MOTHERLAND

GROWING UP WITH THE HOLOCAUST

RITA GOLDBERG

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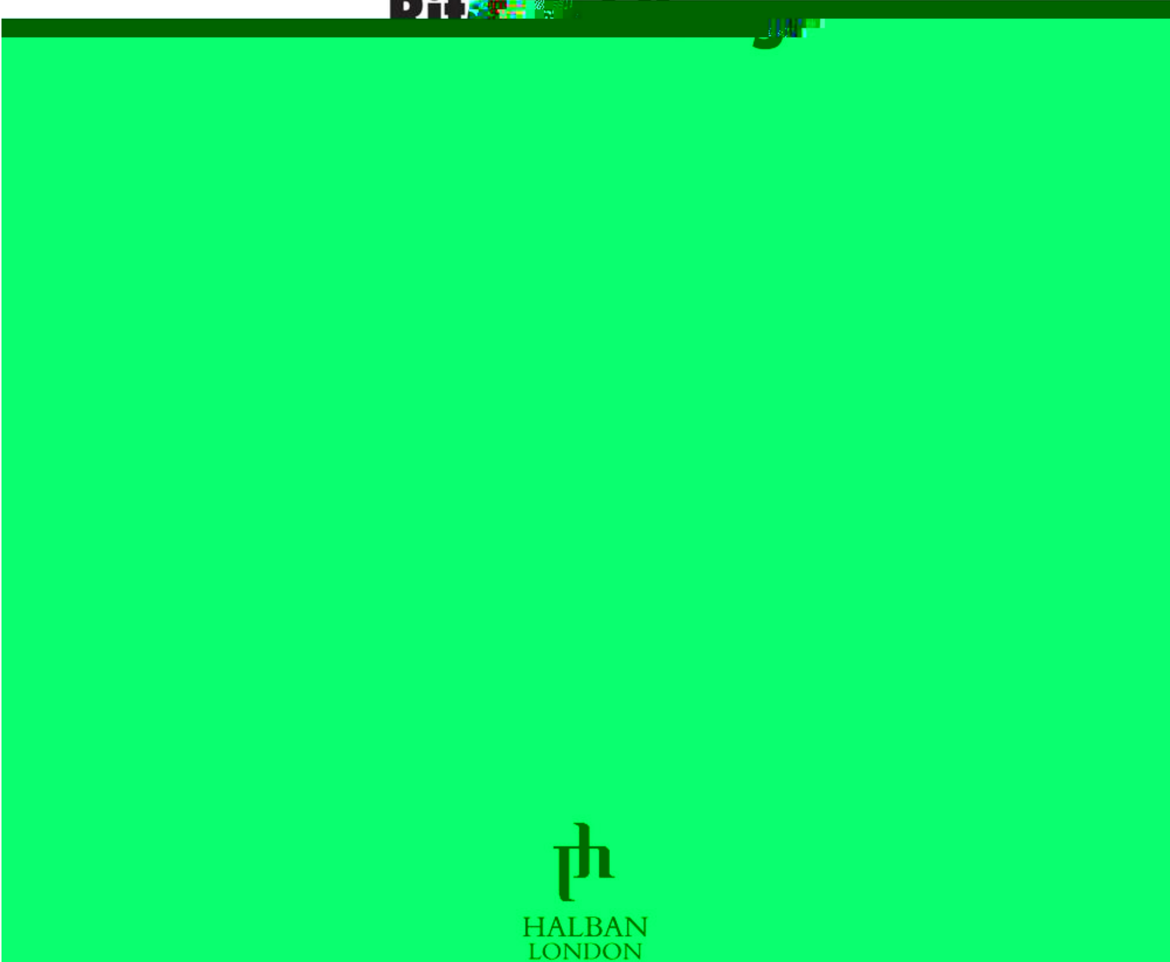

For the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of Hilde and Max:

Daniel, his wife Ellen and sons Gabriel and Jamie
Benjamin

Heather and her husband Zach
Melanie
Michael

Rebecca and her husband Riz, daughter Zawadi and son Simoni
Adam

And for all their future descendants

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Acknowledgments

I HAVE BARELY started, and already I feel like an Oscar nominee fearful of leaving people out. First thanks must go to my mother’s rescuers: Zus and Joop Scholte, in Amsterdam, and Robert Dupuis and family in the Ardennes of Belgium. Without them my mother would probably not have survived, and there would be no marriage, no children and no story. They should have been inscribed among the Righteous of All Nations at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, but for some reason that never happened, possibly because of my mother’s habit (so like my own) of jettisoning the past like a booster rocket on her voyage through life. I hope that this book will make some amends, especially to Kiki Scholte, the youngest daughter of the Dutch family, who has been a friend all these years.

I mention Yad Vashem, but other museums also appear quite a bit in this book, not only because people working there have kindly helped me with research, but also because museums

love and support from the beginning, when they read the first version of the memoir.

Oliver, Benjamin, Daniel and his wife Ellen and their two little boys, Gabriel and Jamie, are the delight of my life and have made me a happy writer even when the work has been sad. They (at least the adults) and other members of the extended family – nieces Heather Brubaker and Rebecca Ross Russell, and Becky’s father, David Ross Russell – read the manuscript at various points. The entire clan, including cousins in Switzerland, Israel and the Philippines, has been a source of loving strength, and I recognize my good fortune in having them.

Special thanks go to two people whose intellectual support has been essential. My husband, Oliver Hart, has been everything writers usually mention at the very end of the acknowledgments. We have been married nearly forty years, and he has been patient, loving, hilarious and generally adorable. He has also been a challenging reader and fastidious editor even when he had to grit his teeth to plow through yet another version of a chapter. My son Benjamin Hart, who is a professional in these matters, has edited several versions of the manuscript down to the one now in print. His love of language and his grasp of structure and logic are amazing, and his comments have been astute and characteristically witty. He also gave me the title of my book.

Warm thanks as well to Myra McLarey and Steve Prati, who have been insightful readers, commentators, cheerleaders and beloved friends. I’m grateful for the help, interest and unflagging kindness of many people in Lexington and Cambridge, Massachusetts and abroad, only a few of whom I’ll name here: Steven Cooper; my close friend, Pat McFarland, who died before she could see the published book, and her husband Philip McFarland; John Gledson; Ruthy and Elhanan Helpman; Linda Jorgenson; Eva Simmons; Esther Silberstein; Ali Butchko; colleagues at the Department of Comparative Literature at Harvard; and the now-defunct Porch Table writers’ group in Cambridge, MA, the brainchild of Elena Castedo and of which Myra, above, Gregory Maguire (to whom thanks as well) and I were members.

I would like to thank the many archivists, historians and researchers who have helped me – some for years, some more recently. These include the incomparable Genya Markon, who as Director of Photo Archives first contacted my mother on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. She has, regrettably, semi-retired, though she still does work on behalf of the Museum in Israel. She gathered photographs and interviews for the Museum, where they are in safe hands, and she introduced my mother to other scholars. Dutch researchers from NIOD (the Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies) and from Dutch Public Television, both based in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, include Matthijs Cats, Gerard Nijssen, René Kok, René Pottkamp, Erik Somers, the late Eric Nooter (who worked in New York) and Ad van Liempt. Several of these historians also participated in making a television program about my mother that aired in the Netherlands in 2003. They generously shared major discoveries from their archives, and I have been able to use these in the book. An Huitzing and Monica Kaltenschnee, from the Stichting Annemie en Helmuth Wolff, recently discovered a cache of wartime photographs and out of the blue sent me three formerly unknown pictures. The cover portrait of my mother at eighteen, in her nurse’s uniform, comes

from that collection.

Thanks go also to Elisa Ho of the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati, Ohio; to Lynn Fleischer, of the Annette Levy Ratkin Jewish Community Archives in Nashville, TN; to Reuma Weizmann (wife of the former president of Israel), though indirectly, because she sent her unpublished memoir to my parents; to David Delfosse, of Paris, who is working on a book that prominently features my uncle Jo; and especially to Megan Koreman, a brilliant historian who generously shared information about Jo and his underground connections in Belgium. Her meticulously researched http://dutchparisblog.com allowed me to find some information online, but she was generous with advice and further commentary as well.

Karen Packard, Theresa Norris and Alicia Peters of Wales Copy Center in Lexington MA have helped me over many years with printing and illustrations in all kinds of complicated permutations. Judy Stewart, my copy-editor, and Michelle Levy, the book's designer, have been a delight to work with and have taken care to minimize error and please the eye.

I should add that I'm not a historian, and that this is not an academic enterprise. Because I wanted to tell my mother's story as she told it to me, and to tell my own in relation to hers, I chose not to read other people's memoirs, or even to dip into the huge critical literature on the Holocaust. I didn't want to be too influenced or to be made more self-conscious than I already was, though I know many excellent books exist. I'm sure that my work joins others in the articulation of many shared ideas, but I have neither read nor borrowed from anyone else in that regard. On the other hand, I've tried to cite the historical and other sources that I do use, again by no means exhaustively, with great care. Because of my own linguistic limitations, I haven't been able to read most Dutch historical sources in their original language. As authors always say in these situations, any mistakes are my own.

Final thanks go to my peripatetic agent and friend, Andrew Schuller, who divides his time between Canberra and London, and to Martine and Peter Halban, who have also become friends as well as publishers.

Rita Goldberg
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Notes on the Text

I have tried to minimize abbreviations in this narration, but several recur:

AJDC – the American Joint Distribution Committee, also known as Joint. This is a Jewish relief organization based in New York and still very much in existence. It provided crucial assistance to Jews in Europe, especially immediately after the Holocaust. My mother was employed by the AJDC for the latter part of her time at Bergen-Belsen.

NIOD – the acronym for the Netherlands Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies. This organization has changed its name several times, but NIOD always refers to it.

UNRRA – United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, an organization that my parents, especially my father, were involved with for a couple of years after the war.

Because this story covers almost 100 years, it jumps around in time a bit. Many conversations with Jo Jacobsthal (my uncle), Joe Wolhandler (who was present in 1945, post-war, at Bergen-Belsen) and even with my mother took place in the mid-1990s and early 2000s, but are often retold in the present tense. I have tried to be clear about these distinctions in narrative time.

American Prologue
Mother and Daughter

THE GRASSY FIELD in the middle of the hospital grounds ought to have been lawn, but it had been left wild and was known by now as The Meadow. Five substantial brick houses adjoined it, two on one side, three on the other. The houses had been built about three decades before in the Georgian style, with white-columned porticos and side wings lined with windows. Winter and summer, a path ran not quite straight across The Meadow from one set of houses to the other. In the spring, before the grass had begun its serious growth, it looked like a parting inexpertly drawn through a luxuriant head of hair. As the summer progressed, the path diminished from a clear line to a trace to a mere fold in the waving grass, until it finally disappeared altogether, only to re-emerge from the snow and mud of winter once again. I remember lying on my back in that sweet-smelling nest, looking up at the summer clouds and listening to the scrabbling of small creatures.

This was in Rhode Island, in the mid-1950s, in the grounds of the state mental hospital where my father, Max, was a doctor. I lived there in episodes for a total of perhaps five years before I turned nine and we moved away for good. I have always identified so strongly with the little girl in the long grass that my habit of retreating there seems to define something to which all subsequent experience somehow referred. I wonder now whether the comfort I drew from being on my own in the buzzing silence of that miniature world, from relying on my own thought and observation, and especially from the idea of not being found, came from a deep part of my being, a part I dared not confront, really, until much later in my adult life. *Hiding in the long grass* became my shorthand for escape. Decades later, I think about the appeal of that hidden place. Something about hiddenness and surveillance, about the refreshing of identity in solitude, had meant a great deal to me and seemed to endow an ordinary experience of childhood with exceptional weight. The long grass was more than a safe haven. It was genuinely an escape, and the question becomes: an escape from what?

Sometimes I think that the escape was from the long reach of memory, that shadow over the sunlit lawn of my own little life, from infancy on; and not from my own memories, which were only beginning to take shape at that age, but from my mother's memory, from our family memories, even, it sometimes seemed, from the collective memory of the Jews. My father was a psychiatrist, a professional rememberer, but he spent more time analyzing than recalling, being a true disciple of Freud and Erikson. His sort of remembering was supposed, eventually, to bring you health. In fact he often protected my mother, Hilde, from remembering too much or too fast, but my mother on her own was not very self-protective. She talked freely about what had happened to her in the years just before I was born. I feel,

sometimes, as if I had taken in her stories at her breast, before I had the power of speech. I knew the family history so early that I cannot remember a time before knowing. My dreams and waking life swarmed with frightful retellings.

By the age of three or four, I knew that it was pure chance that had saved me from the boxcars I had heard so much about, those trains which took terrified innocents, crammed together standing up and dying of thirst and exposure, to their deaths in the camps of Eastern Europe. I was born a few years too late, but I knew right from the start that my blue eyes, my blonde ringlets, and my prattle would not have saved me. Children younger than I had perished. I had seen them in my mother's photograph album. At first I imagined myself in those boxcars. As I grew older, into womanhood and then into motherhood, I imagined my younger sisters on them, and then my children. The dream of deportation was a nightmare that could be adapted to all the stages of life, because it had been a reality, though not directly for me.

When I grew old enough to read, I was introduced to *The Diary of Anne Frank*. By the age of ten, I'd read it many times over. I don't think that was an unusual thing to do, since the book was a bestseller by a child, but in my household it had a special significance. Anne's father was my godfather, and I knew him very well. I had always called him Uncle Otto and thought of him as a blood relative, my favorite, in fact. One of my first extended memories from childhood is of Otto standing on his head in a shaft of sunlight pouring in from a window behind him. His smooth, benevolent face is getting redder and redder, but being upside-down on a warmly patterned Persian rug doesn't keep him from spouting delightful nonsense. I laugh and laugh – I have that body memory of laughter welling up from inside – and once Otto is upright again, his three-piece suit pulled to rights and his fair complexion recovered from the rush of blood, he gives me a British pop-up book full of tile-roofed houses populated by dolls who speak an odd sort of English and have fairy cakes for tea. It's like an afternoon in Ali Baba's cave. I already possess other treasures he has given me. The tiny antique silver eggcup, napkin ring and spoon slotted in a case of blue velvet and engraved with my name were given to my parents when I was born. All my memories of him in my first years are of laughter, play and affection.

By that time, Otto and his second wife, Fritzi, had settled in Basel, Switzerland, where his mother, sister and brother and their families had survived the war. Basel was the city of my father's birth, and of mine, too. My parents had seen a great deal of the Franks before our departure for America in 1950. The two families had lived around the corner from each other when I was born, and my mother took me to visit almost daily. In the next couple of years, we came back once or twice for visits we could ill afford, and when my father was drafted into the US Army and sent to Germany, we traveled back and forth: Frankfurt and Basel were not very far apart. My memory of Otto on his head comes from that period, when I was just under four. Otto and Fritzi came to us in the US quite frequently too, as the fame of Anne's Diary continued to grow.

In 1958, when I was eight and we were spending our last winter in Rhode Island, my mother sprang a surprise on me. She knew that Otto was coming on his way, or way back, from visiting Hollywood, where George Stevens was making the movie