

The Last Flame

by Yehudit Shendar

The last flamenco was danced by Catherina van den Berg behind the walls of the Theresienstadt Ghetto (northwestern Czechoslovakia) in the spring of 1943. The statuesque, lithe, and very pretty Dutch-Jewish woman caught the attention of the Czech artist Charlotte Buresova when Catherina took her infant son, Clairence, for a walk on the main street of Theresienstadt. She had recently arrived to the ghetto from Westerbork (northeastern Netherlands), a transit camp for some 97,000 Dutch Jews who were being deported to Eastern Europe in 1942–44.

Catherina passed through the gates of Westerbork as a newlywed in a nurse's uniform, accompanied by her husband, Jacques Frank, and pregnant with her son. In her last days in her hometown of Rotterdam, she had served as a nurse in the Jewish hospital, and in Westerbork, too, she was assigned to work at an 1,800-bed infirmary.

She gave birth to Clairence on 3 May 1943. Her husband managed to see his son once before they were separated. He was evacuated in one of nineteen transports that delivered 35,000 Dutch Jews to Sobibor, Poland — the infamous extermination camp where prisoners were sent to the gas chambers within a few hours of arrival. At the end of the war, only nineteen of the Dutch Jews who had reached this camp had survived. Jacques Frank was not one of them.

The inmates at Westerbork lived a quasi-normal life in between the dreaded transports to the East and certain extermination. In months when such transports did not occur, the camp commander encouraged the prisoners to entertain themselves. Concerts, opera, and cabaret performances were arranged with the participation of the artists among the camp prisoners.

Catherina, a newlywed and new mother whose husband had been deported to an unknown destination, was asked to join the camp's entertainment team. The team members from Rotterdam, recalling that their childhood friend had studied dance from age six to age twenty, recommended her to Willy Rosen and Erich Ziegler — two famous musicians from Germany — who composed and wrote lyrics for a revue called "Humor and Song" at the Westerbork cabaret. Although the performances were meant for the prisoners' amusement, the camp staff and high-ranking SS officers filled the first row of seats every evening.

On one of those occasions, the notorious Adolf Eichmann sat in the front row and watched the revue. (A descriptive album with color drawings, a manuscript, and photographs is in the Yad Vashem Archives.) After the

program, he asked to be introduced to the lovely dancer, Catherina Frank. When he heard her personal story, he promised to have her sent to the Theresienstadt camp and interned there until the end of the war. He kept his word. In the spring of 1943, clutching her infant son and a fur coat sent to her by her father — with gold coins concealed in the lining — she was transported to Theresienstadt.

The young mother and her son were given housing in one of the large barracks, with neither privacy nor any of the special accoutrements that an infant needs. The spectacle of a baby in the ghetto was unusual, and whenever Catherina took him for a walk people would approach and stare at the sweet, handsome little boy. When the artist Charlotte Buresova stopped her, however, she had an exceptional request; she was working on a series of drawings of dancers and dances from around the world and wanted Catherina to model for her. When Catherina came to the studio, Buresova asked her whether she knew the steps of the flamenco.

Thus, it was in the Theresienstadt ghetto, far from home, her future and fate unknown, that Catherina Frank danced her last flamenco. However, it was not the last time that Buresova asked Catherina to model for her. One day, she told Catherina that the camp commander had asked her to produce an oil painting of Madame Butterfly. Observing Catherina's lovely face, Buresova decided that she was the ideal model. So she became Madame Butterfly in the painting that enhanced the camp commander's office. (Charlotte Buresova escaped from the ghetto in the vehicle of the Swedish ambassador three days before the camp was liberated by the Russians. She returned to Prague where she continued to paint portraits of children and her memories of Theresienstadt.)

In one of his many visits to Theresienstadt, Adolf Eichmann, who had been responsible for establishing the ghetto, and for assembling and deporting Jews from Europe to the concentration and death camps, noticed the painting and told the commander that he had made the acquaintance of the beautiful Jewish woman. Catherina was summoned to the commander's office for her second encounter with Eichmann. She reminded him where they had first met and was surprised he could remember her.

When Eichmann asked if he could help her in any way, Catherina described her hardship in raising her son in the cavernous barracks, and immediately he promised to arrange for a private room. Catherina was moved to a small room on the fourth floor of one of the barracks and became the housemother for a group of young Hehalutz (Jewish youth

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Catherina van den Berg modeling as a flamenco dancer. Watercolor on paper, 1943. Donated by Mrs. van den Berg.



Ghetto Quarters. Watercolor, ink, and pencil on paper. Donated by Mrs. Aliza Chic.

group) members who had reached Theresienstadt with another 500 Danish Jews captured in Copenhagen in October 1943.

The prisoners from Denmark received special treatment from their government, including support parcels from the Danish Foreign Ministry. They shared these parcels with Catherina and her young son, and with this food she and the boy managed to survive in the ghetto despite the harsh conditions. By the end of the war when most of Dutch Jewry had perished at Auschwitz and Sobibor, Catherina and Clairence were among the only five percent of Dutch Jewry who had survived.

Catherina remembers her first steps on Dutch soil, with the sole responsibility of caring for her 2-year-old son, as the most difficult moments of all. She had just recovered from the typhoid fever she had contracted during her last weeks of internment in the camp, and had been flown back to her homeland with the assistance of American soldiers for whom she had served as an interpreter.

The authorities were unsympathetic in their treatment of the returning refugees. She was given a job at a department store by the former manager of the laundry facility in Theresienstadt, who had promised to help her if they survived the inferno. She remarried in 1952, and as Mrs. Van den Berg raised her son Clairence, who eventually became the father and grandfather of daughters and granddaughters. Catherina speaks proudly of all of them and pampers them with everything she could not give Clairence in his own boyhood.

She never danced again; the flamenco in Theresienstadt was indeed the last flamenco of the dancer whose shapely legs, as she confided to this author, had saved her from a brutal fate. She contributed the painting of her likeness as a flamenco dancer and a portrait of Clairence at the age of nine months to the Yad Vashem Art Museum, during her recent first visit to Israel. "This is the right place to preserve them," she said.

The paintings were added to the Art Museum collection and joined several works by Charlotte Buresova, including women dancers in various ethnic costumes. We had not known the full story of these paintings until Catherina explained it to us, during her visit. Then, for the first time in her life, Mrs. Van den Berg gave a full account of her ordeal.

Now, past the age of eighty, she feels that a chapter is closing. The story of the last flamenco, now in the public domain, has a personal dimension. This firsthand account of Catherina's story has added to our awareness that dancing and art existed behind walls and barbed wire during the Holocaust.



Dancer. Watercolor and chalk on paper. Donated by the artist.



Portrait of Clairence Edward Maxim van den Berg (the son of Catherina van den Berg and the late Jacques Frank). Donated by Mrs. van den Berg.

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