

SURVIVOR

Real History and the Fake Survivor Deli Strummer

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What? Why would anybody lie about being a Holocaust victim/survivor? Money? Fame? Respect? Leniency? 80.6 billion in compensation claims money? Here is one amazing and true story woven into the hoax of the 20th century.

YOU NEVER SEE THE SCARS. But she talks about them once in a while and you see them in your mind's eye—smooth white burn marks on her flesh, old as the Holocaust.

She offers the scars as desperate testimony when she's tired of talking facts—too much „nitty gritty“ —and wants to talk emotions instead. She's leaning back in the pink vinyl restaurant booth of a Baltimore diner: gold sweater, beige jacket, her hair a fluffy white helmet. Big glasses propped on a little nose.

How long were you in Auschwitz?

And what was your prisoner number?

She sidesteps the questions and speaks of the scars: indisputable, horrible.

„I could take off my sweater and could show you still my cigarette marks,“ she says, motioning to her top, as if you'd say yes and allow an elderly woman to take off her sweater right here in the diner and show where the Nazis stubbed their cigarettes out on her skin. As if that would gain back her reputation, quiet the doubters, turn the clock back to a time when she was loved and admired instead of shunned.

For better or worse, it's too late now.

Deli Strummer is 78 years old, a concentration camp survivor, and until recently a local hero. Now her account of the war has been so called into question that a few have even whispered doubts about her identity. You can hardly fault their suspicions, the contradictions in her story are so profound.

For 20 years, Strummer had been saying she was at five concentration camps during World War II over the course of 4 1/2 years. Turns out she was at three in not quite two years. She claimed, briefly, that she was imprisoned at Bergen-Belsen. Never was. Auschwitz, which she said she survived for nine months? The German records say she couldn't have been there for more than eight days. Her husband, who she always led people to believe was dead? She divorced him! He's alive and remarried in Vancouver. And on and on and on.

„I've never encountered anything like this before. Ever,“ says Lawrence L. Langer, an expert in Holocaust testimony and one of two historians who interviewed Strummer since questions arose about the validity of her recollections last year. „I'm not talking about lapse of memory. I'm talking about invented reality.“ Before all these revelations, Deli Strummer had her own little float in the local Independence Day parade. She waved the American flag and crowds cheered. Children embraced her after lectures. This summer, allegations about her honesty erupted on the front pages of area papers. Her speeches, her book, her documentaries were publicly discredited. Worried that Strummer's growing lack of credibility would taint the honest testimony of other Holocaust survivors, friends repudiated her. After years of supporting Strummer, the powerful Baltimore Jewish Council disassociated from her—a move tantamount to expulsion in this tightknit community.

„I don't know why in the world they want to hurt me that badly,“ Strummer says of the council and other Holocaust survivors, whom she calls her „accusers.“ Perhaps, she speculates, they were envious of her fame. Some discrepancies she denies; others she calls the mistakes of memory.

Should we pity 78-year-old Deli Strummer? In the camps, she had no calendar, she had no pencil, she had only 10 fingers and fear. She was terrorized. She was traumatized. Who are we to judge an old woman's memories of horror?

Ah, but there are some things we must do, says Art Abramson, who leads the Baltimore Jewish Council and spearheaded an investigation into Strummer's past. Get history right. Respect the living. Honor the dead. Abramson is a small, garrulous man with strong opinions. When it comes to the Holocaust, facts are facts, he says, and woe to anyone who toys with them.

„A table is a table is a table,“ Abramson says. „It's not a chair.“

In this drama, there are two truths. There is objective history—that of scholars' books, German records, the preponderance of survivor testimony. And there is the personal anguish of one Towson woman who defines her life in terms of an experience half a world and half a lifetime away, which she will not—will not—let go quietly into the night. Which is more sacred?

A year ago, as one former friend of Strummer's phrases it, „her name in Baltimore was holy.“

Unlike some Holocaust survivors, Strummer, a retired research associate from Sinai Hospital in Baltimore, is not reticent in public. She began lecturing around 1980. At first she had to be coaxed into speaking but quickly discovered she was a natural. In lectures she speaks with dramatic ease, her voice hardening at important lines, her finger wagging, her fist sweeping the air for emphasis. She achieves a heightened emotional pitch, invoking God, blessing her audience, offering thanks to America, the country she says saved her. (She long ago declared July 4 her adopted birthday.) Of the 20 or so area survivors on the Baltimore Jewish Councils list of Holocaust speakers, Strummer was among the most frequently used.

„I was the golden girl of the council,“ Strummer says one afternoon at her dining room table, in her sharp Viennese accent. „Rain, snow, ice—Deli never said no. Because I committed myself.“

Single and childless, Strummer gained a family in the community that adored her, the strangers who recognized her face. Her children were the classes she lectured.

„Children really listen to me, they cling to me,“ she explains. „I have over 200,000 children.“

But trouble rumbled. For years, a handful of people voiced isolated concerns about Strummer's account. One fellow Holocaust survivor, 79-year-old Leo Bretholz, who spent seven years on the run during the war and now lives in Baltimore, heard such concerns a decade ago from his cousin Sonia, who was visiting America.

At a reception, Bretholz says, „I introduced Sonia to Deli. I said, ‚Sonia, here's a comrade of yours from the camps.‘“ Like Strummer, Sonia was Viennese and had survived Auschwitz. The two women compared experiences.

When they drove home, Bretholz says, „My cousin said to me, ‚Leo, what this woman your friend told me—she said in German—das stimmt doch nicht.‘ That means this doesn't jibe at all.“

„From that moment on,“ Bretholz says, „there was a bug in my mind.“

Six years ago, John Holzworth, a now-retired teacher from Fallston High School in Harford County, Md., called the council to say he didn't want Strummer back after she spoke twice in his classroom. She claimed in conversation that she'd spent over a year in Flossenburg, a German concentration camp, yet when Holzworth consulted a book she'd written a few years before, the book claimed she'd been in Auschwitz during the entire period in question.

Some suggest there was a quality of self-aggrandizement to Strummer's account of the Holocaust. Instead of dwelling on details of her daily life in the camps, she focused on having been plucked from the jaws of death time and again.

Five times she entered a gas chamber but came out alive, she claims, because guards turned on the water instead of the gas. Holocaust historians say this scenario is logistically impossible: In concentration camps the gas chambers had no water hookups.

„In all the years I heard her speak, she never described the condition of a camp,“ says Rubin Sztajer, a 74-year-old survivor who has been the most vocal of Strummer's critics. „She made herself great how she survived ... how she walked into the gas chamber and came out.“

In an interview last fall with the Baltimore Sun, Strummer compared her devotion with that of other survivors.

„I understand my colleagues and comrades who don't want to speak about [the war]. They want to go to Boca Raton and live a good life,“ she said. „I can't do that. ... I owe. If I feel someday there is no more hate out there, I go to Boca Raton.“

For these comments, she later apologized in a letter to the editor. But that's how the talk started: a question here, a rumor there. The doubts might have remained merely doubts if Strummer had not so obsessively recounted her Holocaust experiences. In 1988 she self-published a thin book, »A Personal Reflection of the Holocaust«, and in the same year was filmed for the Holocaust archives at Yale University. She was featured in a 1995 documentary with two other survivors, then formed an organization to help fund another film entirely about her. This last was supposed to be her „legacy.“

Instead, it became her undoing.

When Strummer and her producer approached the Baltimore Jewish Council last summer with their new creation, »From Out of Ashes: The Deli Strummer Story«, they wanted the council's seal of approval to show the documentary in schools. Instead, Abramson and other council members began to notice aspects of the narrative that clashed with the book.

They decided to call in the experts.

Under the scrutiny of Langer, the testimony expert, and Raul Hilberg, one of the world's preeminent Holocaust scholars, Deli Strummer's account simply fell apart.

She'd long claimed that she was taken from her family in Vienna in October 1941 and sent to Theresienstadt, a Czechoslovakian ghetto. When the historians pointed out that the first transport of Viennese Jews did not leave for the ghetto until later, Strummer shaved more than two years off her account. She now says she was taken away in 1943—a fact confirmed by the ghetto's records of an Adele (Deli) Aufrichtig, Strummer's maiden name.

Strummer had also claimed she spent nine months in Auschwitz—a stance that became difficult to maintain given the new, shorter time line. Council officials

working with German records concluded that she spent no more than eight days at Auschwitz. (Strummer now says she was at Auschwitz for about three weeks.)

These discrepancies—first aired in June after being leaked to the Baltimore Sun—divided public opinion in Baltimore. Many people defended Strummer, saying criticisms of her chronology amounted to „nitpicking“ after all she had been through.

„When I went from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz,“ Strummer explains, „I lost my name, I lost my identity. I became a number. I didn't have a pen, I didn't have a piece of paper, and time went away from me.“

And yet, so much time lost. Where did it go?

„I can understand someone who thinks it's nine months and it's eight months,“ says Beverly Stappler, one of four people who in recent months have left the eight-member board of Zarhar Remembrance Fund (a misspelling of *zakhor*, Hebrew for „remember“), the small organization Strummer founded to fund her documentary. „But you don't think it's nine months when it's eight days.“

Historical records confirm that from Auschwitz, Adele Aufrechtig went to Freiberg, a unit of the German concentration camp Flossenburg, where she stayed six months. She spent the final week of the European war at the Mauthausen concentration camp. Strummer's account of her liberation is a scene of horror and remarkable luck that—under scrutiny—may be too extraordinary.

She says that on May 5, 1945, the day Mauthausen was freed, she and others were rounded up and made to stand in line before the gas chamber.

„I was as close as to that tree,“ Strummer says one day, pointing to a trunk outside her dining room window at most 20 feet away. She neared the door just as American troops were arriving, she says, „and the door flew open and the brave guards started running.“

But according to the records of Mauthausen, the last gassing took place there April 28, 1945—before Strummer even arrived at the camp. Historians say that by the time she was freed, the bulk of German guards were long gone.

„This is amazing,“ Strummer responds when she hears this rebuttal. „They're lying to you! They weren't there. They really don't know, you know? They really don't know.“

In July, many of Strummer's remaining supporters were dismayed to hear the latest news: Her husband, who she had led audiences to believe had died, had been located. Alive.

How could this be? In her 1988 book, Strummer had speculated that her husband, Benno, whom she married in the Theresienstadt ghetto, died in a fire at Dachau. In a 1988 interview, she stated that she never saw Benno after he was taken from her.

But in fact, Strummer now admits, she and Benno met in Vienna shortly after the war and remarried, this time under Austrian law. Benno Strummer, contacted in Vancouver, has roughly confirmed this time line, as does an apparent Austrian divorce certificate that Deli recently showed a reporter.

So why lie? Strummer says the war changed her husband, and that after their divorce, she honored him by letting him remain—in her lectures, at least—the man she fell in love with.

„I carry his name,“ she says. „I wanted to preserve some dignity for him.“

And indeed, here is the divorce certificate, brown and shriveled at the edges, dug up from the bottom of a drawer. Roughly translated from German, it indicates that Benno and Adele Strummer divorced in 1947, on the grounds that „plaintiff states that defendant mistreated her severely and repeatedly out of rage and brutality.“

So nothing, truly, is as it seems.

The conclusion is almost inescapable: Deli Strummer is a Holocaust survivor who wittingly or not altered numerous elements of her story. Her account is clearly longer, more harrowing and more miraculous than what actually happened—as revealed by concentration camp records, documents in her possession and an interview with her sister. But it is still a Holocaust experience, and she defends the essence of it vehemently, desperately, as a truth that lies more in feelings than the nitty-gritty of facts.

„Have you ever asked me how it hurt ... when I was humiliated?“ Strummer says. „I think I hold this very much against the historians when they interviewed me because not one of them was interested in ‘How did you feel then? What happened to you?’“

What happened to you, Deli Strummer?

- „The food in Auschwitz was—once a day they brought in a pail of water with something swimming in it,“ she says. „You grabbed, you became really like an animal.“ Later, like animals, they were herded to the latrines, 80 or 90 people at a time, Strummer says. They sat on wooden boards. There was no privacy.

- In Flossenburg, „one of their punishments ... they brought in, for instance, bread, then they said, ‘Look at this, but you’re not going to get this because this and this happened today.’“ The prisoners supplemented their meals with grass.

- In Mauthausen, the last camp, Strummer’s best friend, Nita Adler, was struck with typhus. The friends pooled their collection of metal cups, all two of them. One they used to share food. The other was for Nita to use as her toilet; she didn’t have the strength to go outside.

And then there were the burns.

When the women were naked, especially in Auschwitz, Strummer says, the guards stubbed their cigarettes „wherever they could reach,“ she says. The proof is on her body. „I have it, for instance, on my back ... I have it on my—on my, y’know, right on my—how can I say it. I very rarely wear an open garment or something because I have it in the front of my chest.“

Is it any wonder Strummer—who lives with an elderly roommate and two dogs in a middle-class home in suburban Towson, who has filled her retirement by speaking on the Holocaust and volunteering as a grief counselor, who has survived horrors that count as horrors, no matter whether they lasted for days or months or years—is it any wonder that in the middle of her Cobb salad, she looks toward the window and cries?

This, after all, is the same Deli Strummer friends describe as caring, self-effacing. They tell stories like this: Haifa century ago, soon after arriving in America, Strummer mixed a salve to treat the psoriasis of a young woman she met briefly through a friend.

„From then I knew that she was a caring person,“ says the friend, Vivian Zeeman of Englewood, N.J. „She took such an interest after that. She made it a point to bring us the salve.“

Zeeman and Strummer started a friendship that has lasted nearly 50 years. And Zeeman describes a Deli Strummer who’s „part of me,“ who has suffered but not turned hard.

„She’s had this purpose and view to help people to see what happened then, but she hasn’t been bitter about it,“ says Zeeman. „I’ve seen burns on her body, where they put cigarettes. And I’ve seen her legs, where the veins are crushed, where she has to wear the heavy stockings because they beat her.“

Is it any wonder that Deli Strummer is often angry and defiant? Any wonder she sometimes talks as if a conspiracy has been staged to undermine her? After all, why else would they keep asking those same questions over and over—this date and that date—as if they were trying to trip her up? Why else would they seem to sidestep the totality of her horrible experience?

„Maybe they got less assignments,“ she speculates one day of the other survivors, who she feels have tried to discredit her. „There might be some jealousy. I don’t want to accuse anyone.“

And on another day, „Why don’t you ask me a question: ‘Why are they out to destroy you?’“

Why are they out to destroy you, Deli?

„Answer that to me!“

Last fall, before news of the situation leaked to the press, the council worked with Strummer to pin down her time line. Abramson says at first they hoped to clear up the problems so Strummer could go back to speaking.

„Why do you think we contacted the camps?“ Abramson says. „Not to disprove her! To prove her!“

In the meantime, though, concerned about misinformation getting out while Strummer was still speaking under the aegis of the council, Abramson and others asked Strummer to stop lecturing. Strummer’s then-friend Beverly Stappler says that she encouraged Strummer to accept the council’s decision.

„She was very angry at me,“ Stappler says. But „I felt that the preponderance of the evidence was so strong that her story was inaccurate that I just didn’t feel that was something we should defend.“

In the late spring, Stappler says, the two women came up with a compromise over the phone: Strummer could continue to speak if she promised to talk about the topic of human rights around the world rather than the specifics of her Holocaust story.

Strummer says this never happened: „I did not make an agreement with anybody,“ she says.

But Stappler says she called the council with the compromise and Abramson confirms that he was only too happy to accept it. It seemed a perfect arrangement: Strummer could continue to talk and the council could continue to support her.

Some weeks after that, in the midst of a Zarhar board meeting, Stappler was paged to take a phone call, from a woman who worked for the council.

According to Stappler, the woman said, „Beverly, are you aware that Deli is being picked up today in a limousine at 11:30 and she’s speaking in Montgomery County on the Holocaust?“

„I said, ‘No, it can’t be.’“

Stappler walked back to the table.

„I said, ‘Deli, didn’t you agree to not talk about the Holocaust?’ ... After a little more conversation, she didn’t deny“ the topic of her talk.

So Stappler „just got up and left the meeting.“ She and her husband resigned, as did another couple.

Now, Strummer calls Stappler’s resignation the „biggest disappointment in my life. I thought this woman was my umbrella. ... Before anybody else, I remember she was turning to me and saying, ‘Deli, retire.’ I looked at her said, ‘What are you saying? How can you retire from something like that?’“

The Baltimore Jewish Council did what it warned Strummer it would do if she kept lecturing. It called schools and informed them that it was no longer affiliating with Deli Strummer and had concerns about her testimony, effectively eliminating the bulk of her speaking engagements.

Abramson feels he had no choice. In a world where Holocaust deniers nip at the heels of history, he says, how could the council knowingly allow one of its speakers to talk of things that never happened? How could it countenance the possibility that other survivors would be doubted because Strummer was?

Try this: Type „Deli Strummer“ into an Internet search engine. Where does she appear?

A number of Jewish discussion sites. Calendars at several colleges where she has spoken. And—what’s this? A Russian neo-Nazi site. A site that hosts a newsletter called New World Order Watch. Another one for the Committee for Open Debate on the Holocaust. These sites call Deli Strummer a holohoaxer; they accuse her of telling „fairy tales.“ They use Deli Strummer as evidence of „the myth“ of World War II, the myth of 6 million.

And yet. Who are these deniers anyway, and just how much should legitimate historians cater to them? Is the danger presented by them more pressing than concern for a survivor like Deli Strummer?

„I personally don’t buy that. ... The revisionists will find [their evidence] wherever they want,“ says Rabbi Gavriel Newman, who heads Beth Jacob Congregation in wealthy, leafy Park Heights.

Besides, Newman says, Strummer’s speeches were about something more profound than dates and numbers. Few could match her expressive power in front of audiences. „What we want from [survivors] is the personal, the human, the emotional rendition, the eyewitness account that is far more valuable than the historically accurate one,“ he says.

„There are some gross errors in her documentation,“ admits Rita Hyman, a friend of Strummer’s who has stayed on the board of Zarhar. But „that has nothing to do with her mission. ... Her intentions are so pure and she is such a fine human being.“

What are Deli Strummer’s intentions? Why would a person who suffered through the worst atrocity in modern history need to embellish it? It seems easier to understand an outright fraud like Binjamin Wilkomirski—the Swiss writer who

claimed to have been a Jewish child in wartime camps—than a person who embroiders an awful truth. It doesn't help that Holocaust cases of fabrication and embellishment are blue-moon rare. In the spectrum of Holocaust survivor testimony, the vast majority of ordinary people's recollections are essentially honest in substance and intent. Their mistakes are the failings of human memory, no more.

When it is something more, says Dori Laub, a survivor and Yale University psychiatrist who studies Holocaust accounts, the explanation likely has more to do with guilt or great loss than self-aggrandizement.

„Memories—they can bend or be bent when the truth is extraordinarily painful,“ says Laub, who has not studied Strummer's case. „Narrative is influenced by trauma.“

Strummer herself provides few clues. But she speaks of the audiences who hug her, who understand her. She speaks of one of the first talks she gave, and how the children's sympathy moved her.

„I remember specially one little boy,“ she says. „I told those kids, you know, some of my unfortunate torture—that I was burned, I was burned by cigarettes. Instead of taking the cigarette and stepping on the cigarette, they put it against my skin.“

The boy „got up and said, very, very annoyed, ‘Why didn't you buy them an ashtray?’ And I always remember that.“

Later that evening, she says, „God gave me a special assignment. Nobody—nobody—will ever take this away from me.

„All I can tell you, I am real,“ Strummer says one day over the phone, as she fields still more questions about this discrepancy and that one. „I try so hard to prove—to prove that I am who I am. This is very, very, very hard because I lost my identity once from the Nazis.“

She frequently asks, „Do you believe me?“ Believe she has suffered? Yes. Believe she was traumatized, perhaps more profoundly than anyone realizes?

Yes, oh yes.

There are scars to prove it. Cigarette burns. She has offered to show them twice. She describes them: some white, some darker, one on her neck, one on her foot that looks „like a little hole.“ They are the link to Adele Aufrichtig, the young woman from Vienna who perhaps saw things that Deli Strummer cannot speak of. They stand still even as she ages. They are irrefutable.

Deli Strummer, might I see your scars?

She is not shocked or offended. She is apologetic.

„Kids have asked me that,“ she says over the phone. „No, no, honey, this is one thing I really rather don't. ... It hurt enough to be robbed of my privacy before.“

But the next day, she calls back.

On the porch lined with green turf and shaded by hanging plants, Strummer crosses her good leg over her bad and unzips three inches of her white pullover. She calls this her „neck“ but it is her chest, the skin mottled with brown patches of age, where her necklace—a gold chain holding an Austrian coin and her mother's wedding ring—rests. Right of the sternum, across from her heart, is one quarter-sized irregular patch of light brown skin, growing darker toward the edges, like a watercolor.

„I remember it in front of the latrines,“ she says. It was Auschwitz. One of the guards, „he looked at me with the smirk and then he just took the cigarette and put it on my neck.“

Touch it: it is tauter and more smooth than the loose, soft flesh around it, like a disk of plastic. It is skin but it's not skin. It is something else.

Staff writer Dita Smith contributed to this report.
