

### **Prologue from *Tell the World* by Shaindy Perl**

Sometimes when Esther Raab picked Tomatoes at the local supermarket in the peaceful, rural town in Vineland, New Jersey, she would try to delude herself into thinking that she was like any other woman in the store. Just another housewife shopping for her family. But of course, she could never deceive herself for long. Deep down, she knew she was different. Would always be different. After all, she had been *there*.

Whatever illusions she might still have had were shattered one day in 1965 when her husband Izzy came home from work, carrying the day's mail in his hand.

He sat down and leafed through it at the kitchen table, stopping suddenly at one small envelope. "Esther," He said in a voice that sent a shiver down her spine. "There's something here for you. It's from Germany."

Esther dropped the dishes she had been washing and took the letter from her husband. Already, her heart was pounding and her palms had turned clammy. From the day that she had read in the papers that SS Oberscharführer Karl. Frenzel and some other Sobibor Nazis had been arrested, she had known that this notice would come. She was one of the very few people whom they could count on to bear witness. They needed her period again.

Esther's hands trembled as she tore open the envelope. Her pulse quickened as her eyes darted across the printed lines. But even now, as fear gripped her heart and stifled her breath, there was no question in her mind how she would respond.

"So, Esther, will you go?" Izzy asked.

"Of course, I will go," Esther replied. "I must do it for all those people who don't have that choice."

After she sent her response to Germany, the local papers reported on Esther's upcoming trip. Several days later, Esther received an anonymous phone call.

"Don't go to Germany," a man said threateningly. "You will be killed if you go. You have no business going there to testify. Stay home with your family."

He hung up abruptly, and Esther was left standing in her kitchen in shock. She was frightened, very frightened, but she would not be intimidated. She called the local police to ask for protection and then continued preparing for her trip.

“They can scare me,” she thought to herself, “but they cannot stop me.”

### Epilogue from *Tell the World* by Shaindy Perl

In 1982, Richard Rashke, a respected author and journalist, published the book *Escape from Sobibor*. Although a handful of books about Sobibor have been written over the years, most notably Miriam Novitcu’s *Sobibor: Martyrdom and Revolt*, few are as detailed and extensively researched as *Escape from Sobibor*. Mr. Rashke traveled all over the world and interviewed more than fifteen survivors. He visited Sasha Perchersku in Communist Russia; Stanislaw (Shlomo) Szmajzner in Brazil; Thomas (Toivi) Blatt in Santa Barbara, California; and Eda and Yitzchak Lichtman and others in Holon, Israel.

By the time Mr. Rashke interviewed Esther Raab in her home in Vineland, New Jersey, his manuscript was almost complete. He was impressed by her excellent memory and good recall of events. Esther was able to verify many facts for him and clear up some misconceptions. Mr. Rashke expressed his regret that he had not met with her earlier.

Three years earlier, in 1985, the film *Escape from Sobibor* based on Richard Rashke's book, was filmed in Yugoslavia by Chrysler studios. The company invited Esther Raab and two other Sobibor survivors, Stanislaw Szmajzner and Thomas Blatt, to act as consultants on the set during film.

Esther made the trip together with her husband, Izzy, and spent several days walking among the barracks and watchtowers that were built to replicate the Sobibor death camp.

She answered the questions of the directors and members of the cast and ensured that the dialogue and events were accurate.

When she mingled with the actors and actresses, Esther always pulled back for a moment when she came across the men who were dressed in the Nazi SS uniform. Although it felt wonderful to know that the story of Sobibor was

finally being told, it was difficult to control the overwhelming terror that seized her from time to time. Esther had to keep reassuring herself that she had not somehow returned to that terrible time and place again. It was just a movie set, albeit one that looked eerily familiar to her.

Before she returned home, Chrysler Studios paid the Sobibor survivors for their time and service. Esther, however, refused to take any money from them. "I'm doing this for all those left behind," she said, "and to open the eyes of people all over the world, so that no one should ever have to suffer as we did."

Chrysler's lawyers insisted, though, that she created a legal problem by refusing payment. "You must pay her," they explained to the directors, "and have proof that she accepted that as full compensation. Otherwise, she can show up at your door five years hence and demand an astronomical sum for her assistance with the film. It must be clear that you no longer owe her anything."

When Esther learned of their dilemma, she asked that they make the check out for \$100. "I won't deposit it," she said. "I'll keep it as a souvenir of my time here with you."

Indeed, the company did as she suggested. Esther took the check home and placed it in one of her numerous albums that she has filled with documents and photos pertaining to Sobibor.

Shortly before the film was released in Europe, Esther was invited to appear with Mr. Rashke on BBC Television in England. Her son Marvin accompanied her on the trip, and he also took part in the interview. Esther expected this to be a one-time experience, but it was in fact the first of many radio and TV interviews that she would give over the next several years.

After the film's release, Esther received numerous invitations from public schools in New Jersey. They had shown the movie to students as an educational presentation and wanted her to come speak to them about her experiences.

At first, Esther was reluctant to stand up before unfamiliar audiences. "Why would these non-Jewish children be interested in hearing the story of a little old woman?" She thought. "Besides, how can I possibly explain the horrors of

Sobibor to sheltered, carefree youngsters who have, thank God, never experienced anything that remotely resembles life in a Nazi death camp.”

But the schools persisted, and at last, Esther tentatively agreed to make several appearances. To her pleasant surprise, the students listened with rapt attention as she shared her story with them. The children had not yet been influenced by the biases of the world, and they were respectful and full of compassion.

Soon, requests for visits were pouring in, and with each invitation that she accepted, Esther's confidence increased. She had been taking questions from the students and was repeatedly impressed by their insightful comments.

After a while, a strange thing happened; The schoolchildren began writing to her period at first, there were only a few short notes, but before long Esther's mailbox was regularly filled to capacity. Some students let her know how inspired they had been by her story, while others wrote to express sympathy and comfort.

Before long, the mailman in Vineland came to know of their illustrious citizen. They delivered letters that were addressed in various odd fashions, such as the memorable envelope that read: “Mrs. Esther Turner-Raab, A spacious home, Vineland, New Jersey, Philadelphia, North America.”

Esther had kept in touch with Richard Rashke, and she often shared her letters with him. Occasionally, she also sent him copies of them. One day, as they were discussing her latest correspondence, he said, “Esther, your story is so incredible. I would like to write something, perhaps a play, based on these letters that you receive.”

“I'll give you my consent on one condition,” Esther replied. “Whatever you write must be directed at young people. For my many appearances, I have come to believe that they are the ones that we must reach out to. My story never fails to touch them, and the letters only prove what a great impact it makes. If students can be educated before they go out in the world to be tolerant and accepting of others, then they will be able to stand up to discrimination and bias later in life. If we can open their eyes today, we can prevent tragedies from happening tomorrow.”

Richard promptly agreed. He named the play *Dear Esther*, after the opening line of all those letters that had inspired it. In the play, there are two actresses who play the role of Esther, and they act out her inner struggles regarding anti-Semitism, her mother's death, and her memories of Sobibor. As the story unfolds, it is punctuated by the recital of some of the touching letters that Esther has received from children.

*Dear Esther* was first performed at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Later, it was taken to the Strength Theater, in Herndon, Virginia, just outside of Washington D.C., and then to college campuses and universities all over the United States. Although the cast changes in each location, the message remains the same. It is a stark reminder of terrible things that can happen when people refuse to accept each other and live together in peace and harmony.

Whenever circumstances permit, Esther tries to be present in the audience when a play is performed. She always brings along a family member or two, and before taking questions at the conclusion of the production, she introduces them to the audience by saying: "This is my revenge!"

For many students who have never heard more than a casual reference to the Holocaust, *Dear Esther* is a true eye-opener. In fact, in some southern states, Esther was the first Jewish person the students met. But wherever she goes, Esther is always bombarded with questions and her audience can never get enough of her story.

Bye now, *Dear Esther* has been performed in over 150 college campuses, and Ester Raab has appeared before more than 40,000 students in the state of New Jersey alone. She has addressed children in classrooms, crowds impact theaters, and radio listeners and TV viewers worldwide. The letters continue to pour in, and Esther has collected literally thousands of them by now. She sits down to read them every so often, and they never fail to bring her comfort and hope.

Even now, in her old age, Esther's energy has not diminished. She continues to travel whenever her health permits, and as recently as July 2003

she visited Poland to do an interview on Sobibor for a documentary that was filmed by German ARD Television.

Esther feels compelled to tell her story again and again. She does it for the sake of all the people who were ruthlessly murdered in Camp III; for the inmates who never made it out of Sobibor during the escape; And for those who were brutally killed in the forest by the Poles and Germans alike.

Leon's final words in the moment before the escape still ring in Esther's ears: "those of you who survive," he beseeched the crowd, "bear witness. Tell the world what has happened here..."

Indeed, Esther believes that as one of the few survivors of the Soviet war death camp, her life isn't hers to live. She has an obligation to fill. She must inform others of the horrors of Sobibor, the inmates' heroic escape, and all those left behind."

It is her sacred duty. She must tell the world.