

Dora Gersten

Title: *Memoirs of a Certain Period in our Lives*

Author: Dora Gersten

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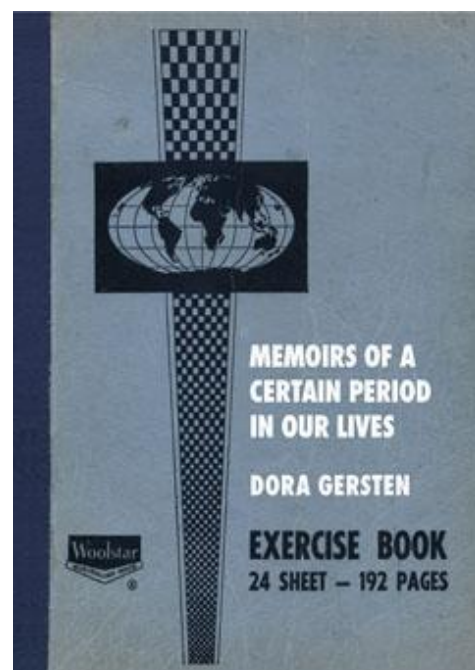
Location of Book: Monash University, Lamm Jewish Library, Melbourne Holocaust Museum, Sydney Jewish Museum and other public libraries.

Cities/towns/camps: Poland: Tarnow; France: Paris, Vélodrome d'Hiver, Cher, Sarthe (Montmirail); Australia: Melbourne.

Note: those cities/towns/camps underlined are those which are most central to the narrative.

Genre: Memoirs

Key events/experiences: Vel' d'Hiv'; in-hiding.



Memoirs of a Certain Period in our Lives is the 169-page memoir of Polish-born survivor Dora Gersten. After migrating to Paris in 1933, Dora and her daughters were caught in the 1942 Vel' d'Hiv' round-up but were miraculously released due to their work permits. They survived in Paris for a time as labourers before going into hiding in the French countryside.

The memoir is divided in two parts: Pages 1-99 contain the English translation of Dora's account, while pages 100-169 feature the original Yiddish diary. Pages 1-20 cover her illegal emigration to Paris in 1933 and struggles as an exploited worker and single-mother. Pages 20-45 describe the onset of the war, Nazi occupation and institution of antisemitic measures. Pages 36-98 recount her escape from the Vel' d'Hiv' round-up in 1942, work as a labourer at a German-run factory and her time in hiding until liberation. Pages 100-169 present a facsimile of the Yiddish diary.

Dora Gersten was born 19 July 1899 in Tarnow, Poland. She married Yehuda Zvi Lichter in 1925 and the couple had two daughters: Basha (Berthe) born in 1927 and Baltsha (Bella), born in 1928. The marriage did not last and in July 1933 Dora emigrated to France with her two young daughters, joining her cousins and brother Shulem, who had established themselves in Paris.

Arriving in Paris as a single mother and illegal immigrant without a work permit, Dora was forced into the black labour market, working long hours for up to seven days a week as a seamstress for clothing manufacturers. For years, she struggled to obtain residency and work permits, living in extreme poverty and uncertainty.

Fearing imminent war with Germany, in September 1939 Dora fled with her daughters to the village of Cher, but returned to Paris after six months. In June 1940, Nazi Germany invaded and occupied the city. Ration cards were issued, curfews imposed, and Dora's employment became increasingly insecure.

In 1941, German authorities, with the cooperation of the French police, began arresting foreign Jews and deporting them to transit camps. As Polish-Jews, Dora and her children lived in constant fear of arrest.

In March 1942, noticing her poor health and desperate financial situation, Dora's neighbour – a Jewish Frenchman – secured her a job at his place of work, the Maison Grundel, a German uniform manufacturer.

Deportations intensified in 1942 and on 16 July French policemen arrived at Dora's home and arrested the family. They were interned alongside 13,000 other Jewish detainees under appalling conditions in the Vélodrome d'Hiver sports arena, from where they were to be deported via Drancy to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

After three agonising days, it was announced that workers from nominated German factories, including Maison Grundel, were exempted from deportation. As she had a work permit, Dora was able to obtain the release of her unregistered children. Their reprieve was short-lived, for three weeks later the girls, then aged 14 and 15, received notice to present at the Department of Jewish Affairs for deportation. Dora frantically secured work permits for her children and again obtained their release.

In the subsequent months, Dora and her daughters were repeatedly arrested and released by French police – spared temporarily from deportation because of their work permits. As their permits were subject to renewal or revocation every three months, the women lived in constant fear.

In early 1943, Dora's permit was cancelled and the family went into hiding with the Furstenbergs – fellow Jews with connections to the underground. To avoid detection by police and informants, the children were sent to a safe house in the town of Montmirail, in the Sarthe region of western France, while Dora moved between the Furstenberg home and various safe houses. When Mr. Furstenberg lost his work permit in mid-1943, Dora sought refuge with her daughters' rescuer, Madame Avignon. After a few weeks, due to the risk of exposure by town residents and local authorities, they were moved to separate farms. Dora was placed in the care of Mr. and Mrs. Poirer whose daughter sheltered the girls.

The Poirers soon became a loving surrogate family for Dora, assisting her in obtaining ration cards, securing paid labour with local farmers, and establishing a network of supportive Christian villagers. Although their kindness provided great relief, Dora lived in constant anxiety that their naivety, or the indiscretion of the local villagers, might result in her discovery by authorities.

By 1944, Dora had saved enough money working as a farmhand and seamstress to rent and furnish a modest cabin on a farm known as Bel-Air, where she lived with her daughters, supported by their network of local farmers and villagers.

After the Allied landing in Normandy in June 1944, retreating German soldiers began flooding the region, pillaging vital supplies and threatening locals. In early August 1944, Sarthe was liberated by American forces.

Following liberation, Dora returned to Paris to find her apartment occupied, prompting her to find shelter again with the Furstenberg family. After registering with authorities, she was finally able to secure legal residence papers, which enabled her to reclaim her apartment and find stable employment. At an unspecified date, she and her daughters emigrated to Australia, where Dora lived until her death in 1973.

Although it is uncertain when Dora began writing her account, her memoir was completed in 1967. Written in Yiddish in an exercise book, the diary remained hidden in a desk drawer until its discovery by her children and grandchildren in 2004. It was later translated into English by Albert Shelling (Bella's brother-in-law) and published as part of the Makor Jewish Community Library's "Write Your Story" program.

Memoirs of a Certain Period in Our Lives offers a candid account of the author's pre-war and wartime experiences in Paris, without details of her life in Poland and Australia. It is a significant document describing the role of French police in facilitating the Holocaust, as well as the efforts of French rescuers. It also provides detailed insight into the French political climate of the 1930s and 40s, as well as the daily struggles of an immigrant and single-mother.