie was very active, he swam and exercised every day and ate a healthy diet, he suffered greatly from the disease. Although he was in great pain, he went to work every day. One Friday after work he was so weak and in so much pain that he was not able

to get out of bed all weekend. That weekend he said many things of love and kindness that I will never forget. He passed away at home on Monday morning. The last thing he said to me was, "Thank you for taking such good care of me."

It was a big blow, a big loss in my life. Much more bereavement than I had ever felt in my life before. With the previous bereavement I was able to fantasize that I would find my family somewhere, some day, but with my husband it was a final, final separation.

MOVING TO MIAMI

After my husband's death in 2000 I began cutting down on staff in our business, but I was still happy with the work I was doing. Business was getting slower and slower but I still managed. I didn't want our workers to lose their jobs. If they lost this job they wouldn't find another one. When the government began taking over the businesses, properties, factories, and farms, business got slower and slower. Eventually we had to shut the business down.

By 2017 there were big rallies every day in the streets. People were getting killed. There was no respect for human beings at all. There was no safety. My sons went to marches every day to protest the government—to no avail of course. My daughter was held up three times with her four children in the car. After the third or fourth holdup she moved to Miami. My older son left next. My younger son, an editor and journalist, had a

financial and commercial magazine in Venezuela, Colombia, and Argentina. His name was on a list banning all editors so he eventually went to the United States with his wife and children.

In 2017 I packed up just my little carry-on bag like I always did. I did not take luggage because anyone traveling from Venezuela with luggage right away was thought to be moving. "No, no, no. Just going for a few days." I came for Passover planning to stay for three weeks thinking that by then the situation would calm down. But it did not. News from Venezuela was on the radio all the time, on the television all the time. More and more killings. My kids started to really give me a hard time about going back. They threatened they would take my passport away. They threatened with everything! So I stayed thinking that in a few months when things quieted down I would go back.

I have not returned to Venezuela since I left in 2017. I still have my big, beautiful house in Caracas. It is still a responsibility. I have to maintain it and pay the taxes and insurance. The house is up for sale. People love it, but there have been no offers. Nobody even asks the price. Nothing is sellable in Venezuela. If I were to call a charity and say take the house and everything in it, it would be assessed by the government and I would have to pay taxes on what they say house is worth. I did send some of the period furniture, paintings, and rugs to my children. Lucky for me, my daughter's friend who was the seamstress who created the costumes for *La Ausencia* needed a place to live. She moved into my house before I left and she is still living there.

MY LIFE TODAY

My children and grandchildren all live near me in Miami. My daughter Lizbeth and her husband David Schonfeld have four children: Daniel, Jonathan, Eva, and Elisa. David has two children from a previous marriage: Nathalie, a lovely girl and Benjamin, a wonderful young man, who are part of our family. My son Louie and his wife Ilana have three children: Gabriel, Nicole, and Jacob. My son Ronaldo is single. My granddaughter Eva has two children, my great-grandchildren Naomi and Ari.

A portrait of me taken by Hungarian Holocaust survivor Laszlo Selly. 2024.

SPEAKING ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST

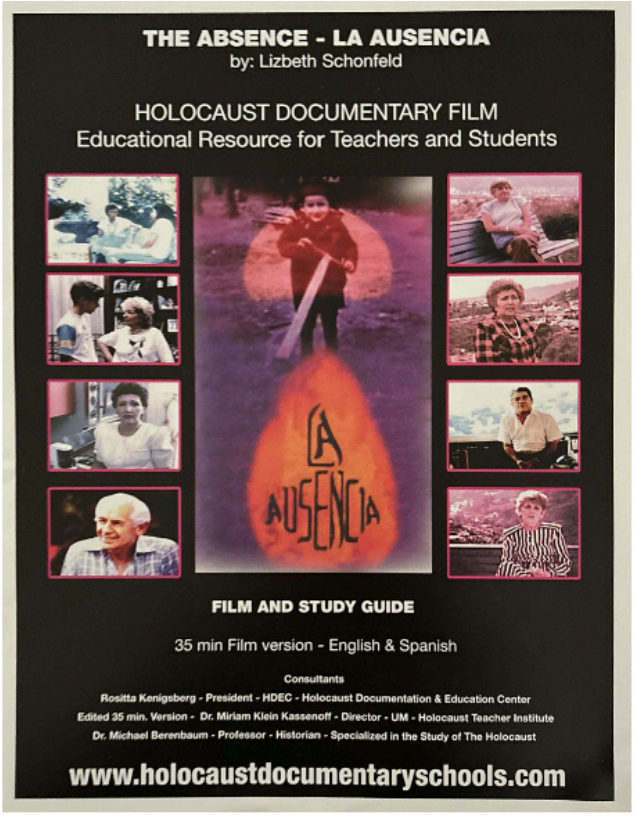
I never talked to anyone about my life during the Holocaust until more than 50 years after the war. My grandmother told me when we parted when I was age six and Mrs. Varjas took me out of our home, "Just obey. Follow instructions." Living with the nuns I couldn't ask questions, it wasn't allowed. When I was living with strangers I also didn't ask questions because what would they tell me? I knew internally what happened to my parents, my family, but I couldn't say it.

In Venezuela my daughter made a film, *La Ausencia*, *The Absence,* a four hour long documentary which covers the complete history of the Holocaust featuring 32 survivors' testimonies from every country where the Holocaust occurred, archival footage, reenacted scenes, and a message to humankind. I am not in the film. Neither are my husband or any close family because we still were not speaking at all about what happened to us in the Holocaust.

During my visit to Miami in 2016, my daughter had a showing of *The Absence* in a theater in Aventura. Dr. Miriam Kassenoff Director of the University of Miami Holocaust Teacher Institute and Rosita Kenigsberg, Director of the Holocaust Documentation and Education Center, were guest speakers. My daughter asked me to speak as well, to tell a short story. I refused, refused until I had to give in. That is how it started—I tried to help her with her film, that it should be shown. All the people in that film—most of them had never spoken, not

even to their children or grandchildren. In honor of that and in honor of my people I said okay. So I started to speak. Just like that!

I began speaking at the Holocaust Education and Documentation Center then at the Holocaust Memorial Miami Beach. Now I speak to groups of students at least three or four times a week. I am always asked to talk about my story, but with the war in Israel that began on October 7, 2023, and the rise in antiSemitism all over the world, I feel that I have to do something more important than just tell my story. My goal now is show the young people how bullying, racism, indifference, and anti-Semitism defined my life and that the dangers I faced in my lifetime are the very same dangers they face today. The dangers are real; we are in a very difficult time in the world. We must unite to insure there will never again be another Holocaust.



My daughter's Holocaust documentary film, La Ausencia, features survivors' testimonies, archival footage, and recreated scenes of the Holocaust.

I speak to groups of students of all ethnicities and religions as often as four times a week. I want them to understand the dangers of bullying, hatred, racism, indifference, and antiSemitism.

ABOUT THE WRITER

I began writing for Holocaust survivors in the 1990's when survivors I met on The March of the Living asked me for help writing about their feelings on returning to Poland for the first time. Later, survivors I interviewed for Steven Spielberg's Shoah Foundation asked me for help writing down all the things they did not speak about in their interview. Soon, other survivors began approaching me seeking help writing a book about their experiences in the Holocaust. I met with the survivors, recorded our numerous conversations, organized and wrote the stories in the survivors' own words, printed the books, and then handed the books to the survivors as my gift to them. The books were written solely for the survivors and their families; they were never intended for publication. They are being published now because my friends, Carol and Jaime Suchlicki, recognizing their historical value as first-person testimony, introduced me to Dr. Haim Shaked to discuss finding a wider audience for the books.

Thank you to Dr. Haim Shaked director of the Sue and Leonard Miller Center for Contemporary Judaic Studies at the University of Miami for agreeing to publish the books and for your guidance and patience as we worked together on this project.

I am grateful to the March of the Living for introducing me to the world of Holocaust education and finding a role for me in it.

Thank you to the Shoah Foundation for choosing me to be an interviewer and for mentoring me through more than thirty interviews of Holocaust survivors. Your training led me to do the work I do today.

Thank you to the Holocaust Memorial Miami Beach for encouraging the docents at the memorial to work with me to write their memoirs. I appreciate your confidence in me and your respect for my work.

Thank you to the my dear Holocaust survivors for sharing your most painful as well as your most joyful memories with me. Thank you for answering questions that no one should ever have to ask or answer. Thank you for trusting me to write your memoirs accurately and respectfully. It has been my honor and pleasure to work with you.

—Bobbi Kaufman

My husband always wanted to visit his family in Israel, but I never wanted to go. In my fantasy I would find my parents somewhere, probably in Israel. So I was afraid to go to Israel and not find anybody and be disappointed.

— Judy Rodan

Judy Lebovic Rodan was born in 1938 in Berehove, Czechoslovakia. She lived with her family in a home filled with love and music—her father on his violin and her mother on her grand piano.

As the Nazis approached, Judy's grandmother and mother sent her into hiding in a convent in Budapest with the promise they would come for her the next day. When the war ended Judy was reunited with an aunt and an uncle, the only survivors of the family.

In 1947 Judy's aunt and uncle brought her with them to Venezuela. In Venezuela young Judy lived with strangers in many different homes until she married a fellow survivor, Leslie Rodan. While working as an executive in the Rodan family printing business and raising three children, at age 52 Judy went back to school and earned a university degree in philosophy.

Judy never spoke about her life in the Holocaust until more than 50 years after the war.

There is a concept in Judaism of a positive commandment, something that is time dependent, something that must be done *now*. One must, accordingly, applaud this important effort by the Miller Center and Feldenkreis Program of the University of Miami to collect and publish Holocaust survivors' memoirs as there will soon—too soon—come a time when the last survivors will be no longer. Sadly, tragically, this testimony is not only urgent but timely because the world in which we live echoes their world and the quality of their witness. The very nature of their survival has much to teach today's generations. One must express gratitude for this project and in the sagacious words of Hillel say: "If not now, when?"

Dr. Michael Berenbaum
Professor of Jewish Studies
American Jewish University
Former President and CEO
Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation