

FOCUS: The Battle for Memory

Revelation

“I am Claudia Stevens. I act. I am also the granddaughter of Edmund Israel Sinai, Jew, tailor. Of the weak lungs and the many assets....”

A CONVERSATION WITH CLAUDIA STEVENS

Claudia Stevens, a performance artist, playwright, and musician, has created a repertoire of fifteen interdisciplinary theatrical pieces, four of which explore art, ethics, and identity in Holocaust-related settings. She was interviewed by RJ editor Aron Hirt-Manheimer.

When did you first learn the truth about your parents' background?

I was a 19-year-old Vassar undergraduate student. It took me completely by surprise: I didn't even know my parents were Jewish!

My sister found out first. While working as a student nurse in San Francisco, she noticed that one of her elderly patients had a speech pattern that sounded like my mother's stepmother, "Granny," who'd lived with us on our farm in Northern California when we were small children. (Our parents, who had lived in England, had British accents.) "You sound just like my grandmother," my sister told her. "Well, who is your grandmother?" she inquired. When my sister told her Granny's name, the woman said, "Oh yes, I know her! She lives in a nursing home for elderly Jews." My sister visited Granny and put two and two together. Then one day when I was visiting my sister in Palo Alto, she told me me, quite casually, that we were Jews.

The next day I went to see Granny. She was very reluctant to tell me anything; later I learned that she had promised my parents not to disclose the secret. But it was obvious to me that she was indeed Jewish. And, given that my

parents had arrived in the U.S. after the war, thinking about their appearance, attitudes, and mannerisms, I realized that they were not British, but Jews from



Clockwise from top left: My mother, 18, in the Austrian countryside, 1936; my father, 22, in Czechoslovakia, c. 1937; rehearsing for an upcoming performance; portraying Madame F on stage.

Central Europe who must have been caught up in the Holocaust. Suddenly I saw our home atmosphere of secrecy and anxiety in a new light.

How did it feel to learn that you are Jewish?

I felt a kind of elation that is hard to describe. A lot of things that had not made any sense at all as to the kind of person I was—the strangeness that I felt—suddenly fell into place for me,

psychically and spiritually. I knew it would take time for this news to sink in. Already it was raising questions about myself: *Because of their experience, was I now a special person who could no longer follow the path that most people would take in life? Having been one person before and feeling like another person now, have I been the same person all along?*

Did your parents know that you had discovered their secret?

A few days after learning from Granny that I had come to the nursing home asking questions, my father visited me in Santa Barbara and confirmed the truth of what I'd already surmised. As we sat by the sea under a beach umbrella looking at family pictures and letters he'd brought, he told me the things he felt he could convey in a single afternoon. He focused on his escape from Europe in 1939 aboard the *Katina*, a freighter bearing young Czech Jews illegally from the Black Sea to British Palestine. After months of meandering at sea under terrible conditions, repeated unsuccessful attempts to smuggle passengers ashore amid hostile actions by British patrols, virtual starvation, an epidemic of meningitis, and the *Katina's* rescue of another refugee ship, the *Chepo*, most of the *Katina* and *Chepo* refugees eventually landed safely in Palestine.

In 1940 my father's mother had attempted to follow him from occupied Czechoslovakia aboard another "illegal" ship, the *Milos*. But British patrols seized