

## CULTURE AND ARTS

### Book Excerpt: *My City of Dreams*

Memoirist Lisa Gruenberg explores how trauma travels down through the generations

"I started writing...*My City of Dreams* in 2004 when my elderly father, a Viennese Holocaust survivor, began having flashbacks and nightmares about the past," writes Lisa Gruenberg about the genesis of her recently-released memoir. "I was suffering from severe depression and my dreams had disappeared. I would wake with a start as if someone were speaking through me. I got up and wrote what had come to me. These first bits of writing were in the voice of my father's sister, Mia, who disappeared in 1941 at the age of fifteen, and whose name my father did not say out loud until the year before his death."

Gruenberg is a gynecologist who works in the Boston area, and is a graduate of Williams College. In *My City of Dreams*, she struggles to come to terms not only with the wartime experiences of her father and his family, but with the effect on her own life exerted by her father's repression of the tragic story.

Writes Gruenberg: "We knew that his was a sad story, that his parents were murdered and that his only sister disappeared into Germany, and that many of his relatives 'perished,' a term I'd always found inadequate. It was more that my father always lived very much in the present, and always described his city and his childhood in the most joyous way."

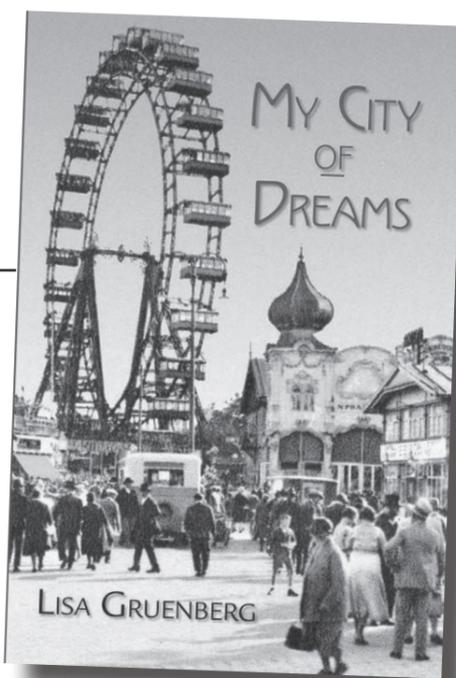
By the time Gruenberg started inquiring more deeply into her family history, her father was unable to reliably remember the past. After his death, she translated letters between her father and his sister, as well as other family documents. She writes: "After my father's death in 2005, I traveled to Vienna, Germany and Israel to explore this lost

landscape, and to trace the fates of Mia, their extended family, friends and neighbors. I wove our stories together, linking them with photographs, archival documents, family letters, diaries, my father's writing, his genealogy research, and the joyful tales he told me long ago. *My City of Dreams* is a Holocaust tale, but it is also very much the modern-day story of the relationship between one daughter and her father, about how trauma travels down through the generations, and about how we find meaning in our lives."

Lisa Gruenberg will be speaking about her memoir at Kimball Farms, 235 Walker Street in Lenox on December 17 at 4 p.m. With the author's permission, the BJV is able to share an excerpt from *My City of Dreams*, a scene from "Part 1: Unraveling" in which Gruenberg begins to realize that there may be more to her father's life story than she understood. *My City of Dreams*, was released by TidePool Press in 2019. You can purchase it locally at the Williams Book Store and The Bookstore in Lenox.



Lisa Gruenberg is a physician, medical educator, and writer based in Boston. She has taught creative writing at the Karolinska Institute, the Asian University for Women, and Harvard Medical School. Her essays have been published in *Ploughshares*, *Vital Signs*, *Hospital Drive*, *The Intima*, *a Journal of Narrative Medicine*, and upcoming in *The Michigan Quarterly Review*. Her short story, *Keiskamma*, won the 2012 Artist Fellowship from the Massachusetts Cultural Council.



#### from Part I: Unraveling

Like my father, [my daughter] Heather approached every question from a novel angle. She read everything: biology texts, historical novels, and sci-fi. She would plunge into deep thought and seem inaccessible for days. I'd see her go under; but I could never predict where she would surface again. She left for boarding school at Exeter, the same school [my husband] Martin had attended, as a self-possessed teenager. When she came home to visit she seemed unsettled, but I sensed that I was the last person she wanted to talk to. I felt like I volleyed conversation over the growing canyon yawning between us, and that, more often than not, my words never reached her.

When she was in sixth grade, Heather had discovered my father's extensive genealogy research, written in the years after he retired from the engineering faculty at Syracuse University. He'd created almost a hundred family trees, tracing his family back from Vienna through Germany to a shtetl near Kolomea, in what is now Poland. He'd even traced my mother's family back several centuries from the north of England to Scotland. There were several pages of Austrian political history, and then he'd written something about most everyone, even relatives who died long before the war. His writing was cheerful and full of exclamation points, similar in tenor to the stories he had told me when I was a child, about growing up with his large extended family in wonderful Vienna. His lighthearted stories didn't match the carefully rendered trees, so many branches withered with phrases like "gassed at Auschwitz," or "died? Minsk?" His parents had a page each. His younger brother, Uri, barely had half a page. Their younger sister, who had disappeared into Germany in 1941 when she was fifteen years old, didn't even have a section of her own. A few of his large extended family and friends made it out of Europe, but many more "perished," a word that made them seem like fruits and vegetables forgotten in a drawer of the refrigerator. I'd only glanced at the cheap plastic binder when my father hefted a copy into my hands in 1994. I was busy with work then, and the girls were still small.

But Heather read the book from cover to cover and used it for a middle school project titled *My Champion*. My parents came out to our home in Wayland, Massachusetts, to watch her presentation. She wore my father's Burberry raincoat and his tweed cap. She narrated his solitary train journey out of Austria in 1939, at the age of eighteen. When he crossed the border from Germany to Belgium, he flushed his last pfennigs down the toilet, after a soldier warned him it was illegal to leave the Reich with any German currency. With her cobalt eyes and taffy mane, Heather looked nothing like my father. At the end of her rendition of my father's escape from the Nazis, her teacher's eyes glittered with tears. My father looked pleased. Heather got an A.

I didn't hear my father join us in the kitchen until he spoke.

"I made a lamp like the one in the movie, as well as a metal paperweight with an Art Nouveau design."

I nodded at his faint reflection in the window.

"When the Brown Shirts came to our door they told us to leave. They took the lamp and the paperweight."

My mind struggled with my father's unemotional voice, the scene he was describing, and getting dinner

ready. I replied with the first thing that popped into my head. "Were they polite?" I asked. My question hung in the air for a moment, giving me time to consider its absurdity.

An animal growl emanated from my father. It made me spin around to face him and I knocked a plate off the counter and it shattered on the floor. Heather started up from her work and looked down at the broken plate and then from me to my father.

The serene man we knew was gone. He looked terrified. "Were they polite? Were they polite? They were not polite." The quaver that usually held my father's voice captive had evaporated. "It was Kristallnacht."

Heat rushed to my face as he went on, speaking fast and loud.

"They banged on our door, and when Mutti opened it they pushed her aside." It was as if he was in the middle of a scene that only he could see. "The local policeman was their leader, a man we saw almost every day. The rest were members of the fascist youth, wearing dark shirts and carrying clubs." My father moved out from behind the counter and stood next to me. He seemed to tower above me. His speech accelerated further. "They took our keys and pushed us out the door and we fled."

"Where did you go?" I shouted back at him even though we were just inches apart.

He didn't answer me, but stepped back, then mumbled and groaned. He spoke a stream of words in German. I couldn't understand him, although he said "Mutti" again. I tried to put my hand on him, but his arms windmilled. His eyes strained wide. He seemed to be looking through me to something far beyond. But just as suddenly, he focused on me and shrank back into his familiar, stooped form. His voice was quiet but steady.

"When we returned, the doors were open—the same with our Jewish neighbors, the Melzers and the Harbands. Everything was smashed and thrown across the rooms. What little we had of value had been taken, including my lamp, the paperweight, and a suitcase with clothes we were sending on to Uri in Palestine. A few marks my sister had hidden were also taken."

He held the counter as he staggered to the kitchen table. He struggled to drag a chair out and lowered himself into it. Then he flipped through Heather's math book. Heather looked at me. I indicated the text with a nod of my head. Heather slid her notebook in front of him.

He studied her solution then leafed through her textbook.

"How would you solve this one?" he asked, pointing at one of the challenge questions. He had told me that Heather e-mailed math problems to him from Exeter, and they corresponded back and forth, debating various solutions. I don't think they talked about any of their day-to-day activities or exchanged thoughts on anything other than math or physics.

He took a paper napkin, his stationery of choice when he wanted to explain something to me when I was Heather's age. Then he pulled a ballpoint pen out of his shirt pocket and clicked it three times. It circled over the page before alighting, and his unsteady numbers slanted down the page.

"Let's try another approach," he said. "Yours is good, I just want to show you a different way to come at it."

The broken plate crunched under my clogs when I walked to my father's side and put my hands on his shoulder. He reached up and patted me. I felt his familiar tremor.

My mother was reading the front page in the living room when I left them. Lydia had flipped onto her stomach and her arm hung down toward the floor.

"Did you hear that?" I asked my mother.

"Hear what?"

"Dad—did you hear him in there?"

"No." She folded the newspaper in half, then quarters.

"He was talking about Kristallnacht. Was he in Vienna on Kristallnacht?"

My mother thought for a minute. "What year was that?" she asked.

"I don't know, but did he ever talk to you about still being there?"

"He seems to be talking about the whole thing a lot now. Maybe it's that new medication he's on." She put the paper aside.

"He used to sit across from me for hours and not say a word—forget about actually having a conversation. Then he went off to that room of his and closed the door. But now he's talking again. You can't get him to stop."

"But, Mom, this isn't Dad running on with one of his old stories. He was speaking German."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure."

"What did he say—when he was speaking German?"

"I don't know. I think it was something about his mother and his sister. I don't know enough German to follow him, and he was talking pretty fast. Does he ever speak German with you?"

She picked up the paper again and unfolded it.

"Never. Well, not since he tried to teach me when we were courting. All I know is that he gets started on one of those old stories and you just can't turn him off. And this stuff comes up at the most inappropriate times with the wrong people. No one needs to hear these things now. It has nothing to do with them." My mother started up on her puzzle again.

"What would be the appropriate time, Mom? Who are the right people?"

My mother sighed and didn't look up. "What's past is past. You can't do anything about it."