

# The New York Times

## Under Suspicion

By James Lasdun

May 3, 2013

In the spring of 1941 the Jewish cabaret singer Vera Gran began performing at the Sztuka, a cafe in the Warsaw ghetto frequented by intellectuals and remnants of Jewish high society. The place was also popular with collaborators, including the so-called Jewish Gestapo who selected and rounded up their fellow Jews for transportation to Treblinka.

One of Gran's accompanists was Wladyslaw Szpilman, whose memoir of survival in the ghetto was the basis for Roman Polanski's film "The Pianist." After the war, when Szpilman was employed at Radio Warsaw, Gran asked him for work. "I thought that he owed me a debt of gratitude," she told Agata Tuszynska, her biographer (though "biography" isn't quite the word for this breathless exercise in author-subject identification). But Szpilman turned her down, stating as his reason the rumor that was to haunt Gran for the rest of her life:

"I heard that you collaborated with the Gestapo!"

At this point the story, at least in Tuszynska's telling, enters a twilight zone of fact and conjecture, cheerleading and malice, lucidity and near-gibberish, all so treacherously mingled there's almost nothing one can say about it that doesn't come out tainted by the pervasive murk.

What is indisputable is that Gran, who died in 2007, deemed herself innocent; that she underwent several investigations, none of which found her guilty; and that the rumor persisted nevertheless, pursuing her relentlessly as she began to rebuild her career. A tour of Israel was canceled after one organization threatened to attend her performances wearing the striped pajamas of the camps. In Paris, where she finally settled, she was refused naturalization papers: the rumor had reached the prefecture.

By the time the Warsaw-born Tuszynska encountered her, Gran's unavailing efforts to clear her name had turned her into a bitter recluse. She was also floridly delusional, her self-exculpatory monologues devolving into crazed persecution fantasies: "They track me down from every side. At night they come into my home, they enter by the windows or break the locks. They grab everything. They've stolen my photographs, my papers; they take and destroy anything they want. They drug me so that I won't wake up before noon. . . . They film me 24 hours a day."



From "The Grosz Library of Hits," Courtesy of Agata Tuszynsky

Whether or not she was guilty, the recriminatory atmosphere of the immediate postwar period worked against her. There may also have been personal animosity involved in some of the accusations. But as time passed many of her detractors, including Szpilman, seemed to want to let the matter drop.

---

**You have 4 free articles remaining.  
Subscribe to The New York Times**

---

Gran, however, wasn't so inclined to forget or forgive. In 1980 she self-published a memoir in which she attempted to turn the tables on Szpilman, making the sensational claim that he was a member of the Jewish police, and that she had seen him, in uniform, dragging women by their hair to one of the selections.

As Tuszynska acknowledges, there is zero evidence of this from any other source. Given the acute postwar interest in punishing collaborators (illustrated by Gran's own story), this total absence of corroborating testimony makes it unlikely to be true. So does the fact that Gran said nothing about it at the time, waiting almost 40 years to drop (or invent) her bombshell. So do her many delusions, lapses of memory and outright lies, all documented by Tuszynska. Szpilman was far from Gran's most ardent accuser, but his fame seems to have vested him with overwhelming symbolic power in her eyes. On her apartment wall she wrote in red ink: "Help!! The Szpilman and Polanski clique wants to kill me! HELP ME!!!"

One would think Tuszynska might therefore be careful to quarantine the allegation in thick disclaimers. But on the contrary, without quite endorsing it, she plays it up to the maximum. Feverishly empathizing with her subject, she accuses Szpilman of nefariously omitting Gran from his memoir, insinuating that he did so because Gran had the goods on him. From Tuszynska's many outraged denunciations of this omission ("He was silent to the point of killing her"), one might suppose that Szpilman's memoir was entirely about the Sztuka cabaret and that the whole book was constructed around the idea of writing Vera Gran out of history. But his time at the Sztuka occupies just a few pages. Unlike Gran, who was able to escape the ghetto when it became too dangerous, Szpilman was there for nearly the entire duration, and as readers of his memoir will recall, he had other things to contend with.

You can gauge the quality of Tuszynska's reasoning from this simultaneously muddled and devious conversion of uncertainty into "fact": "Was he a member of the police, or a volunteer? And if that is the case, I have no proof whatsoever. Did this occur before the deportation of his family, or after? Did he believe that life could be bought, or only the feeling of security?"

Well, scandal sells. Vera Gran was undoubtedly a fascinating and tragic figure, perhaps deeply wronged. One can imagine what Isaac Bashevis Singer or Irène Némirovsky might have made of her. But neither she nor history is well served by this careless, confused piece of work.

## **VERA GRAN**

### **The Accused**

By Agata Tuszynska

Translated by Charles Ruas from the French of Isabelle Jannès-Kalinowski

Illustrated. 305 pp. Alfred A. Knopf. \$28.95.

James Lasdun's most recent book is "Give Me Everything You Have: On Being Stalked."

A version of this article appears in print on May 5, 2013, on Page 15 of the Sunday Book Review with the headline: Under Suspicion