

Vera Egermayer

Vera Egermayer (1940 -) was born in Prague. When Auschwitz was liberated, Egermayer was in a children's home in Prague, because her parents had been interned. Though the war was turning against Germany, systems to round up and exterminate Jews still operated. She was four years old when she was transported by train to Terezin, without her parents. Egermayer's parents survived the war and the family immigrated to Wellington in 1949. As a child survivor of the Holocaust, she has given talks around the world. She was the New Zealand consul in Prague for 18 years.

Identity through involvement

This is a personal account of how I came to assume my Jewish identity. I was a child survivor, of mixed-marriage origin, who immigrated to New Zealand in the aftermath of World War 2, then moved back to Europe as a young adult. Through learning about my heritage by becoming actively involved in the remembrance of the Holocaust, first in the city of my birth and then in the city where I grew up, I gradually, in my later years, arrived at the point of identifying myself as a Jew.

We arrived in New Zealand as a family on 22 March 1949 when I was 8 years old. I came with my mother, Palva, my father, Vaclav and my little brother Paul, who was born just after the war. New Zealand was a natural destination for us because we already had relatives there on my mother's side - the Jewish side. One of these relatives had settled in New Zealand as early as 1914, having followed her Jewish husband-to-be. In the 1920s she brought out two of my uncles and an aunt, Matylda, (who returned to Europe to look after my ailing grandmother and subsequently perished in Auschwitz) and later, in 1939, a nephew, who managed to get out just in time. They all came from a village called Klikov in Southern Bohemia, where they are remembered to this day as the local Jews who ran the pub and owned a ceramic workshop.

By the time we arrived in Wellington, our relatives prided themselves on being (almost like) real New Zealanders, and they appeared distinctly uncomfortable with having us there to remind them of where they had come from, and of all those whom they had not managed to save. My aunt squirmed whenever my mother addressed her in their native language - Czech - in public. Although their own parents lay in the Jewish cemetery of their birthplace - with one exception possibly, they did not lead Jewish lives - they had married out and were raising their families as Kiwis/Christians. So there was no model of Jewish life for us from the family in New Zealand.

As a small child in Prague, all I knew about being Jewish was that you had to hide it and were punished for it if "they" found out. My non-Jewish father, an idealist, who married my mother on 13 March 1939, two days before Czechoslovakia was occupied by the Nazis, thereby saving her life as well as mine, disappeared one day. He was interned in a hard labour camp because he had the courage to resist pressure on him to divorce. My mother said goodbye to me soon after, having placed me in a Jewish children's home for safety, since my father's relatives, whose help she had solicited, were not willing to take me into their home. She left in the first of the mixed-marriage transports from Prague to Terezin - where I followed her in the last of these transports, AE9, on 16 March 1945 at the age of four years and seven months.

Whilst my internment in a concentration camp was brief, I lived the first five years of my life in an atmosphere of terror and fear - fear of being Jewish - and I saw my parents terrorized

and helpless for years on end. I still remember the star on my mother's coat. One of our neighbours denounced my mother for failing to wear her star and the Czech police came around to investigate. The story goes that, aged around 3, I stood up in my cradle to defend my mother proclaiming that she had been wearing the star but she was carrying me in her arms so the star was hidden and could not be seen. The stigma of the star and the danger it represented was implanted in my young mind at a very early age. After the war our main preoccupation was to get out of Czechoslovakia - not in order to escape communism (my father was a pre-war communist and we obtained our exit visas under the Communist regime, a month after it was imposed on 25 February 1948) but rather to escape the memories and the empty spaces left by lost family - and to find a distant haven.

We had already tried to get out before the war but our relatives had not managed to get the necessary permits for us - although, as I later found out at the National Archives in Wellington, they succeeded in getting permits for four of my young male cousins - sadly, only one of them acted in time.

My mother and I would go to the JOINT (American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee) office in Prague for help (clothes, extra rations, information) and I remember that that is where I got my first-ever doll. There were some survivors around most of whom had already been highly assimilated before the war. Afterwards, many tried to dissimulate their Jewish identity even further and merge into Czech society by changing their names and never talking about what they had gone through. And this persisted throughout Communism. Moreover, my mother always felt bitter towards the Jewish Community and expressed this to me from an early age because she felt that they had betrayed her trust: she had placed me in a Jewish home when she was deported to Terezin thinking I would be safe there. Yet I was sent to Terezin too- a defenceless child- sent to make up the numbers in the transport whilst some privileged Jew, as she saw it, had managed to keep himself off the list. A mother's feeling of guilt at having left a child behind? Hardly motivation for any child to want to be Jewish.

Our relatives sponsored us to come to New Zealand and helped to pay for the trip. We left from Genoa on the Toscana which took us to Sydney in a 6-week voyage through the Suez Canal, and there we duly boarded the Monawai for Wellington. We would never have met any of the current immigration criteria - we could not speak English, and we had neither money nor possessions ... just a few meagre personal effects which were mercilessly and meticulously itemized by the Czech authorities who issued our exit visas - down to the last set of underwear and pocket handkerchief. My father did take two pairs of scissors, with the stamp "Sheffield Steel", to use in his profession. He was a bespoke tailor and my mother was a housewife and former shop attendant - with an apprenticeship for this trade to her credit - she kept the certificate to the end of her life although it served no purpose in New Zealand.

My parents immediately gravitated towards the Czech community of Wellington where they could speak their own language and, on festive occasions like parties, listen to their music, eat their food and reminisce about the old days when there was life on the streets on Sunday and you could get a real cup of coffee - the lack of which was a small price to pay for being in a safe country. We continued to speak Czech and eat Czech at home - I certainly did not feel this as a positive manifestation of healthy cultural diversity- and neither did the people we came into contact with. New Zealand in the 1950s was not a place where anyone, least of all newcomers, wanted to be different. The people in our street looked upon us kindly, as a curiosity, with no concept whatsoever of where we came from and what we had been through.

And what about being Jewish during this period? As I have mentioned, our relatives in New Zealand had already distanced themselves from a Jewish identity. We knew some Jewish

people who had come from Europe either before the war or as survivors like us, but we were hardly aware of any established, influential and affluent Jewish community in Wellington. They certainly did not approach us. In fact it would have been unlikely for a mixed-marriage family to be made welcome in the Jewish community at that time. My brother and I were not initiated into any of the traditions or festivals - the only Jewish holiday my mother never forgot was Yom Kippur. My brother and I both went to Sunday school and my brother and I were both baptized in an effort to conceal any trace of being Jewish.

I confided to one or two special friends in college that I had been in a concentration camp but did not dwell on the reason for that – namely, that I was Jewish. I did not go out of the assembly during prayers along with the Jewish girls and to this day I am far more familiar with the Christian ritual of hymns and prayers than Jewish practice. My mother never forgot the sisters she had lost in the Holocaust- Matylda, Olga, Gusta - and she talked about them frequently and with great sadness and bewilderment- she could never understand how it could all have happened. Was it all a bad dream? During my New Zealand years the Holocaust and its trauma were present but being Jewish was never a preoccupation. Expatriation was a way of escaping – from the weight of the past and from the tentacles of a family which had become dysfunctional. It provided a liberating opportunity for reinvention, on many intersecting and shifting levels, through my work, the people in my life, my interests - and the language I was speaking at the time. My dull English name itself - Vera- had quite a glamorous resonance in Paris. My Jewish side remained dormant.

There were many other un-seized opportunities in my life to come out as a Jew. I spent several months in Israel living on a Kibbutz with my cousin (a hidden child) and his family, at the time of the 6 day war in June 1967 and when invited, even briefly toyed with the idea of settling there - very briefly. During the Paris years, 1968 to 1993, many of my closest friends were French Jewish psychiatrists, including some children who had been hidden, as it later emerged. In France during the 1960s such people were still not prepared to expose their history and I only alluded to mine in passing. Whilst never denying my Jewish origin, I was never willing to fully assume this identity. For example, I would always go to great pains to explain to those who thought that I was Jewish from my surname – Egermayer – that it was in fact a German name (my father's family came from the Sudetenland). Whenever the subject came up, I would say I was of Jewish origin. Or that my mother was Jewish but never: "I am a Jew".

I believe that time, place and the people we encounter can help us to recognize who we are. When I went back to live in Prague, the place of my birth, some 15 years ago, in my mid-50s- my time had come - I was ready to make some sense of my life. My return triggered my search for Jewish identity. My Jewish heritage was all around me. It was particularly powerful in the buildings and the streets of the Jewish quarter where my mother must have taken me when I was a very small child. The spirit of the place claimed me and would not let me escape. Memories came back. I walked the streets of my childhood and visited all the addresses where my aunts had lived before being taken off to concentration camps. I must have been in these places before, perhaps a baby in my mother's arms, witnessing events which I could not remember but which were buried in my subconscious. I started looking into records at the Jewish Community about their fate and found the index cards showing the date of their transport to Terezin and then to Auschwitz which was also taken to be the date of their death. Finding such a card for myself and for my mother was a chilling experience even though there was no second date - no Auschwitz date. I made several visits to the village from where my mother and her family originated, saw the sites of their businesses, read the names of my grandparents on their gravestones in the Jewish cemetery and poured over the photos salvaged by my cousin (a child survivor) who is still living in the village - the last Jew.

In Prague, I approached the newly revived post-Communist Jewish Community of the early 1990s with caution. There were several rival groups, as usual, and I associated myself with the orthodox one because I had the right to belong, having a mother who was Jewish. I started going to their cultural events and attending lectures about Judaism. But I was still reluctant to join formally and make myself part of an identifiable Jewish Community. You had to register and were issued with a membership card. It took several years to overcome the fear inside me of putting my name and address down on a list, as all my relatives had done during the Nazi occupation, and thereby earmarking myself - making myself an easy target for a round-up. No one failed to report for a transport when their name was on the list. Some of my Czech Jewish friends are still frightened to join the Community or to receive Jewish publications in the mail in case their neighbours find out.

Then I found my way to the survivor world and started meeting and interrogating women who could have been my mother, and they told me about things I needed to know- events that had happened to me and marked me in my formative years - but which I was too young to remember. I visited Terezin repeatedly and found the site of the children's house where I had been placed and saw the crematorium where the smoke came from. I always remembered the smoke. For the first time, I was told that I was a "child survivor" and even though that label sits uncomfortably because it implies homogeneity of experience, I started reinventing myself by working for various child survivor groups like Hidden Child Prague. I co-founded the EUAS (European Association of Jewish Child Survivors of the Holocaust) and organized several international meetings for this Association. I served as the secretary of the World Federation of Jewish Child Survivors of the Holocaust and attended their conferences in the USA. My language skills and experience in the world of international organizations became an asset in a country which had been largely cut off from the western world for 40 years, and I was able to make a contribution which was valued.

I believe that we are not only what we say we are, but more importantly what we do - where we give of our time and energy. In other words, to me identity emerges from practice. The child-survivor work proved satisfying and strengthened my Jewish identity but I always felt an element of danger in the Prague context and it was not until I came back to Wellington - where I now spend half of my time - and became involved in the Wellington Holocaust Research and Education Centre (WHREC) - in activities at the local level- and saw people who take a pride in being Jewish- that I felt most committed to my Jewish roots. This feeling of belonging is particularly strong when I talk to school groups which visit the Centre or when I speak on public occasions such as the United Nations International Holocaust Remembrance Day on 27 January.

My journey has not been one of recovering a lost Jewish identity because I did not really have one to start with. The Jewish roots I had through my mother, diluted by assimilation and inter-marriage and stifled by fear of persecution, were never nourished by the practice of Jewish life. Hitler called me a Jew and made me frightened and even ashamed of that label. I could never have called myself a Jew - which is what I do now- had I not felt safe and learned something about what that identity was. All identity is complex and composed of differences. My Jewish identity is not derived from religion - the Jewish religion is still a mystery to me. The Holocaust is of course an intrinsic part of being Jewish for me, but it does not end there. I appreciate and share many of the Jewish values such as empathy for suffering, endless enquiry, the importance of the law and of the word - the uniqueness of every life and the responsibility to use it to add something to the world. I am deeply responsive to Jewish sounds - the sound of Yiddish - the cry of the Shofar and the rhythm of Klezmer music. And quite simply, I feel comfortable with Jewish people. There is an unspoken bond that stretches back to a time beyond memory. That is where my journey has taken me – so far.

Note:

For more than two decades Vera worked in Paris as a researcher in an international organisation (OECD). In the early 90s, she relocated to Prague the city of her birth where she represented New Zealand in the role of Honorary Consul for almost 20 years. In recognition of this service, Vera was made a Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit (MNZM). For much of her life, Vera has worked both nationally and internationally to keep the memory of the Holocaust alive through research, education and commemoration. She is a founding member and former Board Member of the Holocaust Centre of New Zealand and has played a leading role in many HCNZ projects notably the Children's Holocaust Memorial.



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