



ARIANA NEUMANN: SECRETS OF HER FATHER'S PAST

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons podcast and our acclaimed author series, brought to you by the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion, together with the Jewish Book Council. We'll meet authors recognized by the National Jewish Book Awards and discuss their celebrated books. My name is Joshua Holo, Dean of HUC's Skirball campus in Los Angeles, and your host.

JH: Welcome to this edition of the College Commons podcast and our special series with the Jewish Book Council, and our conversation upcoming with Ariana Neumann. Ariana Neumann was born and grew up in Venezuela. She worked as a foreign correspondent for Venezuela's The Daily Journal, and her writing also appeared in The European. When Time Stopped is her first book, a memoir, in which Neumann dives into the secrets of her father's past, which is to say, years hiding in plain sight in war torn Berlin amidst the murder of dozens of family members in the holocaust and his courageous choice to build anew. When her father, Hans, died, he left Ariana a small box filled with letters, diary entries and other memorabilia, which became the germ of the book, When Time Stopped, which won the 2020 National Jewish Book Award in the category of autobiography and memoir. Ariana Neumann, welcome to the College Commons podcast, and thanks for joining us.

Ariana Neumann: Thank you, Josh, it's a great honor and pleasure to be chatting with you today.

JH: I'd like you to begin, if you would, by telling us a little bit about the world in which you grew up, Caracas, Venezuela. What was it like?

AN: So it was Caracas in the '70s and '80s, which is completely different than the Caracas now. It was then in a place of potential and promise, investment was pouring in, the government was building roads and hospitals and schools and theaters, and it really was a place filled with promise. There had been a huge influx of immigration right after the war of European immigrants, lots from Eastern Europe, Germany and Austria, and Czechoslovakia, like my father, but also lots from Italy and Spain, and it was really just a mishmash of cultures and just a lot of people trying to restart their lives and to make a better place. So I lived in this vibrant community, and my father was actually very, very successful. So he was one of those immigrants, he had arrived in 1949. I knew that much. He had arrived with his brother Lothar, they were born in Prague, and that's about all I knew about their life before. And by the time I came along in 1970, he was a very, very successful industrialist. He had started with paints, so

he had started creating a paint factory called Montana, and by the time I came along Montana had become actually a conglomerate of things.

AN: It was a juice company and a yogurt company, and they made all sorts of things, and my father was really completely absorbed by work, but he was also absorbed by lots of other hobbies and lots of other things. He was very involved in education and newspapers, he was a big arts collector, an arts patron. He was involved in all sorts of things. So he really was a bit of a renaissance man, and to be his daughter was a bit odd I suppose, but rather wonderful, because it meant our house was always full of really, really interesting people, and we lived in the middle of the city, but in this really rather beautiful oasis surrounded by mango trees and just... The garden was filled with sloths and parrots and all these things you'd read about. It was a little bit cliched and rather beautiful and vibrant and wonderful, and we had a pretty blissful existence. I was his only child from a second marriage, I was his only daughter, and my mother worked as well, and she worked in the arts, so it was a really wonderful place to grow up. And sort of unimaginable, I suppose, if you went to Caracas now. But in those days it really was blissful.

JH: The story that you develop is one of uncovering secrets, and one of the players in this drama is your mother and her relationship to the secrets. And I wanted to draw you out a little bit if I could, particularly because one of the many photos you share is, at least to me, particularly evocative. It's one in which your father and your much younger mother are standing together, but your father peers at the camera from a position partially behind a sculpture. Do you know which photo I'm thinking of?

AN: I do know exactly what photo you're thinking of, and it's a photograph actually was taken in Europe, I think. And I think it's one where my mother's wearing a slightly sort of warmer coat that you would never wear in Venezuela, but you're absolutely right. And I think he's by a bridge, but there's a sculpture behind the bridge, and it's quite a moody photograph. My mother looks incredibly beautiful and glamorous as she always does.

JH: Indeed.

AN: And my father looks very mysterious, as he tends to look. So in most pictures he either looks like a successful man, an interesting successful man maybe, but there's always, if you look carefully, a certain darkness there. And I think that was true not only of the photograph, but also of his life. If you looked carefully in this technicolor world that we lived in, and if you looked carefully at him, there was a darkness there, there was a mystery, always. But you wanted to draw me out on my mother. My mother and I were very, very close and I adore her, but we're very different. She is, and has always been, someone that's very focused on the present. And she's not one of these... She's 80 now, and she's not one of these people that reminisces on life and how it used to be when I was young, she never says that.

AN: When I call her up, she tells me about her day. She tells me what she's going to do, and she's always been like that. And I think my father loved that in her, he loves the fact that she never asked questions of life before, it was very convenient too, of course, because he didn't want to talk about life before, he wanted to talk about life now. So in one sense, I think you end up marrying or you end up partnering up with the people that suit you, right? You sort of find the people that you need emotionally, perhaps, at certain times in your life, and that's what my

father needed. My father was an immigrant, he had arrived actually with a Czech wife, and that marriage had failed, I think the burden of the past had been too much, and I think his first wife, was called Mila, reminded him of that past.

AN: My mother did the complete opposite, and she was Venezuelan, she was from an old Catholic family. I forget when the family arrived, I should know, but it was some stage and, I forget if it's 18th century, but I mean really early on, and they were very established and very traditional, very traditional Venezuelan family. It was actually quite... I'm trying to think what the polite expression is, but it took some sort of serious guts for my mother to marry my father. One, because he was a divorcee, he was much older than her, and he was an immigrant, and actually people said that he... They didn't say to me then, but they had certainly said it to her that he was a Jew. So again, it's interesting, but my mother didn't really care about any of those things, she loved my father for who he was, and she didn't ask very many questions.

AN: She knew a little bit about his past and she just didn't focus on it. It wasn't really what she wanted to do. And when I've asked her, it was obviously such an interesting past, it must... It shaped them and really why did you not focus on it? And she said, "Because I wanted to make his life better, I wanted to make him happy, I wanted to bring him joy. And if I asked those questions, he would get very upset. So I didn't ask too many questions, I didn't want to upset him." And I suppose actually, having found that quite astonishing, I realize now that that's what I did as his daughter too. So whenever I asked questions, whenever you love someone who's traumatized by something and they get upset, they start to shake. Your curiosity takes a back step.

JH: Of course.

AN: You stop asking questions.

JH: And indeed, the part of the poignancy of this otherwise dramatic, fast-paced story of heroism and espionage and escape, part of the poignancy is the fact that you really were only able to dig into the story after he died and after you opened that box, that incredibly curious box to which I referred in the intro. There's so much to talk about in your book that would satisfy or spark the curiosity of our listeners. I wanna encourage them to read it, but I also wanna engage in some of the more intimate stories that you tell. And I wanna focus on one in particular, if you would indulge me, which is the following... It's a common place that one can easily lose sight of the personal, the intimate tragedies and triumphs amidst the magnitude, really the incomprehensible magnitude of the Holocaust. You, however masterfully, you capture one such moment. Indeed, your father captures this moment himself in describing his journey from Czechoslovakia, from one kind of hiding to the heart of the beast, Berlin, as he hides in plain sight, and he enters Germany under a false identity. And in that moment of crossing the border into Germany, he has to contemplate the possibility of capture. And there's this remarkable story of him weighing his options, and I wanted to ask if you would tell us that story.

AN: It's interesting because when my father left me this box that you speak of, and actually that I have right here because I keep it with me whenever I talk about it, because I think it grounds me and it reminds me of how serious it is and main reason, how real it is. Because a lot of it is quite thrilling, like this particular moment with my father, age 22, he's gone from hiding in Prague after absconding from a transport. This is the third time that he's got a notice saying,

"You have to be transported, you're gonna go to Theresienstadt." One of the marvelous things that I've uncovered is a box of letters from my grandparents, and these were letters that were snuck out of Theresienstadt and which my father had read. So by 1943, by March 1943, his parents had been in Theresienstadt, and he has all these letters saying, "Do whatever you have to do, but be safe and do not come here."

AN: So when his notice arrives in March saying, "You're going to Theresienstadt", and he's told by his friends and the council of elders that he is not going to be saved at this time, that there's nothing anyone can do, he hides. So he knows that the Gestapo were probably gonna go and look for him where he's hiding in the family's paint factory in Prague, and he all of a sudden makes this completely insane decision... And I think you have to be 22, I think you have to be pretty crazy... And you do remember, and it was astonishing to me because the father I met was a workaholic, an incredibly disciplined man, and this young man that I discovered in the letters and in the anecdotes didn't marry up with this image I had of my father at all. Because he was a prankster, he took absolutely nothing seriously, he thought life was a joke.

AN: And I think if you sort of you're 22 and you think you're a prankster and you think life is a joke, then you're going to out fool the Nazis. And how are you gonna do that? You're gonna go and you're gonna hide in the belly of the beast. So that's what he decides to do, and it's incredibly risky. It's particularly risky because he has an ID card and a made-up identity, the identity of Jan Sebesta. He has a best friend who's told him about his working in Berlin, his best friend is a Gentile, but he has been sent to Berlin to be part of the war effort, and his name is Stenek Tuma, and Stenek hugely, bravely and has actually... And selflessly has lent my father his passport so that my father can cross to Berlin. Now, there's a huge problem, which is my father was about six foot one, Stenek was about five foot ten...

AN: My father had these huge green dreamy eyes and sort of long face and Stanik looked nothing like him. He had sort of wiry hair, and sort of these very sharp astute small eyes, so he looked absolutely nothing like him. And when you cross the border, part of the dehumanization processes, you never knew what they were going to ask you. So they could ask you for your ID card, they could ask you for your passport, they could ask you for your travel permit, they could ask you for the travel permit and both IDs. And if they did that, then my father, then would be found out. So he figures that if he takes the midnight train it will be easier to hide, but there's still a huge chance. So what does he do? He secures a vial of cyanide which apparently was wrapped in rubber, and right when the train stops in the border, and it must be sort of two or three in the morning, he sticks the vial of cyanide inside his mouth.

AN: So that when the border guard, Assen, asks for the documents, he can just bite into it, if they ask him for the wrong documents or if he gets into trouble. And it's actually... When my father left me this particular bit of writing, it's one of the first ones I read, and I found it so moving and so cinematic actually, that particular moment where he is weighing his options, and you feel the fear, because it is completely insane and crazy and you describe it, and it's thrilling. But in that particular moment, as you read my father's words, which actually were written much later on, so they were written in 1991, you really, I think you feel how scared he was, and I don't know if he was scared as a 22-year-old, but he certainly was scared when he was 70 and re-writing his stories. And it's very palpable, that fear and that you can almost... At least I could almost feel the rubber in my mouth. It's pretty dangerous too, right? You feel that you can just break it by accident. I'm pretty clumsy, I certainly would.

JH: I wanna take these stories to one more, particularly in your recent essay titled *The Beauty of Things*. You retell the remarkable story of Zdenka, if I'm pronouncing her name correctly. The beautiful, clever and independent young law student as you describe her, who married your uncle. And I wanna ask you to tell us the story of this remarkable heroic woman.

AN: So you see, to me Zdenka is the hero. And I grew up having never, ever heard the name Zdenka. Again, as I pieced together these stories and as I found her daughter, it was remarkable. So Zdenka was a young Czech woman. She was born in, I think it's 1915. So she was a little bit older than my uncle Lothar who was born in 1918, so she was in her 20s when the Nazis marched into Prague, and she was not Jewish, she was a gentile, she was independent, she was studying law, she drove her own car and she was actually financially independent. Her grandfather had built all these beautiful buildings in the area, *Nove Mesto* in Prague. And they had tenants and she actually got the income from these things, and it actually was a huge lifeline from my family, because my family being Jewish, were slowly stripped of their right to work, of their belongings, of the right to do pretty much anything, to even communicate.

AN: So Zdenka starts... Initially, what I mean, I think she's wonderful because, I mean, the first thing she does is when everyone is turning away from the Jews, she does the opposite, right? She embraces Lothar even more, and his family. And she is, as I'm sure you agree from the pictures in the book, she is incredibly beautiful, and she really could have had her pick, so to choose to go and marry in 1939, when the Nazis were there, to choose to marry a Jew, sort of this tall gentle giant that was my uncle, when she could have had anyone and she could have chosen a much easier and much, much, much safer life really, is quite astounding. And I think it tells you how brave she is. But as the war rolls on, she first starts being a courier to the family.

AN: So my grandfather was one of eight. They couldn't move from one place to the other, so one of the first things that they do is they strip the Jews of the right to travel. So the family couldn't visit each other, they actually didn't have any money, and she starts being a courier between the family members, taking money, taking food, taking medicines, taking letters to them. And then as the family is deported, she sneaks into *Theresienstadt*, which some people call a ghetto, some people call a transit camp, but either way, it's a place where you're not meant to go if you're not a Jew, and you're certainly not meant to leave.

AN: And she goes and she talks to the resistance, she finds out how she's going to do it, she grabs one of the family's yellow stars, one of Lothar's yellow stars, she sews it onto her coat. And then she pretends that she... And again, if you've been to *Theresienstadt*, it's sort of a fortified town, so there's lots of entrances, and what was happening is that the Jews that were working in agriculture would work, would leave the fortified area and go to the fields around. And that is... She's told that that's the best way in, so she meets the agricultural workers, all of whom are working in the fields with their yellow stars, and she meets them there early in the morning, passes herself as one of them, and then when they go in to have their little measly soup at lunch time, she goes in with him and she finds my grandmother. And I have a letter from my grandmother talking about this encounter, and it is absolutely beautiful.

AN: Right, so I was never... I never met my grandparents, obviously. I never... I was never told really very much about them. And there's this absolutely beautiful letter from my grandmother, which she says, "I had lost all hope in this horrible dark place, and all of a sudden I looked up

and there standing in the doorway was Zdenka. And I just was so overcome with love and emotion, and we just held each other's hands", I think the letter says, "We held each other's hands, and we just looked at each other through these tears and we smiled, and all of a sudden I have hope again." So Zdenka is just incredible. And again, Zdenka wrote about this encounter as well, and her daughter had some of these writings, so I could marry up the two stories. And it's just remarkable that someone that really could have chosen any other life not only chose my uncle Lothar not only chose to help, but then actually snuck into the ghetto of Theresienstadt and took my grandmother a shawl and some lipstick and some... And actually what she needed most of all, which was love and hope, really. And then she does that again. So she does it again, eventually, my grandfather is sent to Theresienstadt as well in November 1942. And I don't think she actually goes in until 1944, but what she does before that, is she sets up a system of contraband.

AN: So they would send parcels of about 30 or 40 kilos with a worker that would go into Theresienstadt from outside. And I think this is someone that didn't have a lot of formal schooling, that did the laundry for the Nazis and for the elders in the camp, and who would sneak these parcels into the camp. Parcels with all sorts of things, including hair dye for my grandfather and little bonbons that they liked, and whatever they could get their hands on that could be used as barter in the camp. And this is a lifeline. I mean, these little parcels, or not so little parcels, keep my grandparents alive and able to sort of secure favors for a couple of years. And in 1944 at some stage, it gets really difficult and you have to bribe people to go into the camp. Often people don't wanna take the risk, and they couldn't get, they were very worried, my grandfather had a head full of white hair, and if you had white hair, the Nazis sent you east, and there were all sorts of rumors of what happened if you were sent east. And Zdenka didn't want my grandfather to be sent east, he didn't want his white hair to be apparent, even though actually he was not very old, he was in his early 50s, so she decides to sneak in to Theresienstadt again and bring him... By then they couldn't find hair dye because it was the middle of the war, but she sneaks in shoe polish, which my grandfather then was using as hair dye.

AN: And again, that is incredibly brave and wonderful and courageous. And the story to me is all these heroes, not my family, who were completely... If they did anything heroic, it was accidental and actually to save their own skin. But all these people like my father's best friend Stenek, who takes a huge risk by lending him his passport, and then takes a huge risk by keeping his secret in Berlin. But also Zdenka. Zdenka is, to me, she's just a hero and she's just... I mean, she really is just astounding, she's sort of super woman and... And it's sort of wonderful because her daughter is equally luminous and equally fabulous. And we've become really good friends, she lives in Switzerland, and even though, again, the first half of my... Much more than the first half my life, but I hadn't heard about Zdenka until about 10 years ago. And now she's one of... I'm just, I'm hugely grateful. I probably wouldn't be here if it wasn't for her so it's wonderful to have met her daughter and made that connection.

JH: Before we return to the podcast, we wanna let you know about digital learning on the College Commons platform. Beyond this podcast, which is available to the public at large, check out the online courses at collegecommons.huc.edu for in-depth learning, digital syllabi, assignments, inspiration for teaching, and one of our most influential courses called Making Prayer Real. Subscribe with your synagogue for all this and more. Just click, sign up at

collegetcommons.huc.edu. Oh, and one more thing, help us out and rate us on iTunes. But whatever you do, do not give us five stars unless we deserve it. Now, back to our podcast.

JH: I wanna pursue a different line of thinking with you. You know the... Your memoir, of course, centers on your father and all of these people in his orbit and part of this story, but I'd like to ask you, if I may, to ruminate for a moment on the power of this journey of discovering your father as an exercise in your own self-discovery, and what it's meant for you as an individual, as a human being, as a person, who must have re-assessed your own life and your own place in the world as a result of this research in this work.

AN: It's interesting, Josh, because the whole journey to me, I never thought it was my journey and I never thought this was my story to tell, or certainly my story didn't seem interesting to me at all. And when I first uncovered these beautiful stories, I felt a duty to tell them because it was a way of keeping these people with me, and of giving them a little bit more life. And I now... I think there's a wonderful tradition, Jews tell stories, and the stories are what make us who we are really. So I wanted to tell their stories, and when I went to this marvelous woman who became my agent, she said, "No, it has to be your story as well. It has to be your journey." And to me, my journey was completely uninteresting, and it was ridiculous to pick myself. Because I've had a very protected life, I went from a blissful childhood in Venezuela to studying in America to living in London. It's a very boring middle class life. I have three kids, three dogs.

AN: I can't put myself in the same... In the same plane as these remarkable heroic figures, or these people that lived through so much tumult and so much horror. And they said, "No, you have to talk about your story". And as I told their story, I realized how much it was changing me and how much putting it on paper was changing me, and how much discovering what my father was and why he was the way he was, was changing who I was. So I've gone from realizing that of course, I still shouldn't be put in the same plane as these people, but that their stories have completely changed my perception of the world, my perception of myself and my perception of my father, and I think we all don't know our parents really. I think we spend half of our lives if not more, thinking of themselves as these very sort of bi-dimensional, boring people who are our parents, who we were rebelling against in our teenage years, and then in our 20s we're just about coming to terms with them and then they're just being annoying by telling us how to raise our children. Then eventually by the time we realize actually that they're human and that they had these pretty full lives before we came along, that we want to ask them questions because we're curious but also because we can learn so much from them. And it's often when they're becoming older and more infirm that we realize this.

AN: In my case actually, my father wasn't even around, but it taught me so much about him and about who he was before I came along. It taught me so much about who I am and what people... What remarkable people I come from. And it's interesting because someone was talking about how the stories shape us and I said, "You're absolutely right". The stories that people tell us shape us, but the silences... The silences, where people don't tell you stories also shape us because the silences are not... Are not absences, right? So the silences in a sense become stories themselves and I think by trying to fill my father's silences, I have finally sort of really discovered my roots and discovered who I am and what I want to be.

JH: At various junctures in your storytelling, it becomes evident that art played a central role in your life and that of your family. And so I would wanna ask you, what have you kept with you in terms of understanding the world through the arts?

AN: You see, I think arts are absolutely crucial. I think they're a luxury I suppose, and I think they make us human and they keep us sane so it's interesting to me that my father was so... He filled his life with art. What was really interesting to me when I delved into all this darkness in the concentration camps to really understand what my grandparents were going through, was the fact that in Theresienstadt for example, the arts flourished in the middle of this darkness, in the middle of the poor people that had all sorts of horrific diseases, that were starving, that were constantly humiliated, they managed to make music, they managed to draw, they managed to write, they managed to keep their soul alive. And I think it was an act of defiance because it was... Sure they can imprison your body and they can pretty much destroy your body, but they cannot destroy your mind and producing art is a way of showing that, of not letting the Nazis win. And I think it also in times of difficulty, it just... It gets you away from your human condition and it elevates you to something a little more.

AN: We in England have just lived through a pretty, well and the rest of the world, but we've been very, very isolated here, and our quarantines were very, very strict. Our isolation and our quarantine rules, and for a long time we were only allowed to go out for once a day for a walk or for a visit to the pharmacy or whatever it was, and actually things like music and things like reading, I think they became very, very important to us all, and writing and poetry and all these little things that you would think wouldn't matter because they're superfluous really. All of a sudden you realize actually that they make our life more beautiful and it's... Sometimes it's a piece of music, sometimes it's just a flower that you see in a walk, but it is actually all art. So I think it's important to keep that and I think it's actually what brought so much light, these little moments of... That get you out of yourself, that allow you to dream, that allow you to realize that actually your mind is indeed free. That kept people and that sustained them through horrible things in the camps for example.

JH: Thank you Ariana Neumann, for joining us on the College Commons podcast, and for this beautiful interview and for sharing so much of your life and your story with us. It's been an absolute pleasure, and I want to remind our audience that they can find *When Time Stopped*, which won the 2020 National Jewish Book Award, wherever you can find books on Amazon and your bookstores. It's a gripping, a beautiful and insightful read and thank you again Ariana, it's been such a pleasure.

AN: Thank you, Josh. The pleasure has been all mine.

JH: We hope you've enjoyed this episode of the College Commons podcast. Available wherever you listen to your podcasts or at the College Commons website, collegecommons.huc.edu, where you can also stay tuned for future episodes.

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