

The truth will out

Herman Rosenblat survived a Nazi death camp. Fifty years on, he told Oprah of the little girl who had thrown food over the fence and kept him alive. Years later they married. But, as he prepared to publish his sensational memoir, the truth emerged

BY ELIZABETH DAY
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Above: Herman and Roma Rosenblat pose for a photo in their North Miami Beach home.
Below: The cover of *Angel at the Fence: The True Story of a Love That Survived*, by Herman Rosenblat.

PHOTOS: AP AND BY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

Herman Rosenblat knew how to tell a story. At family occasions, he was the one who would spin fantastic yarns with only a kernel of truth. He was the clown, the joker, the raconteur whose tales had to be taken with a liberal pinch of salt. "I remember him laughing, being silly and making jokes that weren't funny," recalls his wife's nephew, Bernard Haykel. "He was quite a jovial character, fun-loving. He always seemed pretty harmless."

One of Uncle Herman's favorite stories was about how he met his wife Roma. He would recount the astonishing tale of how, as an 11-year-old Polish Jew interned by the Nazis in a sub-camp of Buchenwald, he was sustained by a young girl who came each day to throw him apples over the fence. He never knew her name. In 1945, Rosenblat and his three elder brothers were liberated by allied troops from Theresienstadt concentration camp, where they had been transferred shortly before the armistice.

Twelve years later, Rosenblat was living in New York when a friend set him up on a blind date. In an incredible twist of fate, the curly-haired woman with green eyes who was his date for the evening turned out to be his childhood savior, the girl who had thrown him apples all those years before: his "angel at the fence." He proposed on the spot, against the twinkling lights of the Coney Island amusement parks. They were married in 1958 and had two children, Ken, born in 1960, followed two years later by their daughter, Renee.

To begin with, it was an anecdote he shared only with friends or new acquaintances. Then, in 1995, Rosenblat wrote it up and entered a newspaper competition to find the best Valentine's Day-themed short story. He won and his story was featured on the front page of the *New York Post*. Television crews and local reporters swiftly tracked the couple down. Within months, the Rosenblats were appearing on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, sitting hand in hand on a cream sofa, in the full glare of studio lights.

BRAGGING RIGHTS

In the years that followed, Rosenblat was signed up by a literary agent who brokered a book deal. A movie producer expressed an interest in adapting his story for the big screen. The Rosenblats, now living in Miami, began appearing at local schools and Holocaust-education centers, with Herman giving his moving account of how love triumphed over the forces of hatred. He enjoyed the attention. "He was very jolly but he was also a show-off," says Sidney Finkel, 77, a lifelong family friend. He was from the same Polish town as the Rosenblat brothers and was interned with them at Buchenwald. "He was always bragging about all the publicity he got. He wanted to stand out so badly."

In 2007, the couple appeared once more on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* where Rosenblat got down on one knee to profess his continuing devotion to his wife. Oprah, teary with emotion, described it as "the single greatest love story we've ever told on the air." The following year saw the publication of a book for younger readers, *Angel Girl*, written by children's author Laurie Friedman. Rosenblat's memoir, *Angel at the Fence*, was slated for publication by Berkley Books this year. Richard Dreyfuss was rumored to have signed up for the US\$25 million film adaptation. Life was good for the Rosenblats.

There was just one problem — it wasn't true. Although Rosenblat did survive the Holocaust and his marriage to Roma was genuine, the story of a young girl throwing him apples was a fabrication. His "angel at the fence" was a fake.

Today, the Rosenblats live in a dispiriting sprawl of beige 1970s apartment blocks in North Miami, just up the freeway from the Aventura Mall shopping complex that caters for the constant stream of tourists who come in search of year-round Florida sunshine. The condominium has been better days. The Rosenblats' front door, painted a dull green, now peeling, overlooks a communal garden with a neglected swimming pool where the younger residents come to hang out and smoke joints. Security guards are posted at the entrance of the car park.

When I ring their bell, Roma answers, her unsmiling face blurred by the mesh of the security screen. She is a squat but formidable 76-year-old, wearing a striped shirt over cream trousers and lumpy slippers. Her short hair is dyed brown. Her small, dark eyes squint into the light. Herman, 78, is standing silently in the corridor behind her, an imposing man in glasses and a goatee.

I ask if they are Mr and Mrs Rosenblat. "No," she says flatly, in a thick eastern European accent. "They're not here. They don't live here." But having already seen photos of the couple, I

know it is them. When I say I would like to give them a letter, it is Herman who softens. He takes a few steps forward and gestures with his hands for Roma to open the screen. She takes the letter and closes the door. As I walk away, I wonder if either of them is struck by the irony that they are still lying about who they are.

Doubts about the Rosenblat memoir started circulating on the Internet and were mentioned by the eminent Holocaust historian Deborah Lipstadt on her Web site as early as December 2007. Shortly afterwards, Dan Bloom, a 60-year-old expatriate Jewish American living in Taiwan, picked up on some of the story's discrepancies and started e-mailing academic experts asking them to look into the veracity of Rosenblat's account. "I just remember thinking, 'How could this humanly be possible?'" says Bloom, over a crackling, long-distance phone line. "My challenge was to prove it wasn't kosher." [Editor's note: In the original *Guardian* report, Bloom, a contributing reporter for the *Taipei Times*, was identified as Danny Bloom. The article incorrectly stated that Bloom lives in Thailand.]

One of the academics Bloom e-mailed was Ken Waltzer, the Madison professor of Jewish studies at Michigan State University. Waltzer, who was writing a book about the children of Buchenwald, had already made his own tentative inquiries into the Rosenblat story. Strangely, out of all the survivors who had helped him with his research, Herman Rosenblat was one of the few who did not respond to Waltzer's repeated requests for an interview.

"In November 2008, I was contacted by two forensic genealogists who were investigating the memoir," he explains. "They were able to give me maps of the Buchenwald sub-camp Schlieben [in south Brandenburg, near Berlin]. We already knew from survivor testimonies that to go to the fence was punishable by death and there was a high risk you would be electrocuted. The maps showed that the only external fence was down by the SS barracks [the other three faced inwards] and that civilians had been banned from the road that ran alongside it since 1943 so there was no way that Herman and Roma could have had a rendezvous."

Waltzer and his associates then looked into the matter of Roma's whereabouts during World War II. In his story, Herman had claimed that Roma and her family, whose surname was Radzicki, were Polish Jews living under assumed identities on a nearby farm. There was no trace of them. "The upshot of it all was that the family was some distance away in Brieg, near Breslau, Lower Silesia [today Brzeg, near Wrocław, Poland]," says Waltzer. "The story was completely untrue. If Roma Radzicki wasn't there, then she wasn't throwing him apples."

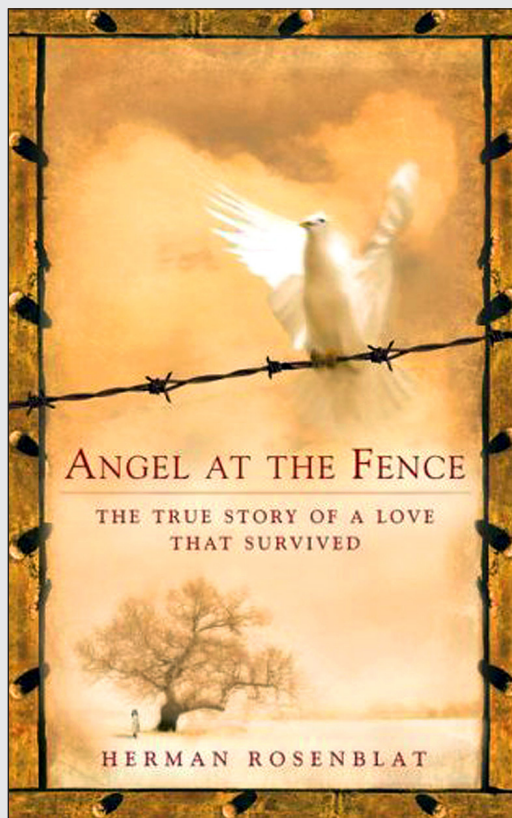
"There are no redemptive endings in the Holocaust. In this case, the dark truth was hidden to spin a story of romance, to portray the universe as an orderly and just place and that, to me, is a denial of the substance of the Holocaust."

News of the Rosenblat hoax finally broke last December. Berkley Books swiftly dropped plans to publish his memoir. The children's book was pulped. Oprah, who was famously duped in 2005 by *A Million Little Pieces*, a fake memoir written by James Frey, declared herself "very disappointed." Rosenblat issued a curiously unapologetic statement claiming that his motivation was "to make good in this world."

"I wanted to bring happiness to people, to remind them not to hate, but to love and tolerate all people," the statement read. "In my dreams, Roma will always throw me an apple, but I now know it is only a dream."

Herman Rosenblat is not the first person to write a fake Holocaust memoir, but he is one of the most intriguing. Unlike Benjamin Wilkomirski, a professional clarinetist who invented an entirely false personal history in his 1995 book, *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood*, or Misha Defonseca, who published *Misha: A Memoir of the Holocaust Years* in 1997, in which she claimed to have been sheltered through the Holocaust by a pack of wolves, Rosenblat genuinely did survive the concentration camps. In fact, one of the most surprising aspects of Rosenblat's hoax is that it obscured the impact of a real-life story that was, if anything, even more compelling.

In 1942, Rosenblat and his three older brothers — Isidore, Sam and Abraham — were living in the Jewish ghetto of Piotrkow, Poland, when they were transported by cattle truck to Schlieben, a sub-camp of Buchenwald. Their father had died from typhus shortly before. The children were rounded up by the Nazis and separated from their mother whom they never saw again. Encouraged by Isidore, 11-year-old Herman lied about his age so that the brothers would not be separated — older boys were deemed more useful to



the Nazis for labor. The brothers would later discover that 90 percent of the town's inhabitants, including their mother, had been sent straight to the death camps.

"He told the SS men he was 16," says Debi Gade, a television producer from New York who met the Rosenblats three years ago and has since become a family friend. "He told me that, in the camps, an older brother used to take his tiny piece of bread and give it to Herman so that he could sustain himself. He told me that he was once beaten so badly by the guards that he was blind for several days and he couldn't tell them because they would have killed him. I'm Jewish, so it resonates particularly with me — it is the most horrible, horrible story."

Since he lied about one aspect of his experience, the natural inclination is to question what else Rosenblat may have been tempted to exaggerate. But what is true is that Herman survived against the odds. After being liberated in 1945, he and his brothers were sent to England where he trained as an electrician. The Rosenblat siblings were among some 730 orphans who were brought to the UK to start a new life; their contemporaries included Ben Helfgott, who went on to represent Great Britain as an Olympic weightlifter.

Rosenblat subsequently emigrated to America, serving in the US army during the Korean War, then returning to New York to set up an electronics repair shop in 1957. The following year, he married Roma Radzicki, a nurse who had emigrated to the States with her brother Harvey and sister Milla. The couple did meet on a blind date. That much, at least, is true.

THE OTHER VERSION

Roma's story, unearthed by Waltzer, proved equally remarkable. Her family, originally from the central Polish town of Krosniewice, lived under assumed identities in Germany from 1941 until the end of the war. One of her two sisters was deemed too young and too dark to pass herself off as a Christian. She was left behind to face certain death. Nearly all of Roma's extended family was wiped out.

For the first 35 years of their marriage, there was no mention of the little girl who threw Rosenblat apples over the concentration camp fence to help him survive. Neither Rosenblat's brothers, whose closeness had been forged through extraordinary trauma, nor his wider friendship group of fellow survivors, had ever heard him reveal the remarkable happenstance that lay at the heart of his happy marriage.

That changed in 1992 when Rosenblat's Brooklyn store was broken into by armed robbers. Rosenblat and his son Ken were shot at by the intruders. Ken, then only 32, was paralyzed, consigned to spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair. Rosenblat was more fortunate; his life was spared, although the bullet, according to Debi Gade, remains lodged in his body. It was while he was recovering in hospital that Rosenblat claimed his mother came to him in a dream and instructed him to share his story with a wider public. He started to tell his friends, explaining away his former reticence by saying that it had been a period of his life he had previously wished to forget. Then, three years later, he entered the newspaper competition. Herman Rosenblat's life was about to change forever.

I meet Diana Moskovitz, a petite woman in

strappy silver heels and sepia sunglasses, at a coffee house in Fort Lauderdale. Moskovitz, a journalist for the *Miami Herald*, reported the Rosenblat story as it unfolded in the normally quiet news days just after Christmas. She says that Rosenblat struck her not as a malicious con-artist but, rather, as a sweet, somewhat naive old man whose penchant for telling tales rapidly snowballed out of his control. "He reminded me of my own grandfather [a Czechoslovakian Jew], the type who tells stories because it brings people happiness, but everyone knows they're not really true," she says. "You know — if he says the fish is five feet long, it's really probably five inches."

Interestingly, the Rosenblats initially demurred from appearing on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in 1996; the production team called their apartment twice without success before Winfrey herself picked up the phone to convince them. Rosenblat was doubtless flattered by the attention. "His motivation was just to be known, to be loved, to tell the best story he could," says Sidney Finkel. "He was a joyful, bountiful man, always telling jokes, but I can't say I warned him."

For reasons that remain obscure, Roma agreed to go along with the ruse. The family members and friends I speak to are unwilling to guess at her motives, but almost all of them point to Roma's history of depression. There are rumors of suicide attempts and periods of hospitalization. A nurse makes daily visits to the Rosenblat apartment. "She's not a mentally healthy person," says her nephew Bernard Haykel. "She has this tragic depressive streak and I don't think she was fully compos mentis."

In public, Roma appeared to be the passive spectator while Herman took the conversational lead. Rabbi Annette Perl, a close acquaintance of the couple, says that whenever he met Roma "there seemed to be lots of things playing on her mind." According to Perl, Rosenblat would often appear strangely isolated from what was going on around him. When, in 2006, Perl performed Rosenblat's bar mitzvah — the traditional Jewish ceremony that marks a boy's transition from youth to adulthood, which Rosenblat had been denied in the camps — he recalls that Rosenblat "came, left and he didn't seem to identify with people as much as I thought someone from his background would. He was there and then he wasn't."

"He is a dreamer and I think his story mushroomed and got out of hand before he could stop it and after a while, it got so big that it was difficult to get out of."

"I don't think he's manipulative, but he is not a person who shows an amazing amount of openness or emotion."

While Rosenblat's fabrication expanded around him, his family knew he was lying. Both his children, Ken and Renee, were said to have been deeply uncomfortable with the story and urged their parents to stay out of the media spotlight. Rosenblat's rapid rise to semi-celebrity also caused an irrevocable rift with his last surviving brother, Sam, who died in February 2007, still refusing to speak to him. His wife Jutta remains estranged from her brother-in-law.

"My parents felt terrible about it," says their son, Ron Rosenblat, a 53-year-old real estate agent in New York. "At one point, when my father couldn't tolerate it any longer, he stopped speaking to his brother. They were as close as two brothers ever could be. It was a very sad set of circumstances."

"I think he [Herman] did it for fame and money. He took a horrible story and embellished it for what I believe were personal, psychological reasons and for financial gain."

"What Herman did was reprehensible for the obvious reasons. One, it fuels anti-Semitism and two, it maligns a horrible, horrible event. It makes almost a joke of it by creating an embellishment that's so... almost comical."

Did Ron's parents ever try to stop him? "They spoke with him privately but it was not in their character to speak out publicly. In some ways, my mother is glad about what's happened because for her the truth is more important than anything else. It was more of a burden for my father — it was a source of incredible pain to him."

Still, it seems astonishing both that no one challenged him for so long and that, once signed up by Berkley Books (an imprint of Penguin) no one thought to check Rosenblat's assertions against verifiable fact, despite concerned e-mails from Waltzer and others.

Sidney Finkel, too, knew that Herman's story was a lie as far back as 1996. At dinner in a Chicago hotel the evening before the Rosenblats were due to appear on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* for the first time, Finkel recalls that Roma admitted to him she had spent the war in hiding in Germany, aided by a Catholic priest, without once

making reference to meeting Herman by throwing him apples over a concentration camp fence.

"I knew graphically then that the story had to be false because she was nowhere near the camp," says Finkel. "For her, it was like living a fantasy. She had a terrific grip on reality — that was one thing — and then the other thing she treated as if she were on stage."

"I felt a little bit angry but I must admit that I was also kind of impressed he was going on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*."

The Buchenwald orphans, who remain a close-knit group, had their own suspicions. "All the survivors thought it was improbable," Finkel says. "There was not a single one of us who believed it. But we didn't want to make any judgment because we didn't think it would go any further."

Bernard Haykel says that a similar sense of indulgence operated within the family. "I told Herman on a couple of occasions that the Holocaust is a very serious thing and no fabrication should be made. I don't think I was taken very seriously. His reaction was, 'Oh what's the harm in it? It's a good story, people get to learn about the Holocaust, they get to feel good after it.' It was a kind of joke."

"You're talking about a man who is very uneducated, who didn't get to go to school from the age of 11, so I don't think there was a lot of thought given to the ethical issues."

"You have to realize the context: Herman had a terrible tragedy when he was held up at gunpoint where he worked. The family just thought anything that kept him busy and gave meaning to his life, well, what's the harm?"

And perhaps there is a sense in which Rosenblat's stories were a survival technique, a means of dissociating himself from the horrific experiences he underwent and of creating a new, happier ending for his own narrative. Perhaps, for the first time, Rosenblat felt in control of a life that had previously been buffeted by a series of external tragedies over which he had no power.

KICKING UP A STINK

But when it became clear that Rosenblat's supposedly harmless anecdotes were spiraling into something more worrying, there was a growing consensus that it was time to speak out. When Rosenblat started a publicity drive for his memoir (adapted by a professional ghost-writer from his oral transcripts), Finkel became "concerned and angry." He told Waltzer of his suspicions. The other Buchenwald survivors, including their unofficial leader, Ben Helfgott, followed suit. According to Waltzer: "There was a real fear that Herman Rosenblat would be adding a fraudulent written record to Holocaust history. That would discount the quality of other, true memoirs." And that, he says, would give further ammunition to Holocaust-deniers.

In the weeks since their hoax was uncovered, the Rosenblats have shrunk from the attention they once courted. They have changed their phone number several times; there is now a screening device that ensures every caller has to identify themselves by name before they answer. Perl says they have been shocked by the fall-out and did not expect the vociferous criticism leveled at them by fellow Holocaust survivors. "They have received hate mail. Forced into a corner, the Rosenblats have retreated into a familiar position: they are doing what they have to do in order to survive."

For understandable reasons, perhaps, Herman Rosenblat chooses not to speak to me. Of all the people I talk to, not one of them says he has ever apologized. "He is still dreaming," says Perl. "It is hard for him to say, 'I made a mistake.'"

A 20-minute drive south of the Rosenblats' apartment takes you to the Holocaust Memorial in Miami Beach, a large, tiled square dominated by a central pool of water. At its nucleus, there is a giant sculpture of a hand grabbing at the sky in a gesture that lies somewhere between desperation and hope. As I look around, I am introduced to Joe, a white-haired man wearing a navy-blue Argyle V-neck. He stoops forward politely to shake my hand, but does not say anything.

Later, Avi Mizrahi, the memorial's executive director, shows me a black-and-white photo, reproduced as part of a permanent exhibition. It depicts a group of thin, pale children being liberated from Buchenwald. He points at one gangly boy, gazing hopefully out of the monochrome snudge. "And that," says Mizrahi, "that is Joe." We stare at the picture in silence; the image requires no further explanation.

Perhaps Joe did not need to speak to make his story worth hearing because it spoke for itself. And it strikes me that, with all the fabrications and lies that he built up around him, maybe the saddest realization is that Herman Rosenblat did not believe his own survival was story enough.