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OPA'S ODYSSEY

In a salute to a legacy of inspiration and love, a local filmmaker chronicles the life of her

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OPA'S ODYSSEY

*In a salute to a legacy
of inspiration and love,
a local filmmaker chronicles the life
of her Jewish-born grandfather.*

TAMARA WARREN
Special to the Jewish News

Detroitter Tamara Warren's grandfather, Frank "Opa" Kussy, is an 89-year old Bohemian-born Jew and Auschwitz survivor who converted to Catholicism in the 1950s. Her late grandmother, Ada "Oma" Kussy, was a member of the Dutch Resistance who risked her own safety to protect his.

Tamara (nicknamed "Little Klooney") decided to write about her grandparents' lives when she was 18. After six years of research, she has written *The Opa and the Little Klooney*, a 250-page memoir about her experiences as a grandchild of the Holocaust.

Tamara, her grandfather and other family recently traveled to Europe to complete filming of a television documentary about this exploration. "In [Opa's] sto-

ries, I have discovered struggle, loss and the importance of going on living when it seems there is nothing to live for," Tamara has written. "I have also discovered that the Holocaust shaped me, too."

Tamara hopes to generate support to complete this film with her grandfather later this year. The following is a selection from her travel journal.

APRIL 19, 2000

We arrive in Dresden, Germany, on an unseasonably warm morning for eastern Germany, which is often chilly and damp. Yet, some force seems to be guiding our journey — with an 89-year old travel companion, sunny weather is surely a blessing.

He would never say as much. He looks at the town of his birth through wise eyes of knowledge. He has no fear. "The past comes never back," he says.

Yet, I cannot help but wonder how this place resonates inside his head — the city where he studied, where he married, had his children — and was first persecuted by the Nazis during Kristallnacht.

We walk past the reconstructed Dresden Opera. My grandfather looks up. "My mother loved to go to the opera," he says. "It was the best opera in all of Europe."

Before the bombing, Dresden was said to be architecturally perfect. It is a twist of irony to peer at these soot-laden buildings with an extended family that includes my mother, my brother and our Israeli cousins. When Opa left Dresden for the United States in 1953, his wife, his nephew and his children were all he had left. His family had been erased — murdered, one by one, in the Nazi concentration camps.

That evening, my cousin Miriam heard that Passover services are being held at the synagogue. She and I take a cab to the synagogue. She and I take a cab to that my grandfather helped to construct. We returned to Dresden after liberation, but letting out, but we try to worm our way into an exclusive hotel dinner to follow.

We are told that several Jewish families in Dresden are unable to afford the fee to attend, and that they have no guests. But one man sees the plea through his cousin's eyes.

"You've come so far, this is ridiculous," he says. He says he will see that we join the family at the Hilton. I feel a little guilty as I realize the families leaving the synagogue under a few minutes later, we are laughing.

I discover the man who has in common with me of my grandparents' old friends.

"Your grandparents gave my parents a meal in Germany in 1948," he says. "I had a Chanuka party at their house with me, but I no longer feel out of place."

One hour later, we listen to the German. Chills course through me. It does not usually bother me, but these languages on a holy day is a reminder that my grandfather converted to Catholicism in the 1950s, I feel an uncanny connection to my ancestry.

Fifty people struggle to follow me — about two-thirds are German and the remainder are Christians. They have practically no knowledge of Jewish history, but be among the more knowledgeable.

Bottles of wine are emptied, and the evening the stiffness has disappeared into a laboratory state. A large chunk of the Jewish community has observed the occasion.

As a young Israeli boy and a young girl, I escort my cousin and me home. The occasion has a complex and complex tone for my project. It is such a bittersweet occasion.

APRIL 20, 2000

We begin filming today at the Jewish cemetery. The special allowance for us. Opa, my grandfather, to the headstone that my grandfather had placed in memory of his father, mother and nephew.

Opa recites the passage inscribed on the stone, taken from one of his favorite poems by Johann Schiller, whose themes of justice and human dignity resonate with the inscriptions for Opa's mother, "Auschwitz 1944, Auschwitz 1945."

With a sense of completion, the ceremony. Oblivious to the camera and the physical memory of this day, the realization comes that likely my grandfather's last journey was a business with reparations is not a trip is visibly taxing on him. He is tired and slowly we return to the car.

Tante Illa arrives today, and the grandfather's face is clear.

They embrace in the way that loyal friends do. She has traveled from her home in Munich to see my grandfather. The 87-year-old woman also is a native Dresdener, and she is half Jewish. She lived in Dresden during the entire war, with two small children.

Tante Illa will not talk about what happened to her. Out of respect, we do not ask. We sit in the café sipping *eis kaffee* — ice cream coffee — chatting. I follow the German.

Suddenly she glances to the square. “I remember the bodies here, stacked one atop of the other, after the bombing,” she says. “There was no air, it was sucked away. My children and I hid in the basement.” She looks away and changes the subject.

I first saw Dresden with my grandparents in 1991 on the day commercial trucks brought Western goods across the border into the former East Germany. It is startling how much progress the Germans have made since that first visit. When I think about our family, we have changed considerably since then as well.

My brother and I have grown up. Oma, my mother’s mother, was just beginning to show signs

moving to a future Communist zone, where Jews would soon again be a target.

Opa had reclaimed his family factory, giving him a reason to stay in Germany, until he was forced to escape with his family by Stalin’s threat to arrest all Jewish doctors. (He’d studied for a Ph.D. in electrical engineering, preparing to take over his father’s electrical factory, when the Nazis came to power.)

Yet, Opa and Oma did not appear to live in the past; they were active people who adored each other. I learned about the Holocaust at age 8, shocked by the horror. Yet Oma and Opa did not seem upset, and openly talked to me. As I grew older, Opa told me more.

APRIL 21, 2000

Today we travel to Czechia. We wait for three hours to cross the border.

We drive into the lush mountainside. My grandfather does not notice the hundreds of prostitutes we pass on the side of the road. Some are barely teenagers.

We are off schedule because of our long wait. It is

“A little bit at a time, I put the pieces of the past together with my everyday life. My grandfather seems tired but strangely content. He is frustrated by the limitations of age but rejuvenated by reminders of his childhood — the lost society of the Bohemian Jews.”

— Tamara Warren

of Alzheimer’s disease that year. She died due to complications in 1997.

However, I remember her as she was then, still feisty and fun loving. She vividly recalled her past but underplayed her own bravery. She came to Dresden in 1945, a young Dutch Catholic, who journeyed to war-torn enemy land to marry Opa.

She met him in 1940 in Amsterdam, working in the Dutch Underground trying to save his family. They began their romance under tenuous circumstances, he a Czech Jew who had temporarily escaped Germany.

Opa and his family were turned in to the Nazis and deported to Camp Westerbork in 1942. My grandmother smuggled packages to the family and did so even after they were deported to Theresienstadt. She received confirmation notices, giving her hope — until 1944.

Opa was sent to Auschwitz in September on the first series of deportations. His mother and brother were on the last deportation, and immediately gassed.

When my grandmother discovered Opa was alive after the war, she traveled to Dresden alone. She had

Good Friday, and it is a four-day holiday in Germany. My grandfather is enchanted by the landscape. “I drove this road nearly 100 times to visit my grandparents,” he says.

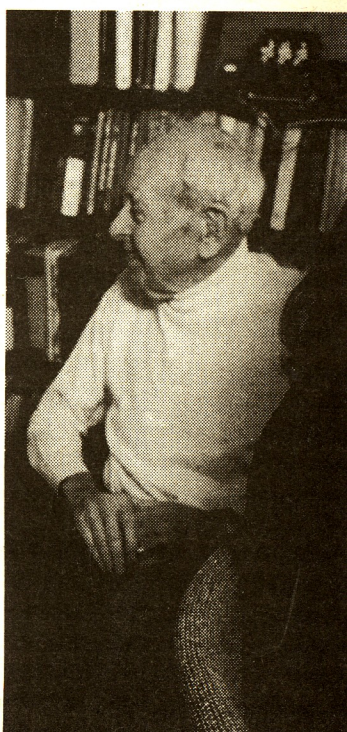
Though we are only kilometers from Germany, the atmosphere has changed, and so have the people’s faces. The East Germans are markedly tougher than the West Germans, but the Czech people seem to be even harsher.

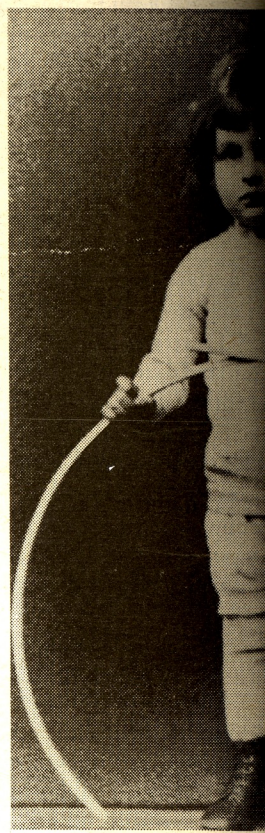
We finally reach Terezin. I have made an appointment to be there before noon. It is 11:30. I rush inside, hoping it is not too late. The woman at the counter looks at me blankly. She works at a concentration camp museum but speaks no English or German.

For five minutes I try to tell her and four others working at Theresienstadt about my appointment. They look at me with disinterest. Finally, one woman makes a phone call and she begrudgingly points outside. I motion for a map. She shakes her head. One of the women finally utters a phrase in English. “You must go one kilometer to the Small Fortress.”

“Where is it?” I ask. “Over there.” She walks away.

Frustrated, I leave with my grandfather following





tion of the Small Fortress, and finally we find people who are willing to help us.

A young man takes us to the director's office, a former Nazi barracks. It is 11:50, and the director has left 10 minutes earlier. I sigh and explain to his secretary why we have come.

Her mother is German, so she is able to communicate with us, she says. She offers us coffee and we gratefully accept. "Czech coffee is always great," Opa says. She calls the director on his mobile. After 20 minutes he obligingly returns. I explain that my mother, who was driving behind us, may be looking for us. He calls the head office, and says she will be notified that I am here.

I introduce Opa, and Opa tells a few of his memories of the year and a half he was imprisoned at Terezin. The director nods, and looks at his watch. He explains that I will have only two hours to film my grandfather at Small Fortress, and that is all.

The camera crew, Opa and I hurry outside. My mother is waiting with the cousins, my brother and Tante Illa. "They would not tell me where you were, Tamara," she says. "We asked at the front desk if you were here. They kept shaking their heads. Only one woman bothered to speak to us. Your brother saw your name written on a pad of paper.

"I told them, 'That is my daughter, where is she?' The woman looked at me and said coldly, 'I am innocent.'"

We shake our feelings of discomfort and focus on the torture prisons before us, which we have barely noticed in our haste. It is my second trip to Terezin, but for some of my family it is their first trip to a concentration camp.

"My cousin was murdered here," Opa says.

For me it is a day of purpose. After six years of study, I know why I have come. Unlike the far-off Polish coun-

Top left: Tamara and her brother Josh, center, film outside the Jewish synagogue in Dresden.

Top center: "Opa" with his daughter (Tamara's mother), Henny. "[At Thereisenstadt] we asked at the front desk if you were here," Henny tells Tamara. "They kept shaking their heads. Only one woman bothered to speak to us.

Your brother saw your name written on a pad of paper. I told them, 'That is my daughter, where is she?' The woman looked at me and said coldly, 'I am innocent.'"

Top right: Frank "Opa" Kussy in 1914. "On the drive home [through the Czech countryside], we stop in Most, the town where my great-grandparents made their home. They owned a bank here, and a porcelain factory. Except for an old church, we see that there is nothing left."

Right: The Kussy family (Frank, Ada and children Ed and Henny (Tamara's mother) in Dresden, 1948: "The past comes never back," Opa says. Yet, I cannot help but wonder how [Dresden] resonates inside his head.

tryside, Terezin is a short distance from the place my Czech family called home. At that time, German-speaking Czech Jews were common to the region. To me, it is a reminder of the closeness of the Holocaust — biking distance from home but a landscape that bears no resemblance to the idyllic vision of the Czech countryside.

After a few hours, the heat becomes overbearing, and my grandfather is beginning to look weak. It is time to go. Gladly, we complete our work at Theresienstadt.

Unmoved by the visit, Opa seems

to be the most cheerful of the group. He always says, "Nothing, no words can recreate the reality. That is why it doesn't bother me to talk about it."

On the drive home, we stop in Most, the town where my great-grandparents made their home. They owned a bank here, and a porcelain factory. Except for an old church, we see that there is nothing left. The reality of the wasted land seems to make him somber.

The Communists leveled the old city, searching for coal. Now all that stands are row after row of depressed housing and sad-looking people walking from building to building.

We have heard that a Jewish cemetery is still here. We stop at the gas station with our three-car caravan.

My mother speaks German to a young man working there. He explains how to get to the highway. When she asks how to get to the Jewish cemetery, he angrily shakes his head and walks away. We decide that it is time to leave Most.

APRIL 27, 2000

We have completed filming for now. A little bit at a time, I put the pieces of the past together with my everyday life. My grandfather seems tired but strangely content. He is frustrated by the limitations of age but rejuvenated by reminders of his childhood — the lost society of the Bohemian Jews.

My grandfather, my mom and I spend a week alone together in the Czech Republic. We travel to Mariensbad, one spa where Opa's family spent summers.

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