

Herta Griffel Baitch

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Abstract

Herta Griffel was born March 10, 1933 in Vienna, Austria to Berta Nagel Griffel and Wolf Griffel as an only child. Her only relative was Lotta Nagel, her mother's sister-in-law married to the mother's brother who died. Her father had a small grocery and Herta enjoyed singing songs with him. She has few memories of her life in Vienna but does recall the noisy Nazi parade. Her father who was already weak was placed in a work camp on Kristallnacht and sent home and died. They lost their grocery on Kristallnacht and later the Nazis came to their home and removed their valuables except for what was hidden. She was one of nine children chosen as part of a Kindertransport to the US in November '40. They went by train to an American ship to New York where a social worker from a Baltimore charity took her to her first foster family. They were very loving to her but when the mother gave birth to a fourth child, the charity transferred Herta to another family. The new family only consisted of one adopted daughter, Beverly, almost three years older than Herta who was not academic. They did not get close until Beverly quit school at 16 and went to work and they became friends when they both married as had something in common. Herta had a hard time leaving Baltimore with her husband and, another time was difficult when both Beverly and Mary, her foster mother, passed away. In 1964 her cousin in London made contact and Herta learned a bit about her family and in 2008 she met two women from her transport and learned more about that time in her life. For years, Herta did not consider herself "lucky" as people said because she felt a refugee and guilty but now she has 3 children and 7 grandchildren and feels lucky.

Summary

00:00 Herta Griffel was born March 10, 1933 in Vienna, Austria to Berta Nagel and Wolf Griffel as an only child. Her mother was from a small town of Madyar Sredny near Krakow and was taken to Vienna to find a husband. Herta's only relative is her mother's sister-in-law married to the mother's brother, Lotta Nagel, a widow. The family never spoke of Krakow or visited it or spoke Polish. They spoke German and sometimes Yiddish.

05:00 Herta had no citizenship papers, certainly not Austrian but, perhaps, Polish. From Yad Vashem, Herta learned her mother's birthplace and that she was taken to Molly Trastmelk and died there. Herta's childhood was full of secrecy, rumors, sadness and fear. She has a nice memory of singing Yiddish songs with her father who loved to sing. Her mother packed her his book of those songs. The most familiar song was, "Aufen

Pripenchik” which means “On a fire.” Her father had a small grocery nearby but he was not well. Her mother was the strong person. Both parents worked in the grocery.

- 10:00 She has little memory of her childhood, friends or schools. Her mother’s letter had an address so she visited the place later but it did not look familiar. She does not know her address as her records with the agency are private. Herta does not remember what her room looked like. She remembers going with her mother to an immense parade with all the Nazi banners and buntings all over the place. She remembers the sound of the soldiers’ boots, the loud music, and “Seig Heil” and did not know what was going on. She asked her mother and she replied, “It will be very bad.” Herta remembers the pounding on the street. She remembers her mother more than her father. Her mother did embroidery, and worked in the store while another woman took care of her. She has no memory of hugging or kissing her mother or her mother kissing her. She does not remember school or friends. She is blank until she came to the US and went into the foster home. She has no memory being in her mother’s arms.
- 15:00 Herta remembers sitting in a chair after Shabbat and waiting for the stars to come out. Her mother said, “There is a moment when Shabbat ends and the stars come out that you can see G-d.” She remembers her mother saying that she is coming to the US and that another mother will take care of her and that she had to be very healthy. Herta remembers being in shul and the people were crying and the man made her leave and her father was holding the Torah; perhaps it was a Yiskeh service. This is usually on Yom Kippur when you remember your parents and say a memorial prayer for those left behind. In the old days, children did not attend. The parade was the most vivid memory. She felt her father was more outgoing than her mother who was very quiet. After the Anschluss and the Nazis took control, there was Kristallnacht which she does not remember. They lost their grocery store and her father was taken by truck to a labor camp. The trucks would come at night and in the morning would round up the men. One morning, her father came home and then he died. He was not well to begin with. Herta visited the cemetery and the father’s grave was green and bigger than her. Her mother put a hat on her to cover her braids and she felt like a boy. During the parade, her mother did the same thing—stuck a hat on her to cover her braids. Her mother often tried to hide her braids.
- 20:00 Herta does not have emotional knowledge of her childhood. Her father had a large gravestone. They were not hungry. Her mother came home with a pot, perhaps it was from a soup kitchen. She does not have emotional memory. She does not speak of this often. The pot had a tight lid. They went to live with her Tante Lotta. She does not know the name of the lady who cared for her. One night they heard people with boots who came into their apartment and shouted and looked at their belongings and threw them around. The three of them cowered in a corner and when the three Nazis left, her

mother opened the ash tray in the stove and found the money she hid in a bundle and was relieved.

- 25:00 Soon she tried to get Herta out. Tante Lotta was older. All three looked like their photos. She always had the photos with her. They thought they were going to Shanghai but her father was sick and they could not go. She does not remember attending school. She always had a passport and her handwriting was beautiful for a seven-year-old. When she came to the US and was put into a class, the teacher asked her to copy the American A, B, C as she used the German H and G which were different.
- 30:00 This indicates that she must have been in school. Under her father in her passport, Herta had signed her name in the passport. She was stateless. She had no emotional feeling upon seeing her father's gravestone. The parade is the most vivid and the second best memory was looking for the stars. She has a memory of unhappy feelings. She does not recall laughter or going places. She thought the Nazis were officers. Her mother said she was going to America and another Jewish mother would take care of her. She did not understand it. Also, that she had to be healthy. Herta spoke in German but now forgot it completely. She was examined and had a vaccination mark on her thigh and did not know what it was. She kept her arm against her thigh so it would not be seen. Her mother packed her suitcase and took her to the train station where there was a lot of commotion. There were other people there beside the children who got on the train. All the children were chosen who had no father.
- 35:00 In 2006 she met one of the children as someone gave her a list of the nine children on the train. Her name is Stella and she was 13 at the time while Herta was seven. Stella revealed everything and told her the whole process. The Agency was the German/Jewish Children's Aid Society and when Herta got to the US their social worker brought her to Baltimore to her first foster home. The foster parents could not come. This was November '40. Herta was not in the streets of Vienna so she did not see the army. She came later, after the war started and people were not permitted to come. Herta never saw her mother again. Her mother had told her that she would try to find her. She would go to Cuba and then to the US and be reunited but she did not know when.
- 40:00 Herta received letters from her mother for six months and replied to them. Her foster mother said that something must have happened when the letters stopped. In her suitcase was a photo of her mother and Herta wearing the same dress that was packed in the suitcase. Her mother packed a doll that Herta feels no connection along with embroidered nightgowns, books, prayer books, a blue songbook with Yiddish songs, her parents' marital photo, Tante Lotta's photo, a photo of Herta when younger and one of her parents. Stella and her husband had two boys. They got a letter from the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) in Baltimore that someone was looking for her. Her mother's cousin lived in London and found her address on a letter. Herta's mother had

packed a package and sent it to the cousin; perhaps sent by a non-Jew. The cousin was a domestic and got to London on a Kindertransport and wrote to Herta at her first foster home.

45:00 The letter was returned to her and she kept the package. Herta met the cousin in 1964 and opened the unopened package. Adela Dula was the London cousin and she went to Israel to see relatives. The bus broke down in a gas station and she spoke to a woman from Detroit in the US. The woman said she had just been to Baltimore and read about Herta in a newspaper and told her to contact HIAS. The cousin did and found Herta. The cousin lived in a small house and sat in the kitchen with just one light bulb from the ceiling and opened the box for Herta. It had a tablecloth which Herta's mother had not finished, silver candlesticks from her grandmother, spoons, knives and forks, and her mother's earrings and rings. In 1962 Herta got a check from Austria for \$162 for restitution and submitted it to the Association for Jewish Charities so the newspaper had her photo and name.

50:00 Adela told Herta about her mother and her family. She had lived with Herta for a few months but she did not remember her. Herta learned that her mother's family was very educated. Someone was a treasurer for a Duke had his picture in a palace in Poland. More recently Herta learned the treasurer must have collected taxes. He must have been a tax collector. Adela was ten years older than Herta and kept the unopened package. She seemed poor and married a survivor who died and had a child who was very religious but had a mental disability. Herta wrote to Adela and kept up the correspondence until the son wrote that she died from breast cancer two years later. Herta still has the items of the package and has turned over most of its contents and the contents of her suitcase to the Holocaust Museum as they were deteriorating. The edges of the tablecloth were rough but the embroidery was finished. She recognized her mother's earrings.

55:00 Herta met two of the nine girls who came to New York with her. In Lisbon, she walked to the boat with two boys and seven girls on cobblestones and she saw water for the first time. It was a black-sided boat and had a huge American flag painted on it. She does not remember if she felt cold or was seasick or where she ate or slept on the boat. She remembers being on the deck and a sailor tried to teach her English. One morning they ran to the rail and pointed out the Statue of Liberty. It was misty and raining and she could not see it and could not get to the rail. Rose Beser, the Social Worker from Baltimore, met her and took her alone to her foster home. Some of the others had relatives and some were also going to foster homes. Around 2008 she met two women from the group of nine as she got the list from someone doing research in Vienna on the computer. She found out how they were chosen, examined, got their papers, about the boat, some were sick on the boat and that they slept on the ballroom floor with French children. The two women met in her home

- 60:00 They had a wonderful meeting. There was Stella and her husband, her daughter and son-in-law and her son and husband—seven in all. It was amazing to meet as had no idea what she looked like. Stella had an accent on the phone. Herta did not know what to expect when she called her and told her she just found her name. Stella remembered braiding Herta's hair and she went to Scarsdale where she met her husband. They taped the 1 and ½ hour meeting. It was emotional and amazing. Herta's cousin and Stella filled in a lot. Herta did not close the door and did not mind talking about it but there was no reason to talk as they asked little as knew she was from Vienna and what she brought. The Jewish Museum of Maryland did a program on people from Germany and Austria who came to Baltimore to settle and asked her to bring what she had. She brought her suitcase and doll to the exhibition of 20 to 25 people and their stories. The Museum called her that a woman in Vienna was doing research and asked her to speak to her. With the use of the computer and internet, Herta told her what she remembered and the lady wrote a book on the other children. They were older and came before her so it was none of the nine children.
- 65:00 The lady found the list of nine children and Herta tried to contact them. One man was ill and she spoke to his wife who said he did not like to speak of the past and one man was dead. Herta reached Stella and Melanie in New York. Her daughter found the obituary of one not in Baltimore who died a few months after they found the list. There were two sisters and another woman they could not find. Anatole Steck recently found Leonard and Edith Erlich of Vienna who researched the Jews of Vienna of the Holocaust and came to the US and interviewed survivors in the 70s. She had a role in the Jewish community of Vienna. (Nine minutes of the December 27, 1974 interview of Margaret Feiler at the American Joint Distribution Committee in New York is run and is static.)
- 70:00 She was the only adult chaperone on the transport of nine children. It is part of a three-hour interview. Her father died in Bucharest or Dachau. They sent two social workers who wanted to immigrate with the children. They all required a visa but of 30 who applied, only nine children obtained one. Margaret got a visa and took the children to New York. First they went through occupied France on a sealed train.
- 75:00 She said that everyone was asked how they had voted in Austrian's last election. They all responded Social Democrat or Christian Democrat. The Democrats got all of Vienna. Margaret got a visa. They went to the American Consulate for an exam and were asked, "What is your true hair color?" and "What month are you pregnant?" They left November 30th. A man's only hope was a job offer. He was afraid that he would not survive so she promised she would get him a job as a Rabbi in America. She worked in January in New Rochelle and went to the Rabbi who said he would not do anything.
- 80:00 Rumor reached the US that Margaret's child accompanied her. Herta only heard from Stella Bruckenstein. She remembers a nice American lady who took care of her. It was

probably Margaret Macoosy, the intake person. When they arrived in NY, Ms. Feiler gave all the papers to Ms. Macoosy, a social worker. Herta went to a temporary home which she does not remember. There is a transcript of Ms. Macoosy accepting the children. She was American. Herta remembers a nice lady taking care of her. The interview took place in 1974. At a meeting of the Jewish community, Rabbi Marmelstein told the community they must get a child. On the trip, Margaret Feiler was an uncaring person who was not with them much. There were two fifteen-year-olds who took it upon themselves to take care of the others while en route.

85:00 Ms. Feiler spoke to Ehrlich. To get a visa, they asked the question of who they voted for. Others answered the wrong way so did not get a visa. Ms. Feiler was the sole chaperone of the group according to Stella. (The interviewer will give a copy of the 3-hour interview to Herta.) They only heard nine minutes. In Baltimore, Clara and Joseph Bear were Herta's first foster parents. She remembers walking up the steps to their house and saw they were lighting the Chanukah candles. They asked her to participate and she lit the candles and said the brucha (prayer) and they were amazed. Present in the family was the baby, a toddler and Beverly who was four or five. Herta was seven. The foster parents were very loving and reassuring. Herta and the other children were given Hershey bars. It was an amazing way to come into their home. They spoke Yiddish so she felt she was understood.

90:00 Ms. Beser also spoke Yiddish or German. Mrs. Bear was fat and Mr. Bear was skinny and they were nice to her. Herta was placed in second grade in a nearby school and the teacher did not know what to do with a Yiddish-speaking girl. She was placed at the blackboard to practice writing letters as she wrote a German G and H. There were one or two other Yiddish-speaking children and they explained the bells and recess to her. She stayed with the family from December '40 to July '41. The Agency sent her to Camp Louise for the summer where Herta was very lonely and missed the family. When she came home, they had her suitcase packed as she had to go to another foster home. During the summer, Mrs. Bear had unexpectedly delivered a baby. She was rotund and even the husband did not know she was having a baby. It was their 4th child. She had the baby at Sinai Hospital. Mrs. Beser thought it would be too much for the Bear Family so Herta was sent to another foster family. She still keeps in touch with the Bear Family as two are in Baltimore. A couple of years ago, the Bears had a reunion which Herta and her husband attended. Only the new baby and Beverly were there.

95:00 Mrs. Bear had a total of seven children. Herta was the first foster child and later the Bears were used as an interim home until children could be placed. They cared for 100 children through the years. They were warm, unusual people. Herta did not feel like an orphan until she left the Bears. One day she was waiting outside of her school and someone asked who she was waiting for and she replied, "My mother." Everyone laughed. Herta did not feel like an orphan but part of the family. The second foster

family lived in a more affluent part of town with lawns and gardens and single homes. Mrs. Bear took her to the new home and she met her new foster mother in her garden pulling weeds.

100:00 Her new foster sister, also named Beverly, came out and Herta felt like a refugee. She was still wearing her high top shoes and clothes her mother sent with her and wore braids and they looked at her like she was from outer space. They were not prepared. It was the first exchange. Beverly was two and one-half years older than her but at 11 and ½ looked like a woman. She was completely developed and looked older than her years and not pleased to see Herta. Beverly was adopted at six months of age from Jewish Charities and, perhaps, they thought it would be good for her to have a sister. A neighbor, Mrs. Fine and her daughter, came over and thought her adorable but Beverly did not. It was a bad time for Herta as everyone thought her so cute. Her foster mother, Mary, got ill soon after with high blood pressure and headaches. Her foster father, Harry, had a nice size grocery and Herta and Beverly helped out. Harry was soft-spoken. He came home and had dinner and read the newspaper. At first Herta slept with Beverly in the single bed. Beverly had to make room for Herta's belongings in her drawers. It was very strange. They shared the room until they both got married.

105:00 Herta lived there from 1941 to 1952 when she married. Beverly married a year earlier. The two girls were so different but they had to make peace. Herta cannot envision how they managed but they did. She called her foster parents, "Uncle Harry and Aunt Mary." She got her braids cut and got new clothes and shoes and did not have an accent. Herta spoke perfect English so she and Beverly made peace but they were not close. Mary was hospitalized many times and they had to cooperate and take care of the house. Beverly started to date and it got better. By the time they got married, they were best friends as they had things in common and both were older. Herta left Baltimore when her husband went into service. She and Beverly were girlfriends, never sisters. Mary was very sick by then and Beverly was diagnosed with Lupus. They were now girlfriends, not like before. Beverly played piano by ear and played it with the children. Uncle Harry was very quiet. She and Beverly went to the grocery together on Saturday mornings. She wanted to hear something about Harry but he would not share. Mary was very ill. Eventually she was diagnosed with Parkinson's.

110:00 Herta met with Mrs. Beser, the social worker, once a year at her office and she never asked about the home situation. They talked about school and asked to see her looseleaf to see how she was doing at school. She never asked about the home. Perhaps she knew. Mary was sick and they did not have a relationship to tell her what Herta wanted her to know—that she felt alone and had trouble being Beverly's sister. Beverly was different. She was not good in school as had a learning difficulty. Herta's report card was so much better than Beverly's, that it was almost embarrassing. At 16, Beverly quit school and worked in a record store and things changed between them. Beverly was not in school

and made her own living. Herta felt relieved and the relationship between them improved. Beverly brought home records and they sang together and Beverly played the piano and they sang together. Mrs. Beser never asked and Herta never told her what was going on. Whenever Herta went shopping with Mary and ran into Mary's friends, they said that Herta was a lucky girl. She knew they were right but hated it as she felt alone. She knew no one who had her history who came over as she did and grew up alone.

115:00 Herta hated to hear that she was a lucky girl as it made her feel guilty as if she was not grateful. Herta wrote her little book about her experiences for her children as thought she might forget her experiences in the future. She called the book, "Lucky Girl." Although she thought she was a lucky girl, she could not take it when she was younger. Now she realizes that she did not appreciate being a lucky girl. She is smart enough to recognize that she is lucky but felt she was not grateful enough and it gave her guilt. They wanted her to tell about school but she could not remember. The Friedlanders were wonderful but not huggers like the Bears. Perhaps they did not want to show preference of Beverly, the "apple of their eye." Herta did not feel that she was loved. She felt closer to Mary's younger sister and her husband when she babysat in their home.

120:00 Herta felt like an imposter in her own home; that she did not belong there. She was a daughter, but not a daughter. The letters from her mother stopped when she lived at the Bears. No one knew how bad it was in Europe. At least, they did not talk about it. When the war started, it was announced on the radio. In December '41, Herta realized that the US was also at war. She did not know what Pearl Harbor meant. She helped the war effort by collecting scrap iron and collecting fat in the grocery store. Harry was an air raid warden and she liked to go with him when they had air raids. He wrote down the names of people whose light was on, had a whistle and she sent messages back and forth. Only after the war did people talk about concentration camps and their losses. When she got older, she contacted the Red Cross to find out about her mother but there was no information. After she was married a year, Arthur went into the service. He graduated from Medical School in '54, had an internship in '55 and was stationed in Montgomery, Alabama. She worked for a pediatrician and they lived in Harry's house for \$35 a month. Beverly lived upstairs from Mary with her baby as he husband was away. Movers came and Herta moved out of the apartment and stayed a couple of days with Harry and Mary. Suddenly she felt so bad that she had not made contact with her mother so saw Mrs. Beser who said she is upset about leaving Baltimore, not about her mother. Mrs. Beser said she had nothing to be sad about. They spoke like adults for the first time. Again she was leaving for a new place, a new phase of her life. Mrs. Beser was right. They had a good time in the service. It was good for them. They had their son, Larry, and returned after two years. They found Mary dying and Beverly very ill so it was not a happy time.

- 125:00 Beverly still lived upstairs from Mary. One morning Beverly's husband called that she died from cardiac arrest, died before Mary. They were in Baltimore and Herta was a daughter but she did not know what to do. Mary was bedridden and could not speak. Herta gave birth to Karen and took her over to see Mary and put her to sleep next to Mary. Mary died when Karen was four months old. Harry was wonderful. He was never emotional and did what he could. After a few months, he remarried and had a good life for ten years or more before he died. Everyone was gone. Sarah and Joe Bear died and in 1962 she got a call from HIAS that she had a cousin in London. Mary was still alive and Herta only had the two boys and not Karen when she got the call. The cousin explained about the family but not about coming to America. The cousin came to London on a Kindertransport and Herta's mother contacted her to send the package and she received it. It was suggested that Adele contact HIAS and she did.
- 130:00 Herta's children knew she was a foster child. The boys knew who Mary and Harry were as they were 6 and 8 when Karen was born. Dorothy and Uncle Otz knew she felt different and liked her. When she was home, Herta felt like a foster child and never part of the family. She did not have much self-esteem. When Herta got married, she started to drive but it was a low time for her. They went to Philadelphia for her husband's residency but returned before Mary died. Beverly had already died and Herta was the only child and went through a bad time. She got help and it helped somewhat. She has had a good life since then. She had three children and seven grandchildren. She got lucky. Whenever someone calls her a survivor, she feels she was rescued and was a refugee not a survivor. Leo Breitholtz (?), who jumped off a train from Auschwitz, is a good friend said she is a survivor and not a refugee as she had papers. She feels she has no one to share it with. She can't believe that she is here. She feels it is someone else's story that she is telling.
- 135:00 Herta met a woman who told her to come to the Museum and make a full circle. She does not recall her relationship with her mother which may be self-protection. She would love to recapture her relationship with her mother. She does not feel like a survivor like others as she was sheltered from the horrible stuff. Herta thinks of the children she left behind who never had a life and never had children. She feels guilty about that. Herta imagines that so many people must have been involved in bringing her here. She never grieved, all is inside. Herta is thrilled she met the two women and learned a lot from them and was lucky to find them.
- 140:00 (Herta brought artifacts and shows her suitcase.) It is big and she wonders how she carried it; maybe the older children helped. Her mother packed a lot of things. She shows her dress which is meaningful as it has connection to her mother who embroidered, smocked it and sewed it. She also embroidered the nightgown she shows. Herta does not remember the doll that was packed. She had a ragdoll with her and not this doll that her mother made the dress, slip and panties. There are prayer books that

teachers and others gave her which they signed when she left, more clothes, a songbook that she wrote in the songs that she and her father sang and a note of the 10 commandments so she would not forget them. A paint set and photo album were lost along the way. Every morning, Herta would recite the Morning Prayer and the Friedlanders could not understand why she did that.

144:00