



BOOK REVIEW

The story of Vera Gran and the high price of survival

Vera Gran followed her mother and sisters to the Warsaw ghetto and sang for her life.

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 COMMENTS**TITLE** Vera Gran**AUTHOR** Agata Tuscynska**GENRE** Nonfiction**PUBLISHER** Knopf**PAGES** 299**PRICE** \$34

I had never heard of Vera Gran until recently, but her mystery quickly drew me to her dark, dank, airless rooms in the elegant 16th arrondissement of Paris, and I found myself following her back through the dangerous streets of her youth, through prewar Warsaw, then the wartime ghetto with its strange mix of starvation and hysterical entertainments, through the maze of her unlikely marriage, her dead child, her efforts to survive in postwar Warsaw and Tel Aviv. Survival is a key word in this story, what people will endure just to live another day. And where compromise ends and betrayal begins.

Vera Gran, born Grynberg, was the stage name for a beautiful singer whose contralto voice captivated audiences throughout Europe. She recorded 32 songs in 10 languages. "In prewar Warsaw," she told her biographer, Agata Tuszynska, "a Jew couldn't become a star." Yet she did become a star, one whose talent opened most doors – until all doors closed against her.

She followed her mother and sisters to the ghetto and she sang for her life and the comforts that the infamous Café Sztuka and the Melody Palace could provide even in the depths of deprivation. Here, there was still laughter and women would wear their remaining

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She escaped with the help of her husband – an indistinct figure in Gran's narrative – and the fake Aryan papers he obtained for her. She hid her identity behind dyed hair, church attendance and her own closed doors. She believed, no matter what her papers said, that she looked Jewish. Her mother and sisters were murdered.

After the war, she was accused of seeking friends during the German Occupation among "known agents of the Gestapo," behaviour that "could legitimately raise suspicions of collaboration." Once such an accusation is made, it is almost impossible to escape the implications. Vera Gran was imprisoned, investigated and judged innocent of the charge both in Warsaw and, later, in Tel Aviv, but the stain remained.

Former admirers shunned her. Wladyslaw Szpilman, whom she had helped during the Occupation, refused to hire her at Polish Radio. She, in turn, claimed to have seen Szpilman shove fellow Jews into boxcars bound for death camps. Szpilman had once been her accompanist, and now he is famous as the model for Roman Polanski's Oscar-winning film, *The Pianist* – a film based on his story, in which Vera Gran does not appear.

She returned to the stage in Paris, toured London, Toronto and New York, but never again tasted the joys of her prewar fame in Poland. When Tuszynska found her, Vera was living in Paris, a virtual recluse, surrounded by mementos of her life as a star. Photographs of her, such as the one on the cover of the book, show a beautiful woman; the reality of her old age is ugly, confused and very angry. But Tuszynska succeeds in gaining enough of her confidence to write her story, one in which Szpilman is just a painful memory.

Agata Tuszynska is a hard worker. She interviewed survivors – including Marek Edelman, one of the leaders of the Warsaw ghetto uprising – who remember pieces of Eva's life and



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the Warsaw ghetto.

Vera Gran: The Accused is a book to read slowly and think about.

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Anna Porter is a writer living in Toronto. Her most recent book is Ghosts of Europe: Journeys Through Central Europe's Troubled Past and Uncertain Future.

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