

# TRAVELS THROUGH TIME

## When Time Stopped: Ariana Neumann (1944)

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[Intro music]

**Peter Moore:** Hello, I'm Peter Moore. Today, we're venturing inside the Third Reich in 1944 to revisit an astonishing story of survival in the very bleakest of times.

'Imagine this. The clock on the wall or the watch on your wrist stops ticking. Time has frozen. You've become invisible. At first, you might feel exhilarated by the sense of freedom but then you'll be frightened that you're lost and you'll never be able to get back.' These are words written by Hanus or Hans Neumann describing a sensation that he experienced strongly during the cruel years of the Second World War. Hans was a young Jewish man, locked within the borders of Hitler's Third Reich and by the year 1944, he'd found himself caught in a nightmarish struggle for survival. Here to tell us about Hans' story and that of his wider family is his daughter, Ariana Neumann. Ariana is the author of a deeply moving and extraordinary new memoir called *When Time Stopped*. John le Carré has called it 'a beautifully told story of personal discovery of almost unimaginable human bravery and sacrifice and a harrowing portrait of living, dying and surviving under the yoke Nazism.' I met with Ariana in London the other day. I hope you enjoy our conversation.

Welcome to *Travels Through Time*, Ariana.

**Ariana Neumann:** Thank you for having me here.

**Peter Moore:** Right at the start of your story is this sense of dislocation. Your family roots on your father's side are in Central Europe but you grew up in Venezuela. Could you begin by telling us a little bit about your childhood memories of your father in Caracas?

**Ariana Neumann:** Absolutely. I grew up in the Venezuela of the '70s and '80s which was a place booming with investment, potential and promise. It was a colourful, vibrant country and I had a beautiful childhood. I grew up the daughter of a very successful industrialist; a man who was very engaged in the present, who worked all the time and when he wasn't working, he was giving advice to museums or politicians on themes as varied as education and art. He was a really engaging presence and seemed to go perfectly in this wonderful new world of potential but there was a darkness to him. There were little bits which were incongruous with his surroundings. He was much older than the other fathers. He was much more wrinkled and much more distant and this was a block. He would discuss ideas and discuss anything really and was very open but he would not ever discuss his past. He never spoke about his family in the Czech Republic or his life before.

**Peter Moore:** There must have been some facts that you knew about him from talking to your mother or from talking to the wider family. Were you aware of his childhood in the Czech Republic, as it is today? I know that wasn't what it was then but were you aware at all of any facts?

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**Ariana Neumann:** Not really. All I knew is that he had emigrated in 1949. He had arrived in Venezuela and had built a paint factory. By the time I was eight or nine, I had a 'detective club' and one afternoon, I just found this box and inside the box was a photograph of my father as a young man, and I recognised him, and a stamp of Hitler, which was dated Berlin 1943, which made no sense to me because I knew he was from Prague and more importantly, *[laughter]* it had someone else's name. I ran to my mother, saying, 'There's an imposter. This man who lives with us is not who he says he is.' She then said, 'Please don't worry about it. Calm down. He's not an imposter.'

**Peter Moore:** How old were you?

**Ariana Neumann:** I was eight or nine. She said, 'He had a difficult war and he had to pretend to be someone else.'

**Peter Moore:** I imagine this is quite traumatic for you at that point because if your father is not who you think - we construct our parents quite strongly in our childhood minds - and then the evidence you see before your eyes contradicts what you've been told.

**Ariana Neumann:** That is true but that particular moment made these other tiny, little moments that I hadn't really noticed until then much more salient. My father would wake up screaming in the middle of the night and he would be screaming in a language that I didn't understand. If you asked anything about his family, his hands would start to shake. I always knew that there was something there that he just could not speak about.

**Peter Moore:** Well, we're going to get to the story, which is absolutely fascinating, in a moment. A little bit more about the context of Venezuela in the '70s and '80s. I like one of the things you write towards the end of the book that when your father and his brother were encouraged to emigrate in the late '40s, they were told, 'The only things you'll need to maintain are your good health, learn a bit of Spanish and a dose of optimism.' From reading the early parts of your book, which deals with this childhood which is so enticing, idyllic, the sun is shining and you're up to all sorts of schemes with your friends (we'll talk about one of those in a moment), it's completely at odds with what lies beneath, what is unsaid and what is unseen, isn't it?

**Ariana Neumann:** Yes, absolutely. Even just contrast of the colours, the vibrancy of the place, the sounds, the music, the joy and the feeling of potential compared to where my father came from. It was a Europe completely decimated by war; from a family which was completely decimated; the darkness and the weight of history. It must have been quite liberating for him, in many ways, to just arrive in this tropical country which was just emerging from a dictatorship and know that he could reinvent himself and be whoever he wanted to be.

**Peter Moore:** Of course, the other significant person in this story is yourself because you were temperamentally curious. You later went on to be a journalist by training. So by training and by character almost, you're someone who is going to be drawn to stories, especially mysteries. You talk about The Mysterious Boot Club early on in the book which I thought was a really charming little story. Can you tell us a little bit about The Mysterious Boot Club of Caracas?

**Ariana Neumann:** Of course. I have to tell you The Mysterious Boot Club is still alive today *[laughter]*. We're just a little older. I started it when I was eight or nine and we were just inspired by Enid Blyton. I read all these books with Nancy Drew and an American character called Encyclopedia Brown who amassed information and I just wanted to be like him. I wanted, more than anything, to solve mysteries. On Saturday mornings, there was a disused kennel at the back

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of the garden and we used to have Great Danes, initially, so it was a very big kennel and we could all crawl in there, sit around, have our meetings and we would spy on people. It was mostly my cousins and a few friends. They would arrive on Saturday morning and we would decide who we were going to spy on, whether it was the gardener, my father, my mother or someone cooking lunch. We would then spend half an hour observing them and then we'd read reports back to one another and try to figure out who was hiding a secret and where this mystery that we needed to solve lay.

**Peter Moore:** The person who, obviously, was hiding the biggest secret - and this became clear to you throughout your childhood - was your father. There are two things I'm just going to mention about him, which come from my reading of the book. I think they're really instructive quotes and anecdotes. One is that you say your father 'always said that life was now, in the present, and he was certainly not one to think about the past.' That was his outlook but at the same time, and this is a contradictory element, that he was a man who never raised his voice but once he carried a gun in an ankle holder and he told one of your family members that 'it contained a bullet for the man who separated him from his father at Prague railway station.' These are peppered throughout the early parts of the book. As you're talking about Venezuela, Caracas and this idyllic life, there are these quite unsettling moments which suggest there's much, much more. The book, *When Time Stopped*, becomes a family history, as much as a story of your father, doesn't it? Is that right?

**Ariana Neumann:** It absolutely is. I mean it is a story of my father at the centre of a riveting tale of how he survived the war by going from Prague to Berlin when he was wanted by the Gestapo and hiding in plain sight, working in a Nazi factory and eventually, passing off information to the Allies. The centre of it is his story of survival but as I pieced together his story of survival, I spoke to different people and I traced family all over the world, these remarkable tales of a family that was never spoken about emerged. All of a sudden, I got to know my grandparents and one of the things that arrived very early on in my research when I started asking questions was a box of letters that my uncle's widow had kept. When I asked, 'Do we have any documents?' She said, 'Oh yes, there's this box.' The box had dozens of letters uncensored but coded which were written by my grandparents in the concentration camp of Theresienstadt. It's a remarkable trove of information and not only from a historical perspective, as I was told by museum curators that it's unusual to have that amount, but also because it allowed me to get to know these grandparents who were never ever spoken about. They weren't as much forgotten as just veiled in silence. Together with them, there was this enormous family. They had siblings, nephews, nieces and cousins and this huge family just emerged and is a little bit part of the story.

**Peter Moore:** Absolutely. Let's just do our last bit of chronological set-up before we get into our three scenes. We're going to go and look at the family in a moment and their wartime experiences. Your father died in September 2001. Obviously, it's very memorable that he was cremated on 11th September 2001. That date is a fulcrum in so many of our lives but particularly in yours because that seemed to me, in reading the book, the moment when you were free to begin these investigations more intensely.

**Ariana Neumann:** Yes.

**Peter Moore:** You write 'I've gone to the paint factory that the family owned to the houses and the apartments that were once theirs. I've paced the same rooms and hallways, climbed the same stairs, held on to the same railings, crossed the same streets, tripped on the same chipped cobbled stones of Prague's sidewalks, walks on the path of the river and smelt the same

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magnolias and geraniums,' and so on. I think what we're going to do, in a conversational sense now, is exactly the same and just try and go back to this history, to try and imagine what it was like and to analyse what happened. What we always do in this podcast is ask someone to pick a year and three scenes within the year. Now you picked 1944. What drew you towards that particular year?

**Ariana Neumann:** I think, from a historical perspective, we know the war is ending in 1944. It's a terrible year but it's also perhaps a more hopeful year than the preceding ones during the war because it's obvious that Germany is going to lose. For my family, 1944 is really a harrowing time and for me, actually, as I've investigated, it was a very difficult year to immerse myself in. All sorts of interesting things happened but my grandparents were interned at the time in Theresienstadt. They had been sent there in 1942 and then at the same time, my father, who had absconded from a transport in March 1943 and was wanted by the Gestapo, had gone, in May, to the belly of the beast. He had gone to Berlin to hide in plain sight. So 1944 finds my family split up and in completely unimaginable conditions.

**Peter Moore:** Just to pick up on a broader sense, by 1944, we know this horrific process, that today we called the Holocaust, has reached its most intense phase. There's active deportation and people are being sent to the death camps in Poland. Against the backdrop of that, you couldn't have any more dramatic and tragic context to frame this conversation... but there are people living their lives within this. Let's go and have a look at them. What is the first scene that you would like to go and have a look at, please?

**Ariana Neumann:** The first scene I would like to go and have a look at is the Red Cross visit to the camp of Terezin and it takes place on June 23rd 1944.

**Peter Moore:** Let's do a bit of unpacking. Terezin, is it right to describe it as a ghetto? I know, in the book, you have a slight qualm about that term because it doesn't capture fully what was happening in there but that's how it would broadly be categorised by historians, isn't it?

**Ariana Neumann:** It is broadly categorised as a ghetto. At least when I heard the word 'ghetto', I didn't quite understand the horrors that that could encompass or life there could encompass. Over 80,000 people went through it and over half of the people there - not quite half but around 35,000 died there. It wasn't an extermination camp but the conditions were so horrible that people died of disease, hunger and exhaustion. It was certainly a safer place to be than Auschwitz and it was seen as a transit camp. The Nazis excluded, then they deported usually to transit camps or to ghettos and then eventually, they sent people to extermination camps.

**Peter Moore:** So in the process, this would be lying between home and maybe the extermination camps.

**Ariana Neumann:** Absolutely.

**Peter Moore:** This was a halfway house. Whereabouts was it exactly? Can you give us a geographical location?

**Ariana Neumann:** Absolutely. It's just outside of Prague. It's northwest of Prague and if you were to drive there today, it would take you about 50 minutes to reach it.

**Peter Moore:** Is it really just a village or a small town?

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**Ariana Neumann:** It is a small town. It is surprisingly beautiful because it was built in the 18th century and it is a fortified town. It has a classic square with a church in the middle, a post office to one side and these beautiful streets. You walk down them. I mean they're now abandoned and it's difficult to call them beautiful but...

**Peter Moore:** I know you describe it in the book as 'a place which is almost indistinguishable from a thousand other towns of its type in Central Europe.'

**Ariana Neumann:** Absolutely.

**Peter Moore:** It's got the square, the pretty streets but...

**Ariana Neumann:** Absolutely.

**Peter Moore:** ...at this period in its history, it's been converted entirely, hasn't it? As you say, if you were Jewish, you lived in Prague and you were to be selected for deportation, this is where you were sent initially, isn't it?

**Ariana Neumann:** It is, absolutely. The majority of my family were sent there. In some odd cases, people were sent straight to extermination camps. It was an unusual place because most of the urban, educated Jews ended up going through there and so you had a group of people who were concentrated there, who tended to be very educated and you had wonderful musicians, for example, or you had wonderful doctors. It was a very strange place because you had all these artists and all these very successful professionals all conglomerated in here. Of course, I'm not doing it justice. It was a town designed for 5,000 and you had tens of thousands just clustered in there with no food and no facilities.

**Peter Moore:** What makes you choose the date of 23rd June 1944?

**Ariana Neumann:** There was a charade that took place on that day and it's very interesting to me that it could have taken place, from all sorts of angles: the fact that it happened at all and the fact that Jews cooperated is astounding. Perhaps I should go back. What happened was that some 400 Danish Jews had just been sent to Theresenstadt and the Danish Red Cross said, 'We want to ensure that this place they've been sent to is okay.' They organised a visit with someone from the International Red Cross and there were three delegates. They inspected Theresenstadt and they found it to be perfectly suitable. The reason they found it to be perfectly suitable was because the Germans - or the Nazis, rather - knew this was going to happen and so months before, they started a beautification programme. All of a sudden, they put little potted plants in places. They wrote up the word 'school' and they actually cleaned up the camp; not only in terms of making it more beautiful but they emptied it. In two days, they deported over 7,000 people to their deaths in Auschwitz to make it seem less crowded. With this backdrop, these three people go there and there are obvious signs that things are not right. For one, the supposed mayor of the town had a black eye. They were only allowed to go through certain streets. I heard a survivor, the other day, tell a story that she was a little girl there and that the children were given bread and margarine which they hadn't seen in years. They were allowed to hold it and they couldn't bite into it until after the people from the Red Cross had gone past them. It was a whole, coordinated charade and they had musicians performing on the street and, of course, there were lots of very good musicians. They even put a children's opera on and the people sat through this and saw what they wanted to see.

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**Peter Moore:** It's a complete perversion of the reality of the time and I imagine this element of theatre, which is coordinated for the visit, would be really interesting to see. But it wasn't really anything like reality, was it?

**Ariana Neumann:** No, it was not at all. There were no schools. There was some music being performed in Terezin but it was nothing like that. Those people were given new clothes. The conditions there were absolutely horrific and people were starving.

**Peter Moore:** Can I ask you a broad question before we linger there a little longer? What did people in the West, perhaps in Britain and America, know about these camps or ghettos? Call them what you will. Was there an understanding of what was happening inside them or is it difficult to make that judgement?

**Ariana Neumann:** It is. As I'm sure you know, there's a huge debate as to what people knew. What is remarkable to me, as I read through my grandparents' letters, is that very early on - in the letters from '42 and '43 onwards - they are already saying, 'We have to do whatever it takes to not be deported, to not be transported and not go on holiday to the East.' They use the word 'holiday' as a code, obviously. They knew that's where death awaited them. They also knew the only way to survive was if you appeared fit to work. I figure if they knew that, as Jews in Prague, in 1942/43 and certainly, my father knew, for example, that he shouldn't go into a transport because he knew what it meant, then obviously lots of other people knew it. I think they just dismissed it as rumours. No one could really comprehend that people could behave in such a horrific way and so it was easier to say, 'No, it's an exaggeration. Obviously, that is not the case.'

**Peter Moore:** Let's go and meet a couple of your family members who were there. There's a few of them, in particular. I'm thinking of your grandfather and your grandmother. This is Otto and Ella and they've been in this environment for two years. How are they faring in June of 1944? It seems like they're surviving.

**Ariana Neumann:** It does and they're very different personalities and, of course, it's a gift to me to have these letters that allow me to see what they were like because they were all letters to their children, so they're very intimate. On the one hand, you have my grandfather who is very dour, a workaholic and a bit of pedant. He's often described by my grandmother as grumpy, which I just think is endearing but he's petty, he's jealous and he's obsessed by Gandhi. There's this marvellous story from before the war where he apparently required everybody in the family to be a vegetarian for a year. I think it's still very difficult to do in Eastern Europe now but it certainly was very difficult in the '30s. He is coping as best as he can but his personality is not suited to this place, not that anyone's is, but by comparison, my grandmother is just the life of the party. She manages to find joy in friendships with other people. At some stage, one of my cousins (one of her nieces) gets married and she manages to throw a little party for this wedding. Party is a strong word but a small celebration and she steals some flowers. She would always see, I think, the best in every situation and try to find joy and beauty in it. I think people like that tend to - at least psychologically and I don't know if it saves you in the end but it does make the journey a little bit easier.

**Peter Moore:** She really sparkles as a character in your book and you've got some wonderful photographs of her in the 1930s before the war; all smiles and full of vivacity. As you say there, we couldn't really imagine them as being completely isolated from the remainder of the family in Prague because there are these lines of communication, aren't there? Letters go backwards and forwards and occasionally, supplies as well. That brings me to this absolutely extraordinary

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character who is one of those characters that you couldn't believe unless you saw the documentation. This is Zdenka. Is that the correct pronunciation?

**Ariana Neumann:** Zdenka, yes. Zdenka is marvellous.

**Peter Moore:** Zdenka is not a direct family member, although she's there in the nucleus of the family, isn't she? She's married, at this point, for a second time. This is a story I can't get into but she marries your uncle. She manages to enter and leave, and enter and leave I think twice, is it?

**Ariana Neumann:** She does. She's beautiful. I suppose she is physically beautiful, now that I've seen photographs of her but I have traced her daughter and the beauty seeps through *[laughter]* in the stories that her daughter tells me. She was absolutely adored. She was three or four years older than my uncle. She was independent, she was studying law and she drove her own car. She had two very important things going for her at that particular time for my family. One was that she wasn't Jewish and so she was a gentile. Her family had built lots of buildings in Prague in the 19th century and she had access to money because they were left to her and she collected rent from them. She had access to supplies and she had access to money that then could buy the supplies that she didn't have access to. She was incredibly brave and had this wonderful attitude.

**Peter Moore:** Incredibly brave almost underplays it, doesn't it?

**Ariana Neumann:** My uncle was a terrible worrier and I think to maybe compensate for that, she would just say, 'You know what? We're going to get this food to them. We're going to get the hair dye to Otto.' Like every member of my family had white hair and you didn't want to have white hair because if you had white hair, then you appeared even older than you already were - he was in his fifties - and then you weren't useful to the Nazis. We all know what happened if you weren't useful to the Nazis. She is just remarkable. When my grandmother is first deported to the camp, they don't know what happened to her in the first months. They didn't know if she was alive. They didn't know where she was and they hear that she is not only alive but quite close to Prague. Zdenka arranges so that she can sneak into the camp. There are very few stories of people doing that. She wasn't the only one.

**Peter Moore:** So she joins the workers in the fields.

**Ariana Neumann:** She joins the workers. She talks to her friends in the Resistance, she gathers all the information and she dresses up like someone who would be in the camp. She sews a yellow star onto her coat. Of course, she hides all this and takes her overcoat before arriving and joins the workers in the fields. She then goes into the camp when they go in for their lunch, if you can call it lunch - for their little soup - at midday. She walks in with them carrying potatoes, or whatever they had been picking in the fields, and sneaks in. She spends a couple of hours with my grandmother and just brings her so much light, and so much joy, and so much love that my grandmother writes this beautiful letter the day after, I think. She just says, 'I am in such good spirits. My Zdenka came to visit me.'

**Peter Moore:** Two things which strike me from this story of this character I really adored in the book. Firstly, a feature of your book is that these characters, your family members, are actually walking towards danger instead of walking in the opposite way because paradoxically, it's safer sometimes to do that. Secondly, there's a bit of a link here with the culture within these streets and within the camp. I know hanging around your neck, at the moment, you've got a ring that your grandfather made for Zdenka. Is that right?

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**Ariana Neumann:** That's right. I'm not sure of the dates here but I think it's at some stage in 1944 and that's just because in 1944, it becomes much more difficult. My family had set up a way of having a courier take supplies in and these supplies included cash (whenever they could find it), different food, clothing and hair dye or eventually, shoe polish because you couldn't get hair dye towards the end of the war. The trusted couriers couldn't always do it and at some stage, Lotar and Zdenka are worried that Otto and Ella don't have their supplies and Zdenka decides to go in a second time. I know this because she wrote about it and her daughter has given me her memoirs. She does it again and she goes in once more in 1944. This time, she goes and finds Otto and brings him his shoe polish, so he can dye his hair. Again, I'm not entirely sure how he gets it to her, so I'm not sure if he puts it in a parcel with a letter that he sneaks out (and I presume that's the most obvious way) but at great risk to himself, he steals a piece of copper pipe. He was an engineer, so he's not an artist and yet he fashions this ring with a nail and a hammer. I'm told it would have been made with a nail and a hammer. When you first see it, it's quite coarse and when I first found it, I didn't quite understand why you would keep this thing, which didn't seem at all to be precious. It's a copper ring and it has Zdenka Neumann, her initials, forged into the material. It's a rather beautiful thing and it's one of the hundreds of things that have made their way to me. I love having it around my neck because it grounds me and it reminds me *[laughter]* to keep things in perspective a lot of the time. It also shows me that you go and you plunge into all the darkness of the Holocaust in these letters and yet there's humanity that seeps through and there's this love. To me, this ring was exactly that. It didn't really matter what they were trying to do to you to dehumanise you, you could still feel gratitude, you could still feel happiness and you could still feel love. That's what this ring, to me, symbolises.

**Peter Moore:** What a beautiful connection with your grandfather as well and the hours of concentrated effort that must have gone into its manufacture. To have it today is quite a thing. Probably, this is the most difficult part of our conversation today because we're going to follow your grandfather's story into our second scene. Do you want to tell us where you're going next, please?

**Ariana Neumann:** Yes. We're going to move a little bit further on from June. He's transported on September 29th and I think he actually arrives on October 1st. Because my family knew that there were dangers to being transported, they did whatever they could to avoid being transported, both in Terezin and then my uncle, who was outside and still in Prague because he was married to a gentile and that saved you temporarily from being transported, tried to pull every possible string that he could in Prague but all these efforts failed.

**Peter Moore:** This is this euphemism of 'going East', isn't it?

**Ariana Neumann:** Yes, this is it. On September 29th, my grandfather gets on a train and is transported to Auschwitz. There were thousands actually transport between September and October 1944. I think half of the men in Terezin were transported out of Terezin to Auschwitz.

**Peter Moore:** He's lasted almost as long as possible there, hasn't he?

**Ariana Neumann:** He has and today, obviously, marks the 75th anniversary of the liberation, which was the January. I so wish he had lasted a little longer. *[Laughter]* Probably because of how old he was, I might not have met him but I think it would have made my father a very different man.

**Peter Moore:** Absolutely.



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**Ariana Neumann:** So he's on this transport and he arrives. He departs on 29th and he arrives a few days later in Auschwitz and like every transport in Auschwitz, they're met in Birkenau. They're met by doctors and guards who then examine you and they separate men from women. They then examine you and they decide whether you're fit for work or not. My grandfather arrives and he's armed with his shoe polish so that he can dye his hair and I think he's done this. He must be absolutely exhausted. He's a man in his fifties. He's apparently very healthy but he hasn't really eaten for days and he's been crammed into this...

**Peter Moore:** I think, it's just important at this moment to pause and dwell on the mindset of the people who are making the selections, as difficult as it is, because what they were looking for was really biological strength. This is in Nazi racial theory that biology was everything and usefulness lay beyond that as the big determiner of where you were selected. You mentioned earlier about why having dark hair was so important and this is why they were going to such lengths to try and get, first of all, hair dye into the camp outside Prague but then later on, shoe polish. That seems to be almost as important as food and medical supplies. This was absolutely central to his survival. Is that right?

**Ariana Neumann:** Yes, absolutely. Obviously, you have to be fed and you have to be alive but once you're alive, you have to appear strong. If you don't appear strong and you appear like an old man and obviously, white hair will immediately make you look older...

**Peter Moore:** We know what happened, don't we?

**Ariana Neumann:** We do know what happened because one of the survivors told the story to my parents. My father actually writes a little bit about it. There were 1,500 prisoners in the transport from Terezin to Auschwitz and they arrive there on October 1st in the morning. About 750 of the men were selected to work. As the survivor told the story to my father, my grandfather was initially selected for work and sent to the right with the young, fit people. Most women, children and older men were sent to the left to be gassed. My grandfather was standing on the right and on this October day, the rain started to come down and it washed away his shoe polish. He was then immediately sent to the left and gassed. My father wrote a little bit about it and that's incorporated in the book.

**Peter Moore:** It is and we have your father's own words. I suppose there's a paradox in this part of our conversation in the sense that you've picked this moment, which is the saddest moment of the book, as a place to go and visit but you don't want to go to Auschwitz. You've not been back, have you?

**Ariana Neumann:** No, I haven't. I was talking to someone about it just yesterday because they were saying, 'You have to go.' I disagree because one of the greatest gifts that this research has given me is having my grandparents back and I'm just not quite ready really. I feel them with me and I love having them around, *[laughter]* as weird as that sounds. I have been living with them for the ten years of this research, slowly getting to know them and finding so much beauty and happiness from having them back in my life that I just can't go and say goodbye to them. Maybe I'm moving closer to going to Auschwitz just by choosing this scene. I don't know but I haven't been able to go and I still don't think I could go, even though today marks the liberation, the 75th anniversary.

**Peter Moore:** We're going to talk about the liberation of Auschwitz a little bit at the end. It's tremendously difficult to dwell there any longer. I think I like the picture of your grandfather as the upright, slightly cantankerous figure before the war, who is dogmatic about vegetarianism,

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Gandhi and so on. Let's leave that to one side and go to a third scene, which I think is coloured in a very different way, even though this situation is just as perilous, maybe. Do you want to tell us what your third scene is going to be, please?

**Ariana Neumann:** It's October 9th, 1944 in Berlin. That's where my father has chosen to hide. He's absconded from a transport because he's wanted by the Gestapo. He knows that he should not, under any circumstances, allow himself to be transported to Terezin.

**Peter Moore:** Let's do this but with a bit of background because it's so important to set this scene up and the sheer magnitude of what's happening, it deserves a bit of time just to say that whilst his parents have been in the camp, your father has managed to stay working in Prague, hasn't he?

**Ariana Neumann:** He has.

**Peter Moore:** He's worked at the paint factory. He's been useful, he's kept his head down and he's done all the things that you should do but it's an inevitability, isn't it? He is going to get the letter through the post at some point. When that happens, he realises that he can't get on that train. Well, it's a bit more complicated still, isn't it?

**Ariana Neumann:** That letter comes in March and him and his brother, who is there, know. They enlist the help of this marvellous man, whose daughter I've met and who actually still remembers the fights between her father and his wife (her mother) because he was harbouring and helping Jews. That was a crime that was punishable by death. This man, Mr Novak, Lotar and Hans build a fake wall in the paint factory. They decide that my father, Hans, is going to hide there. It's a very imperfect place to hide; first, because the factory is still working and has been taken over by Nazis. You have people going in every day and so my father has to lay there in a tiny, tiny room. The factory still stands today and you can still see the little window that leads to that makeshift room. He just has to lay there incredibly quietly and not making a sound from Monday to Friday, from 8 AM to 6 PM whilst the workers are there.

**Peter Moore:** How long did this go on for?

**Ariana Neumann:** It went on for about two months and between those two months, it was obviously a very dangerous place to hide because it was the family's paint factory. Obviously, the Gestapo are looking for him and I know this from the documents and from the anecdotes. They would obviously go to their house, their old apartment, the country house and eventually, they would go and look for him at the paint factory but, perhaps because it was so obvious, they don't. My father still feels it's incredibly dangerous and his best friend, this wonderful man called Zdeněk - I think it's just important to highlight that my father and his family maybe did crazy things or they did brave things, if you want to call them brave, but they didn't have a choice. They were being persecuted but people like Zdenka and Zdeněk didn't have to do this. Their life was not in peril and they could have easily just turned the other way and yet they chose to help and chose to risk everything. Zdeněk, at this stage, hasn't chosen to risk anything but he knows that his best friend is in hiding. He goes one evening to this little room, I presume, with a bottle of slivovitz or whatever alcohol they could find. There was Zdeněk, my father's girlfriend, Mila, and him. Zdeněk has been sent as a forced labourer. Enormous amount of people from the Reich, like Czechs and Hungarians, had been sent to work as part of the Nazi war effort and Zdeněk is working in a paint factory in Berlin. It's a factory that's making lacquers for the Luftwaffe and helping with the development of V2 rockets. Zdeněk says, 'Oh, we're so overworked.' Hans and Zdeněk had been at chemistry school together and he just says, 'Hans, if

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you could come and help me, things would be so much easier.' Astonishingly, that's the cue that my father needs to decide that he's going to go to the one place where no one is going to look for him. As a Jew, he's going to go and hide in the centre of it all. He is 22 years old and he's a risk-taker. He always has been; usually, with silly things like throwing stink bombs at the Nazis with his best friend Zdeněk but he likes jokes. He thinks, probably, 'This is the biggest joke of all.' His life is at stake. If he obeys the Nazis, he's going to end up dead and so he might as well do whatever he thinks he can do.

**Peter Moore:** We're sitting here in the middle of London and not in the middle of Berlin in 1944, thankfully, but we've got this absolutely tantalizing box of objects that you've brought along. I thought that this is maybe a time just to have a look at two of them. God, you could stare at them all day. First of all - so the box is coming out now - is a doll. During your father's period of hiding away, we can almost imagine *The Pianist* and Szpilman and that story of being completely isolated, although being very close to people. Was this doll made by Zdenka?

**Ariana Neumann:** No, it was actually made by Mila. My father's girlfriend, Mila.

**Peter Moore:** It's just a very simple doll, isn't it?

**Ariana Neumann:** It is. Obviously, the face has faded a little bit and it's not too big. It's a little bit bigger than the palm of my hand but it has a very pretty, flowery dress, which has been very nicely sewn together.

**Peter Moore:** Maybe we can get a picture of this for the website.

**Ariana Neumann:** I think we might have to. The sleeves are a little puffy [*laughter*] and quite chic and then she has this beautiful hand-knitted bonnet or stitched bonnet, which is white and red.

**Peter Moore:** So this was Han's little companion whilst he was in prison.

**Ariana Neumann:** It was. Mila gave it to him as a good luck doll, so that he had it in his room and he had it when he went to Berlin in May 3rd 1943, with the help of Zdeněk passport and a forged ID. They forged Mila's ID. Hans travels to Berlin.

**Peter Moore:** This is where the second object comes in which I want to hear about because this is beyond crazy. We have Zdeněk and your father, the two friends from Prague, standing right in the middle of Berlin in front of a statue of Bismarck. Whereabouts is this exactly? It's in one of the parks?

**Ariana Neumann:** It's in the Tiergarten, which is the park in the centre of Berlin.

**Peter Moore:** [*Laughter*] We're definitely going to have to put this on the website. We've got these two quite cheerful looking almost - a sense of... I don't know...

**Ariana Neumann:** Mischief, yeah?

**Peter Moore:** A sense of mischief there, isn't there? I think they're probably enjoying it. I don't know who took the photograph but they're there right in the centre of it all.

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**Ariana Neumann:** It was a professional photographer and I know that because this photograph that I have was left to me in my box, the box that my father left me. When I traced Zdeněk's family, he also had a photograph and it was taken by a professional photographer. It just said 'Taken in June 1943 by...' - I forget the name of the photographer.

**Peter Moore:** It's a wonderful caption, isn't it?

**Ariana Neumann:** Yes, and it says 'Two boys on their 'educational' walk around the Tiergarten in Berlin' and educational is in quotation marks.

**Peter Moore:** Well, this would drive any Nazi mad to think that there was a young, Jewish boy...

**Ariana Neumann:** Of course, it's in front of Bismarck, the symbol of German military might.

**Peter Moore:** ...in front of Bismarck.

**Ariana Neumann:** There they are in their shorts; these Czech boys just fooling them.

**Peter Moore:** What a symbol of defiance. We have done an enormous amount of context there but I think it's really important to actually understand that if your father has chosen safety in Berlin, he's going to run enormous risks as well, isn't he? His skill is as a chemist. He's worked in the family's paint factory in Prague, which then gives him these skills that the Germans really need at this point in the war which is developing lacquers and paints to presumably work with the war machine with their new weapons. He's working there in this factory. What is it called?

**Ariana Neumann:** I don't speak German, sadly, but I think it's Warnecke & Böhm and it still exists today. It's headquartered in Bavaria now and they have handed in all their records over.

**Peter Moore:** He becomes a bit of a star worker, doesn't he? He's very good.

**Ariana Neumann:** He does. He's a bit of a clown before the war. He doesn't study, shows up late to class and uses his chemistry to build stink bombs and the like. He arrives in Berlin and there's a transformation and he becomes a very diligent worker and his boss, a man called Dr Hogan, takes a liking to him and Dr Hogan is a Nazi.

**Peter Moore:** He's a preposterous character in many ways.

**Ariana Neumann:** He is a pretty revolting man. My father describes him in his memoirs as a really utterly revolting man who is pompous and awfully frog-eyed. I think he describes him as a stuffed goose, at some stage.

**Peter Moore:** As I entered, I was struck by the bumptious grin; his chubby fingers clasped in self-importance. He seemed very proud as he muttered, 'Ah, I have a task that will bring you great pleasure.' This is your father's description of a meeting with Dr Hogan.

**Ariana Neumann:** Which is a very important meeting. It's now 1944 and my father has been there for a year, working very hard and passing off some of the documents to a member of the Dutch Resistance in the hopes that it will somehow help the Allies. It is at this meeting that Dr Hogan, thinking he's doing my father a favour, says, 'I have a task that will bring you great

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pleasure. We need someone to go to Prague to deliver an order to this factory and we have decided to select you, Jan Šebesta.'

**Peter Moore:** Which is the assumed identity.

**Ariana Neumann:** My father obviously doesn't go to Berlin as Hans Neumann, the Jew, but goes as this Czech man from [45:46 - s.l. Altbundsland] who doesn't exist, called Jan Šebesta. My father is obviously absolutely mortified because he can hide in Berlin where no one knows him but to go to Prague, where people might recognise him as Hans Neumann, where people know that the Gestapo are looking for him and that he actually should be in a concentration camp, is suicide but he can't get out of it, so he goes. That's where we go. We're actually going to go not to that particular moment but we're going to go to October 1944.

**Peter Moore:** What's happening in October? The story is playing out.

**Ariana Neumann:** My father has to go from Berlin to Prague. He has been told by Dr Hogan that he has a week in Prague and that he should use it to see his girlfriend and his family. My father is absolutely terrified. He arrives in Prague and goes immediately into hiding and his girlfriend, Mila, who has made him the doll, helps him. She just keeps him there and does the errands that he had to do for Warnecke & Böhm for him and they spend a week just hiding him. When it's time for him to go back, or he thinks it's time for him to go back, he looks at his travel permit because he is sure that it was a week. Dr Hogan made a big deal about the fact that it was a week.

**Peter Moore:** And we're in the Third Reich which is mad on bureaucracy.

**Ariana Neumann:** Absolutely. You travel when you're meant to travel because otherwise, God knows what happens to you.

**Peter Moore:** If there are any irregularities...

**Ariana Neumann:** Absolutely and so he realises that he's missed the date. His date of travel was not when he thought it was going to be but four days before. It's interesting to me because it's a little vestige of the slightly shambolic boy that my father was before the war, which still is there. He does, again, a completely crazy thing which is he just alters the permit. He just changes the date so that he can travel. This time, he doesn't wait for Mila's help or anyone else and he just goes to the train station, gets on the train again to Berlin and he's stopped at the border. They notice the irregularity and he is questioned. He manages, somehow, to endear himself to these border guards who let him through. They say, 'Yeah, so your girlfriend distracted you from your permit. That's alright. Your Czech girlfriend must be quite something,' and they let him through. He arrives back in Berlin and he thinks, 'Hopefully, this will all be forgotten.' He is called in to Dr Hogan's office again because Dr Hogan has received a summons for Jan Šebesta to appear in court in Prague for altering his travel documents.

**Peter Moore:** Everything about this is perilous because his name is a name of a person who doesn't exist. He would be in a city where he's known and he'll be in front of an authority which is completely ruthless in justice. So we catch your father, if we're travelling back, in the greatest dilemma anyone could find themselves with this pompous boss in the paint factory in Berlin. What happens?

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**Ariana Neumann:** He does what I think what my father learns to do very, very well which is he charms his way out of this one. He appeals to Dr Hogan's sense of self-importance by saying, 'Listen, I'm helping you out here. I'm doing so much good work. What good is it going to do for me to go and appear in court? It means that I'm not going to be able to work for you. God knows what is going to happen to me and it's awful for me. Couldn't you use your power? Couldn't you use your connections and perhaps they can give me a fine? Perhaps they can do something so that I don't have to go to court.' By now, my father has told him the story and he said, 'You know that I just got distracted by my girlfriend. I'm sorry I missed the date and I shouldn't have done it but I didn't want to anger you.' He just appeals to Dr Hogan. He's pragmatic and says, 'Come on. This is important. You need me to help you right now because this is a crux time in the war.' He manages to get Dr Hogan to help him out, which is remarkable because you have this ardent Nazi scientist who, all of a sudden, says, 'You're right. I'm going to help you.' Of course, he's helping a Jew and he doesn't know this, so it's completely ironic.

**Peter Moore:** This portion of the book, as you tell it, is narrated by your father because he wrote in secret an account of what happened during these years, even though he wasn't speaking about it.

**Ariana Neumann:** Yes, much later on in 1991.

**Peter Moore:** There is a line and this is, I think, why your father is actually a very likeable person to read about on the page as well and just to hear anecdotes about him. He writes 'so this foolish man saved my life for a second time,' or something like that. Of course, this is why people have to go and read the book to understand the intricacies of the situation because he's had to create an entirely different persona; sometimes by doing foolish things and doing things that are actually contrary to safety, like maybe living with someone in an indiscreet way or manufacturing some alcohol on the side. He created this plausible character.

**Ariana Neumann:** And refusing to say 'Heil Hitler', for example.

**Peter Moore:** He refused to say 'Heil Hitler' which, you would have thought, if you're trying to keep your head down in 1944 [*laughter*], it's certainly not the thing to do.

**Ariana Neumann:** But yet it makes him more plausible, perhaps.

**Peter Moore:** So when we come to this moment, which is probably the central, dramatic scene in the book, it makes sense, doesn't it? Of course, he's stayed too long with his Czech girlfriend. He's got carried away and he's not thought it through. I suppose you've picked this moment to go and see. You'd love to see your father though, I suppose.

**Ariana Neumann:** I would absolutely love him just chatting to Dr Hogan and convincing him that he must help this poor, Czech boy who was just distracted by his girlfriend and get him out. Jan Šebesta doesn't exist. There would be no record of him in Prague. It's just absolutely - I wouldn't be here.

**Peter Moore:** Are you quite fond of Jan Šebesta? He's a halfway character, isn't he?

**Ariana Neumann:** He is. He's a halfway character. This boy called Hans, who I first encounter and I was actually very surprised by in the letters and the anecdotes, is not the man I recognised. He was a shambolic poet and my father was very disciplined and definitely not a poet. He was an industrialist who worked very, very hard and he loved the arts but he wasn't just sitting around.

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**Peter Moore:** Now I'm aware that we probably, if anything, underplayed your father as a character in post-war Venezuela because he has streets named after him, doesn't he? He wasn't just an industrialist. He was a bit of this and a bit of that. He was involved in all sorts of ways in the arts, politics, the newspaper industry and he had his businesses. Didn't it even go further than Venezuela out into South America at large? He was an incredible success, wasn't he?

**Ariana Neumann:** He was very successful and very respected. He was a very strange father to have because on the one hand, he was distant and older and when you're a child, you want to be like everyone else. I wanted someone that watched football and played football with me, who was possibly in his 30s or maximum 40s but I had this older man in his 60s. At the same time, I was immensely proud to be his daughter because everyone said, 'Hans Neumann is your father! Wow! What is it like to be his daughter?' They all wanted his advice. You'd have presidents, ministers, people that ran museums and people that were establishing universities come in and want to have his take on things.

**Peter Moore:** Did you ever hear him mention this name Jan Šebesta?

**Ariana Neumann:** No. I mean towards the very, very end of his life, he showed me a little bit of his writings. I talk about this in the book. He wrote about his time in Berlin much later in 1991. He showed me one page which had an account of his first train ride from Prague to Berlin and there was the name. But no, he didn't talk to me about Jan Šebesta and Jan Šebesta was just a perfect middle ground between this sort of shambolic poet and the very disciplined man that I met.

**Peter Moore:** Well, The Mysterious Boot Club can't really ask for a bigger mystery than this.

**Ariana Neumann:** Yeah, *[laughter]* that's absolutely true.

**Peter Moore:** Let's pull away. What we've tried to do here, I think, in the conversation is to give a panorama of what was happening in 1944 in this big family story from our position in 2020 but, of course, to really understand it all and to see how the subtleties of survival work themselves out, you have to read the book. I suppose this is the moment when your writing does merge into your father's which is really, really touching. It's a profoundly moving story and a very human story in very surprising ways. Let's leave the history there. We have our box full of mementoes. There's something I always ask everyone though. If you could bring one more thing back from 1944 to today, what would you like to bring?

**Ariana Neumann:** I'm going to cheat a little bit and it's actually probably from 1943. I know it because it's in one of the letters but I would like to bring one thing and it's not an object but it's a sound. I've said that my grandfather is dour, cynical and grumpy and I think he's also a terrible singer. I know this because everybody always speaks about my grandmother and how musical she was and I can't imagine him singing at all but there's one letter from Terezin in 1943 where he says he was so happy to have received food and letters from the family, he actually catches himself on the way to his forced job crooning *Golem*, which is a comic song made famous by a duo in Berlin called Voskovec and Werich, who were some avant-garde entertainers, who were critical of Nazi ideology and eventually moved to the US. I would just love to have the sound of my grandfather humming or singing this song on his way to work.

**Peter Moore:** It's the kind of thing that should have been played on Radio 4 this morning at 8 o'clock because today, of course, is the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz; a date

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when we all take pause and think about that particular history on probably, I think, the blackest moment in our human story, that we know about, recorded anyway. You've had time to reflect on human nature a lot while writing this story. Do you think there is any particular resonance to the story for us today from your family's experiences?

**Ariana Neumann:** Absolutely. I think there is something which we must all be aware of which is the insidious nature of evil and how gently and almost imperceptibly it can seep through a society and make seemingly educated and intelligent people do atrocious things. I think we must be vigilant and we must find what it is that binds us to each other rather than what separates us.

**Peter Moore:** Absolutely, and can I just add to that some words from your grandfather? In a way, we've talked a lot about your father here but he's a real star of this conversation and of the book. I think this is your father reporting some advice his father gave to him. This is your grandfather saying, 'You have to fight; not with violence but with your mind; not for people but for ideas. Fight and work for what you believe in Handa. The struggle is all that matters.' Ariana Neumann, it's been an absolute pleasure. Thank you for talking to us.

**Ariana Neumann:** Thank you, Peter. It's been a complete joy. It really has.

**Peter Moore:** That was me, Peter Moore, talking to Ariana Neumann on the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. Ariana's book, *When Time Stopped*, is published in a few week's time by Simon & Schuster in hardback. It's an outstanding work. Please do check it out and thank you very much for listening.

**John Hillman:** Hello, I'm John Hillman, one of the producers on the *Travels Through Time* podcast. I hope you discovered something new on this terrible moment in our history from Peter's conversation with Ariana Neumann. Please head over to our website [tttpodcast.com](http://tttpodcast.com) where you'll find many more original podcasts with some of our greatest contemporary historians. Among these, you'll find Professor Mary Fulbrook, the winner of last year's Wolfson prize, who also discusses the Holocaust. You'll also find Aanchal Malhotra, who describes the cavalier and catastrophic sequence of events surrounding Indian Independence in the summer of 1947. There are many other fascinating adventures into the past from across the centuries and much for everyone to enjoy. Once again, thank you very much for listening and we look forward to welcoming you back very soon here at *Travels Through Time*.

[Sound of ticking clock]

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