When Pola Nirenska and Jan Karski married in 1965 they vowed to one another to never speak of the Holocaust. They both had immigrated to the United States after World War II. Jan was a renowned courier who, in 1943, brought to De Gaulle and Churchill first-hand word and photographs from inside the Warsaw Ghetto and a camp, Izbica, near Belzec. He remained in the US after personal interviews with Felix Frankfurter, US Supreme Court Justice, and President Roosevelt. Pola, who was living alone in Vienna when Austria was overtaken by the Germans, escaped the horrors of the camps by first fleeing to Italy, then finding asylum in England before moving to America. Both were scarred deeply and haunted by the war's ghosts for the remainder of their lives.

Pola was raised in a middle-class Jewish family living in central Warsaw. Her father manufactured ties, and provided well for his family, but held little value for dance and thought it was not a proper pursuit for his daughters. Therefore, Pola did not have training as a child, but loved to improvise. After graduating school, she insisted on receiving training against her parent's will, and locked herself in her bedroom until her father finally consented and slipped 4 brochures of dance academies under the door. Having no knowledge about them, she arbitrarily selected the Wigman School in Dresden, Germany.

Nirenska moved to D.C. in 1951 and lived in a room in the back of Eve De La Tour's studio in Georgetown. She earned her lodging and livelihood teaching for Eve, gradually building her own clientele and dance company. Her "parents" (parents of her students) helped her raise funds to build her own studio in northern D.C., which was her home both personally and professionally beginning in 1959. As fate would have it, Jan Karski now also in the United States, remembered her performance in Europe, and sent her a note after attending her concert in D.C. As they related the story, he invited her to dinner, but she accepted only for a lunch date. They married on June 25, 1965.

Four years later, Nirenska suffered a mental breakdown and, from 1969-79 was in and out of a hospital. Faber was new to the D.C. area and began to dance in Nirenska's work after her re-emergence in 1979. The first group dance she resurrected was a work influenced by Doris Humphrey and performed to J.S. Bach's *Concerto in D minor*. It showcased Nirenska's exquisite musicality and kinesthetic mastery.

Almost 15 years after Nirenska and Karski married, two events changed their pact. Claude Lanzmann interviewed Karski for his film documentary *Shoah*. Karski was then called before Congress to testify on behalf of building the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. The silence was broken, and in 1980 Nirenska began to choreograph a series of works that became known as *The Holocaust Tetralogy*.

Ghosts of the Past: The Creation of Pola Nirenska's *Holocaust Tetralogy*

Rima Faber

She arrived at the Wigman school in 1928, knowing no one, understanding little about Mary Wigman, and with no experience in dance technique, which might have been a creative choreographic advantage. Wigman immediately recognized Pola's musical gifts, and gave her training as a percussionist as well as providing training in choreography and expressive movement. Pola did not do well at first but, by the time she graduated in 1932, received a "distinguished" diploma, and was invited to perform with the Wigman Company on their first American tour.

There is controversy about whether Wigman willingly released her two Jewish dancers, or did so in fear of consequences after returning from the company's American tour in 1933. At any rate, after her dismissal, Nirenska found herself alone in Vienna where she continued to dance. She was awarded first prize for a solo titled *Cry* (also translated from the Polish as *Scream*) in the 1934 International Choreography Competition held in Vienna. The award launched Nirenska into prominence and a solo career throughout Europe, where Karski saw her perform. She escaped to London and then reached the United States, absorbed into the rising tide of pioneer modern dancers. She was especially attracted to Doris Humphrey's musical dance orchestrations, and it was Humphrey who suggested she move to Washington, D.C. as it was open territory.

In this article I will verbally reconstruct Nirenska's creation of the four dances through description of the movements that I hope will conjure a vision of the dances in the reader's mind. Since I performed the Mother in all four works from their creation in 1980 until their final memorial performance in 1993, I can provide first-hand experiences working with Pola and motivations for the movements. It took Pola a decade to choreograph the series which, in programs, she titled, "In Memory of Those I Loved…Who Are No More." She had not set out to choreograph four Holocaust dances, but each one led to the next. She created a good number of other group dances and solos during that period, but I truly believe *The Holocaust Tetralogy* is the most profound and greatest expression of her genius. In a review on July 29, 1990, the Pulitzer Prize winning critic for the *Washington Post*, Alan M. Kriegsman wrote: "They constitute a daring attempt, within the humanistic tradition of modern dance, to bear the unbearable and speak the unspeakable." In these four works Nirenska achieves a human core and depth of vision that reaches into one's heart and leaves a scar.

Rima Farber in *Whatever Begins... also Ends* 1990, photo by Sonya Everett

Nirenska was an intensely intuitive choreographer. She choreographed in phrases, not counts. She did not create movements in the studio in advance of rehearsals but entered the space with a general idea or structure and sculpted the movements on her dancers. Since I worked with her during the final decade of her life, she was greatly incapacitated by arthritis and could not demonstrate her ideas, but sat in a chair with her little dog lying obediently under the seat as she indicated movements through her expressive upper body and arm gestures. She often sang in her smoke-destroyed rough alto voice as she dynamically demonstrated phrases.

All of Nirenska's dancers had strong modern dance technique. Most had studied ballet as well, but none moved with the crisp, light, balletic quality that is a hallmark of pointe work. In these dances, our shoulders, spines, and pelvis had to communicate the intense depth and weight of a wrestler struggling against forces impossible to conquer.

Dirge (9 minutes, 37 seconds)

Dirge, choreographed in 1980-81, was the first group piece to be created after Nirenska's emergence, but it became the second section in the series of four Holocaust works. The piece was conceived in a series of horizontal crossings through which the dancers were fated to follow an inevitable path of mounting annihilation as they weave toward the audience. It depicts a death march to the solemn second movement of Ernst Bloch's *Concerto Grosso Number One*. A mother leads her daughters conjuring all the grief, fear, sorrow, solace, and rage that can be evoked through movements in German Expressionism.

The first crossing is behind an upstage deep blue lit scrim and dark stage. The Mother, who leads her daughters, beckons them as if dragging them onward. Each enters single file with heavily-laden lunges, passing from upstage left to right as silhouetted shadows in the night to the rhythmic drone of a single but syncopated drumbeat.

Interactions between the daughters begin during the second crossing from stage right in front of the scrim. The Mother, again, enters first, but is pulled backwards as if drawn to embrace the second daughter in line as she appears. Each person enters the path of light as an individual character. We pray, cry, hope, console, support one another as the family is compelled to move forward drawn by an outside force toward an ultimate, inescapable destiny.

The third crossing begins with a solo for the Child, who is forever hopeful. The Mother enters with foreboding, then lifts and rocks her as she is supported in the shape of the cross, suggesting a martyred innocent. Nirenska was aware of, and purposely choreographed the symbol of the cross, although she generally did not analyze as she worked. Her relationship to movement was emotional and intuitive.

As Mother and Child finish rocking and move apart, the group enters the lit path, emerging from the left central wing, then splits into movements expressing individualized angst. They gradually move past the Mother and exit stage right as the Mother supported by a back hinge that tilts toward the floor in slow descent. Layered closely together and reaching their clasped hands toward heaven, they gradually sink as one unit until the mother pushes the daughter away into the wings, rolls further downstage, and begins the final crossing with lateral swings suggesting Hemingway's title "For Whom the Bell Tolls."

Another dancer enters from the downstage wing to join the Mother's swings. The group appears and moves forward, rocking between a lunge and forward leg extension as the arms rotate with cupped hands as if catching tears. This final crossing, far downstage, confronts the audience. It builds to hysteria, alternately spreading apart or clutching together in desperate huddles. As Bloch's music climaxes, the movement suddenly slows as it would appear in the midst of an adrenaline rush. The group collects downstage left, staring starkly at the audience. They slowly and simultaneously turn heads to confront their doom, and file offstage to ultimately face their impending death.

Whatever Begins…also Ends (Seneca), (7 minutes, 7 seconds)
Although choreographed after *Dirge* and premiered in 1982, this section became a prelude to *The Tetralogy* and was performed as the first dance to the first movement of Bloch's *Concerto Grosso Number One.*

The dance begins with Mother and four of her five daughters in peaceful family repose on the floor upstage left. The fifth daughter enters gleefully and beckons her sisters to join her. One-by-one the children peel away until the Mother is left alone, and her daughters playfully break into unison jig-like bounces. As the Mother, a figure of foreboding, broods and portends what is to come, she is in contrast to the frolicking jumps and turns of the group, reminiscent of Polish folk dance. Their quick changes of direction syncopate with Bloch's rhythms, clearly establishing the daughters' denial of the Mother's warnings.

In contrast, the Mother slowly advances downstage along a stage left corridor. When she reaches the proscenium, she is on the ground as if remembering her babies. Two daughters lift her to join their buoyant frivolity, but the Mother pulls away. There is opposition between them, with each daughter turning away as the Mother supplicates and reaches toward them individually. She receives reciprocal affection from the last daughter and, for a time, all are in unison, but without assent. The Mother succumbs with an excruciatingly slow back hinge descending to the floor, first reaching toward her children, then turning away as if, again, holding the memory of them as infants.

The section ends with one child on her knees, summoning towards the Mother downstage left while her sisters run upstage right. As the Mother lifts her acquiescent daughter into her arms and starts to carry her offstage, the others turn to run toward her before stopping short of reaching her, as if begging the question, "She may be wrong, but what if she's right?"

The reality of the death march immediately follows in the beginning of *Dirge*.

Shout (3 minutes, 35 seconds)
Shout (1986) is a solo choreographed for and danced by Sharron Wyrrick. Pola described it as the terror she felt hiding from the bombs exploding during the London Blitz. She confided to me that it had similar feeling to her dance *Cry* which won the fore-mentioned prize in the 1934 International Choreography Competition held in Vienna, but she no longer remembered the choreography of *Cry*. *Shout* was choreographed as an independent dance, and was included as part of the *Tetralogy* only after *The Train* was completed four years later. In a *Washington Post* review in 1990, Kriegsman described the dance as "a ferocious outburst of terror, agony, disbelief, fury, and protest."[1]

Performed to modern, dissonant music, *Hatred of the Filthy Bomb* composed by Lou Harrison, the dance begins with Wyrrick in panic, racing onto the stage from upstage right, remaining frenetic throughout the entire three and a half minutes of terror. The focus of Wyrrick's fear is an imaginary attack from downstage right. She shields herself, shrinks away, and braces herself in anger as she challenges to fight before succumbing in defeat. The music is arrhythmic, and so Nirenska creates her own phrases with starts, startled stops, and moments of pulsating stress against music of screams, screeches, and haunting echoes. The solo ends with Wyrrick trapped inside her desperate panic.

The Train (18 minutes)
The last dance, *The Train*, depicts "the final solution". The Mother watches her family as they die and succumbs to her own collapse only after a final furious rail toward God. The choreography in this last section is raw and unadorned.

It is the longest section, partly because the music is that length, but mainly to give each dancer full expression of her individual attitude toward her death. The music is *Sunreader* by Carl Ruggles and contains threatening and ominous overtones of war. It has dissonant, modern tonality and a modicum of meter, but is not atonal as in *Shout*. Nirenska's relationship to it is entirely arrhythmic and in contrast to accented sounds as if confronting them in the music.

The costumes for this dance are entirely different from the first two dances. In *Whatever Begins…Also Ends* and *Dirge*, the costumes are simple dresses in neutral colors reminiscent of an earlier modern dance era. In *The Train* they are torn and ragged, suggestive of the abuse the captured victims endured.

The dance begins offstage left. Whereas in the first dance the group was sitting comfortably affectionate upstage left, *The Train* reveals a huddled, ragged, staggering group clutching one another as they are dragged in by the Mother. They hunch over, pull away, and dart fearful glances in all directions as if waiting for the next blow. Only the Mother is resolute about entering the space.

They are forced to enter the boxcar/chambers or, as victims were told, "the showers" by the SS in the extermination camps. The confined area is represented by a brightly lit rectangle on the floor. In rehearsal, we leafed through Nirenska's book collection of Holocaust drawings and photographs, and Pola chose images to replicate in various "freezes." During creation of *The Train*, there were moments each of us broke into tears. *Dirge* was more abstract and stylized, not direct, primal, nor as near to literal. There is a close line at which emotional becomes emotive, and Nirenska stayed at the edge but was careful not to cross it.

Once inside the "boxcar", the light is extended to contain the entire stage as the chamber. As each dancer struggles with extinction, the remaining dwindling group shields themselves, consoles one another, stares in disbelief, or spasms in sobs. They sometimes cluster in the despairing shapes from the sketches or photographs she had showed us in the previously mentioned art books. It is as if the dancers are a Greek chorus helplessly witnessing their own fate.

The Mother, having watched the death of each of her family, becomes overcome with grief and simultaneously possessed with fury. She attends to each of them, dragging their lifeless bodies into a pile center stage. Before succumbing to her own destiny, she finds strength for a final rail at God as if challenging, "See what you have done! Answer us!" Ultimately, she collapses on top of the heap.

The stage goes dark and the curtain closes.

The festered and searing floodgates had been opened. Nirenska had just completed the entire *Tetralogy* and the performance was scheduled for the Kennedy Center. It never happened because Nirenska suffered her second mental breakdown. She was very ill for at least six months but gradually grew calmer. I realized that, if she were going to recover, we had to fulfill a performance of the completed *Tetralogy*, yet I knew she did not have the strength to do it. To protect her from the process, I did not let her view rehearsals until the suite was ready even though we rehearsed in her basement studio. When I finally invited her to come down, she simply nodded and said, "Very good."

The entire *Tetralogy* premiered at a D.C. dance center called Dance Place (3225-8th St., NE). There were two evenings, one coinciding with Nirenska's 80th birthday, July 28, 1990. At the closing bows Nirenska announced her retirement. She had brought the world her final statement. Alan M. Kriegsman, Pulitzer Prize dance critic for the *Washington Post* review wrote, "Yet, there was nothing final in feeling about the event. Rather, it had the aspect of yet another milestone on a journey that has taken the choreographer along a difficult but ever-enriching pathway."[2]

In summation about the importance of Nirenska's work, he wrote: "The tetralogy begins with a family closeted in warmth and affection, and ends with the same clan a morbid heap of lifeless bodies. It is an unforgettable metaphor for the numbing finality of genocidal extermination, wherein a whole people disappears without a trace. And for this very reason, keeping alive those traces represented by Nirenska's creation is not just an artistic but moral imperative."

Nirenska never fully recovered from her nervous condition. She remained emotionally and physically frail. She died on July 25, 1992, a few days before her 82nd birthday. The cause of her death is a shadow. Her husband claimed she was watering plants on the 11th floor terrace of their apartment, climbed on a stool to reach them, and fell off over the ledge. Another version is that she committed suicide and jumped. In respect for Jan's pride, I have never pressed the matter.

Reconstructions of the Holocaust Tetralogy

The only complete reconstruction of *The Holocaust Tetralogy* was her Memorial Concert held at the Hartke Theatre at Catholic University on December 20, 1993. In a sense, it was her unveiling [Following a death, when the gravestone is laid over the burial site and the grieved gather, this is known as the unveiling]. It is difficult to label it a "reconstruction" in that Nirenska's cast performed and they remembered it. Nirenska's husband, Jan Karski, was the honored guest, as were leaders of the newly opened US Holocaust Memorial Museum. *Washington Post, Dance Magazine,* and *Danceview* critic George Jackson, introduced the evening. In the reception held afterwards, with photographs and mementos of Nirenska's work adorning the hall, critic Alan M. Kriegsman embraced me in tears. The performance was awarded "Critic's Pick" for the year in *The Washington Post*.

Dirge has been reconstructed three times. The first was by a group of graduate dancers at American University. They learned the movement very quickly from working with a video, but it became clear that their training in ballet, Post-Modern dance, and somatic practice had not prepared them for the expressive intensity required. In spite of a trip to the Holocaust Museum, they had difficulty internalizing the finely tuned tension expressive of the movement until I spent a rehearsal having them wrestle with one another.

In 1996, a professional group of Polish modern dancers who had visited the USA learned *Dirge* to bring it back to Poland. The Silesian Dance Company, directed by Jacek Luminski, performed it at Swarthmore college; the dancers had outstanding technical ability and knew how to capture the weight of the work. The content of the piece was close to home and, although none of the dancers were alive during World War II, they lived through its residual destruction and the harshness of the Soviet years. I knew Pola would be happy about their portrayal, and overjoyed that her work was journeying to Poland.

Most recently in 2016, Paul Emerson's Company E performed *Dirge* at the Kennedy Center in a concert celebrating several generations of Polish choreographers and composers. I was invited to dance the Mother again as an ambassador for the geriatric generation which, at 71 years old, was a great honor. The company is an exceedingly accomplished group of versatile dancers. I thought I

Pola Nirenska portrait, 1988, photographed by Rima Faber

would have to adapt the role for my senior status but, as it turned out, I replaced only one highly arched arabesque for an enduringly high frontal extension.

The company was strong and expressive but, again, the challenge was to find a sense of weight, a basic component of early modern dance techniques that has been lost to today's dancers through their post-modern training. The dancers indicated weight through spine ripples or shapes, but found it difficult to solidly succumb to gravity. I find this true, even watching the Martha Graham Dance Company, and Graham technique has changed accordingly. The choreography was learned quickly from videos, but most of the rehearsals were spent deepening their characters and the weight of the movements.

In reconstructing a master work, replicating the movement is only the beginning of the process. Especially in modern dance, a form in which each choreographer develops an individual style and relationship to movement, the most difficult task is to find the movement quality of the original work and maintain the choreographer's intent. The fact that I carry the history of Nirenska's movement and intent into these reconstructions is of paramount importance.

In recent years a major dilemma has arisen about what constitutes, or qualifies as a reconstruction. An American copyrights lawyer has said there is no legal definition of "reconstruction" in the United States. A work can be filmed and copyrighted, but can an accurate revival of a dance work be produced by someone who has never performed in the work, sometimes has never seen the work, and at worst, has never seen any choreography of the dance's choreographer? If the reconstruction of a work is not an accurate reproduction of it, can it claim to be a reconstruction?

Reconstructing ballet is somewhat easier in that there is a least a codified movement vocabulary to define choreography. This makes Labanotation an easier descriptive tool. However, the movements of ballet dancers are also individualized and choreographers often build their work on the original dancers' gifts and personal expression.

The technologies of video have become a saving grace for the historical preservation and continuity of dance as an art form. It communicates the details and nuances of movement qualities. Great works are easily preserved, and lesser known choreographers, such as Pola Nirenska, can re-emerge and be widely appreciated 25 years after her death.

Notes

[1] Kriegsman, *Washington Post*, July 29, 1990.
[2] Ibid.

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