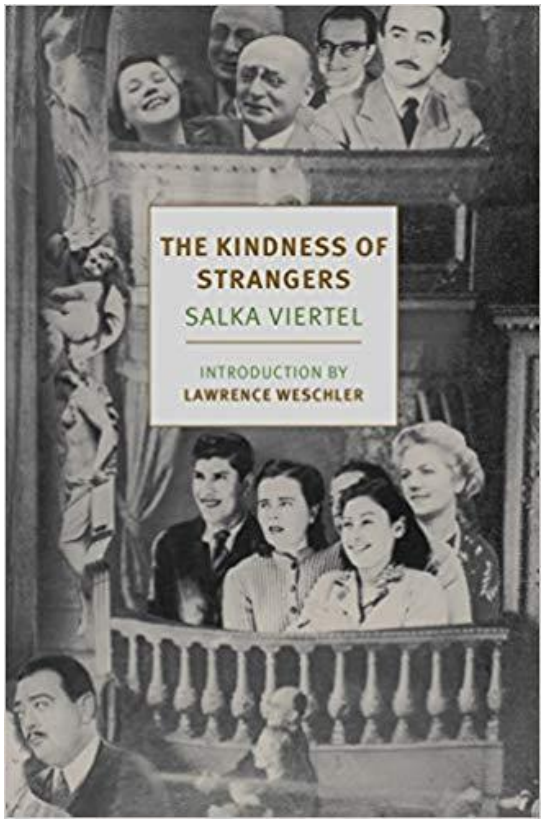

LAWRENCE WESCHLER'S INTRODUCTION
to the
Re-issue of Salka Viertel's Marvelous Memoir
of the Central European Emigres
in Southern California during the Thirties and Forties

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays the title reads not only as tepid and banal but as distinctly unrepresentative of the ensuing narrative's principal themes and contours. In fairness, when the onetime Austro-Hungarian actress and subsequently Hollywood scenarist Salka Viertel first began auditioning the phrase "the kindness of strangers" for the title of her memoir in progress, back in the mid-1950s, as her forthcoming biographer Donna Rifkind has pointed out, the words were not nearly as hackneyed as they are today. (The sensational play *A Streetcar Named Desire*, from which they sprang, was only a few years old, having premiered in 1947; the film had only been released in 1951; and the primary chestnut to have emerged from the latter was Stanley's bloodcurdling scream of "Stella! Stellllaaaa!" and not so much Blanche's breathy Southern belle protestations of having always re*lied* on the *kind*ness of *stran*gers.) Salka's husband, the internationally acclaimed theater director Berthold Viertel, had been translating their friend Tennessee Williams's plays for some years already and staging them all over Europe, and perhaps Salka savored the nod in the young playwright's direction. Such selfless generosity, indeed such kindness on her own part, would have been just like her.

But set aside the book's title and turn, instead, to the text, which gleams with a canny freshness from its first mischievous sentences:

> Long, long ago, when I was very young, a gypsy woman said to me that I would escape heartbreak and misfortune as long as I lived close to water. I know that it is rather trite to begin a story with prophecies, especially when they are made by gypsies, but luckily this prediction did not come true.

That first sly upending of readerly expectations anticipates all the other upendings that will come to characterize our protagonist's life course, but at this early stage of the narrative, she only goes on to admit that "It was utterly irrelevant as far as the happiness or misery in my life was concerned, how near or how distant I might be to a body of water." Still, she concedes how often her own "inner storms would subside when I looked at the crested waves of the Pacific or listened to the murmur of an Alpine brook," and that in addition the gypsy's mention of water "evoked the landscape of my childhood and the house near the river, where I lived and grew up."

And thus by the end of that first paragraph, we arrive, by way of a gracefully commodious vicus of recirculation, at Sambor, the small town by the banks of the Dniester River (only just emerging "young and wild" from the Carpathian mountains to the immediate west) in Polish, though at the time Austro-Hungarian, Galicia (and, actually, since the Second World War on the far western edge of the Soviet and subsequently independent Ukraine), where Salka was born in 1889, the eldest of the four children of Auguste and Josef Steuermann, a barrister who, following the turn of the twentieth century, began serving as this polyglot and marvelously jumbled town's first Jewish mayor, as he would for decades to come.

The Steuermann progeny would prove prodigiously accomplished in the years ahead. In addition to Salka, there came, in order, Rose, an eminent actress in her own right in pre– and post–First World War Austrian and German theaters, who would marry the immensely successful theater man Josef Gielen, fleeing with him to South America during the Hitler years though returning to Europe for further successes at the end of the Second World War (their son, Michael, going on to prove one of the most prominent Austrian avant-garde composers and conductors during the fifties and sixties); Edward, a pianist and celebrated acolyte of Arnold Schoenberg and his followers, who among many other sterling accomplishments, both in Europe and America, would shepherd and premiere the master's *Pierrot lunaire*; and finally Zygmunt (universally known as "Dusko"), the runt of the litter, who went on, improbably, to interwar stardom as a professional soccer player.

The first third or so of Salka's book unfurls across pre-Hitlerian Europe, from an improbably idyllic evocation of her Galician home and

family life (not yet particularly marked by intimations of virulent anti-Semitism), through accounts of her own headstrong determination, in the face of parental resistance, to pursue a career in the theater and her early successes in that regard (under the name Salome Steuermann) across the regional capitals of late-imperial Austro-Hungary before the outbreak of the First World War. She then goes on to vividly render the desolations of the war itself, especially on the home front—a horrific period to some degree leavened for Salka by her courtship and 1918 marriage to the vividly charismatic poet and director Berthold Viertel—and following that, the couple's triumphant sweep through the various centers of postwar Weimar-era Austrian and German cultural ferment.

Salka displays an exceptional talent for conjuring highly visual, almost cinematic scenes in her accounts of those early years—thus, for example, from when she was a young aspiring actress in Vienna:

> Returning from the theater through the brightly lit Kaerntnerstrasse with its elegant shopwindows, noisy traffic and hurrying crowds, I would cross the Graben and plunge suddenly into the darkness of a deserted, cobbled *gasse* which had not changed in four hundred years. As in all Viennese houses, doors were locked at night. I had to ring the bell and wait until the *Hausmeister* emerged from his squalid basement lodging, shuffling and coughing, to take his Charon's toll of ten *Kreuzer* and hand me a tiny candle. My weird shadow darkening the walls, I ran as fast as I could up the endless stone steps of the spiral staircase, praying that the candle would last to the fourth floor.*

No less impressive is Salka's flair for rendering character (Berthold's close friend and idol Karl Kraus, her own early mentor Max Reinhardt) and incident (notably, a close call on the casting couch, which, alas, reads

*Such passages give one to wonder whether it was precisely this capacity for succinct visualization that so excellently fitted Salka for the screenwriting career to come, or whether, conversely, her late-life recollections of those earlier years got recast and colored precisely by way of the scenarist efforts of the intervening decades.

nowadays as disconcertingly pertinent), all of which she feathers into an eventful bohemian narrative that somehow makes room for the charms of early motherhood, with the arrival of the couple's three sons, Hans, Peter, and Thomas.

For many readers, however, it may only be with the couple's arrival in America (and in Hollywood in particular) that the singular fascination of Salka's narrative really ramps up. Strictly speaking, the Viertels were not part of the Hitlerian émigré tide with which they would come to be so distinctively associated. They'd already arrived in Hollywood in 1928, part of an earlier surge of distinguished European theater and film folk that greeted the arrival of sound in the movies. It was thought that such distinguished European theatrical eminences—the likes of Erich von Stroheim, F. W. Murnau, William Dieterle, and, yes, Berthold Viertel himself—might help guide silent actors into the new aural era. For that matter, in those early years, Hollywood studios regularly experimented with making foreign versions of their local successes.

Indeed, it was in the course of one such effort, MGM's German-language remake of their hit rendition of Eugene O'Neill's *Anna Christie*, starring (in both versions) the luminous Greta Garbo in her first spoken roles, that Salka's friendship with the young star really blossomed: Brought on to play the role of the prostitute Marthy opposite the glamorous lead, Salka was in addition assigned the task of coaching the ravishing Swede's German elocution.

Salka's once vital career as a lead theatrical actress wilted precipitously in her transplanted California environs (she was deemed too old and not beautiful enough, and never really took to the chopped-up pace of film acting, which got to feeling, as she writes, "like drinking from an eyedropper"). Nevertheless, she segued effortlessly into a reader, reviewer, scout, and presently developer and co-writer of original scripts for MGM. And she worked especially closely with Garbo, beginning with the 1933 production of *Queen Christina*, the Rouben Mamoulian–directed vehicle in which Garbo starred opposite John Gilbert as the headstrong, tomboyish, somewhat gender-fluid (as we might now characterize matters) new

queen of Sweden. In one of Salka's frequently jaw-dropping asides, she notes that she and Garbo had preferred a newly arrived rookie thespian from London, one Laurence Olivier, for the part of the queen's paramour, but his acting chops were not deemed up to snuff by the all-knowing studio brass.

Berthold by contrast had a more difficult time adapting to the Hollywood studio system, especially after the eminence of his Continental career. He and Salka had originally envisioned a professional sojourn of just a few years in California, but owing to the deteriorating political conditions back home, they kept extending their stay, until by 1933, with Hitler's rise to power, they became de facto émigrés after all. Still, although they had established an idyllic if modest new homestead on Mabery Road, overlooking the Pacific in Santa Monica, Berthold grew increasingly restless. He launched out on ever more extended theatrical ventures to New York and Paris and London—the latter being where he teamed up with scenarist Christopher Isherwood for a 1934 film version of *Little Friend*, the story of a young girl's reckoning with her parents' divorce. That production, staffed by all manner of suddenly fleeing émigrés, would years later prove the basis for Isherwood's short memoiristic novel *Prater Violet*, in which the Englishman described the film's director, in his relations with the supervising studio, as "a lion molested by fleas."

As it happens, my own grandfather, the eminent Weimar-era Austrian modernist composer Ernst Toch, provided the score for that London production—a way station on his own eventual progress to Hollywood. There, owing to the perceived spikiness of his compositional style, he was typecast as a specialist in chase scenes (Shirley Temple's sleigh ride in *Heidi*) and horror effects (the Hallelujah Chorus in Charles Laughton's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*). Only after the war did he manage to wrest himself free of the studio shackles and start composing once again in his own voice (even attaining a Pulitzer Prize for his autobiographical 1955 Third Symphony, with its motto from Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, "Indeed I am a wanderer, a pilgrim on this earth, but can you say that you are anything more?"), though the fame and following of his European past would now elude him. And he would often entertain visitors to his home with a melancholy joke about the two dachshunds who

meet on the palisade overlooking the ocean in Santa Monica: "Here it's true I'm a dachshund," the one admits to the other, "but in the old country I was a Saint Bernard."

The west side of Los Angeles was rife with erstwhile Saint Bernards in those days,* and Salka regales *her* readers with countless representative tales of fish decidedly out of water, to vary the metaphor slightly—Sergei Eisenstein, for instance (though he had come to Hollywood and signed a yearlong contract at Paramount for reasons somewhat different from those of his German and Austrian counterparts). Salka, who through much of that time served as the Russian master's closest local support and confidant, begins her account of that bollixed year with a typically priceless sentence: "As soon as Eisenstein arrived, Upton Sinclair, who had most impressive friends, gave a picnic lunch for him at the ranch of Mr. Gillette, the razorblade millionaire." From there she goes on to detail the story of how Sinclair's wife mobilized a group of idle Pasadena millionaire wives to sponsor Eisenstein's filming expedition to Mexico, with patrons and director soon falling out catastrophically. Before long the whole project went down in flames, leaving a heartbroken Eisenstein to return to his Stalinist homeland. Salka likewise tells stories of Arnold Schoenberg and Irving Thalberg at ludicrous cross-purposes over a possible score for the latter's production of Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth*, and of Heinrich Mann (brother of Thomas and the author back in Germany of massive historical novels as well as the tale upon which the Emil Jannings–Marlene Dietrich classic *The Blue Angel* had been based) and Bertolt Brecht (arguably the greatest playwright of his era)—all of them utterly squandered by a studio system that had no idea what to do with them.

Most accounts of such calamities characterize them as instances of the philistine provincialism of the coarse American rubes who headed the

* I have frequently written on my grandfather's life and on the wider context of the émigré surround in Los Angeles during the thirties, forties, and thereafter, notably in my piece for *The Atlantic*, "My Grandfather's Last Tale," and in "Paradise: The Southern California Idyll of Hitler's Cultural Exiles" (which included a map to all of their homes), my contribution to the catalog for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's 1997 exhibition *Exiles and Emigrés: The Flight of European Artists from Hitler*—both of which can be found at www.lawrenceweschler.com.

Hollywood studios. (Salka herself does so some of the time.) The reality, though, was somewhat more nuanced and complex, for many of the studio heads were immigrants themselves, Eastern European shtetl Jews from the immediately prior generation who'd been looked down upon (as hugely inconvenient embarrassments) by their haute-bourgeois, high-culture, assimilated Jewish cousins in Vienna and Berlin and Munich and therefore hurried along to Amsterdam and Bremen and Hamburg and onward to New York as quickly as possible. Once in Hollywood, these fiercely ambitious Eastern European Jews set about fashioning and veritably inventing the American Dream. The late arrival of those once supercilious Western and Central European Jews set the stage for a certain degree of class-cultural revenge.

Still, many in Hollywood, with Salka and Berthold among the leading figures, did raise vast sums to bring leading European cultural luminaries, desperate in their flight from Hitler, to Hollywood, going on to help secure many of them at least temporary employ in the studios. And Salka made of her home on Mabery Road the site of weekly Sunday-afternoon salon-like gatherings (featuring her exceptional cooking), where the likes of the Manns (both sets), Lion and Marta Feuchtwanger, the Schoenbergs, the Stravinskys, Franz Werfel and Alma Mahler, Otto Klemperer's clan, the Max Reinhardts, Bertolt Brecht and his women, and countless other such Saint Bernards (including, I suspect, my grandparents) would rub shoulders with the likes of Charlie Chaplin, Johnny Weissmuller, Greta Garbo, Edward G. Robinson, and other Hollywood figures (as well as Aldous Huxley and Christopher Isherwood, the latter of whom had taken up residence in the garage apartment behind the main house). Many of Salka's best yarns revolve around these gatherings on the rim of the Pacific—including one in particular about a seventieth birthday party for Heinrich Mann at which, before the meal could be served, his brother Thomas rose up and pulled a long, many-paged peroration in honor of his brother out of his suit pocket and proceeded somberly to declaim it (as the roast overcooked in the kitchen), whereupon Heinrich responded by rising up in thanks, pulling a similarly hefty peroration in honor of Thomas out of his own suit pocket, and soberly going on to read it in its entirety.

Salka's account of those terrible years—"years of the devil," in the words

of her secretary—is hardly limited, however, to the fate of the grand and famous; she is just as attentive to the lives of the more modestly anonymous: onetime doctors and lawyers, for example, who were forced to take up employment as chauffeurs and housemaids (she notes how, what with the sudden transfer of local blacks into the wartime ship- and plane-building industries, these domestic fields had recently opened up), or for that matter, such regular everyday Americans as the sweet lady over at the Santa Monica office of Western Union with whom she became friends in the course of trying to keep tabs on her world-wandering husband and the far-flung members of her own family, some still stranded behind enemy lines.

"The unconcerned sunbathers on the beach, their hairless bodies glistening and brown," she writes at one point,

> the gigantic trucks rumbling on the highway, the supermarkets with their mountains of food, the studio with the oh-so-relaxed employees, the chatting extras pouring out from the stages at lunch time, the pompous executives marching to their "exclusive dining room" or the barbershop, stopping to flirt with the endearing "young talent"—all these familiar scenes were a nerve-wracking contrast to the war horror I constantly imagined.

And indeed, throughout its extraordinary middle half, Salka's memoir shifts back and forth between the grim comedy of life in the studios and the anguish of the war (the terrible reports of the slaughters on the various fronts as her sons, all the while, are coming of age and itching to hurl themselves into the fray; the increasingly desperate rumors of rampaging ethnic carnage as one by one she nevertheless manages to extract her sister and older brother and presently even her mother, the latter by way of an epic sequence of bureaucratic interventions, out of the maelstrom, her mother then coming to live with her, even as the fate of her youngest brother, the soccer player, grows increasingly uncertain).

In the studios, however, Salka seemed to glide from success to success, her friendship with Garbo becoming ever more intimate and inseparable. Salka cobbled together and often coauthored the scripts for films in

which the star got cast, variously, as the doctor's adulterous wife in an adaptation of W. Somerset Maugham's *The Painted Veil*, and then as Marie Walewska (Napoleon's adulterous Polish lover), Marie Curie (the adulterous Polish Nobel prize–winning chemist, in a project from which Garbo was subsequently separated), and Anna Karenina (the legendary Russian . . . well, you get the idea). Salka is wonderful at telling stories of the hurdles these projects had to surmount: the meddling of mid-level studio muckymucks, and the countervailing antics in the various writers' rooms. One of her favorite writing partners was Sam Behrman, such that

> When Sam asked me to dictate to the secretary the shots of Anna's suicide, I truly regretted that this was the last scene of the film. Walking up and down I described the night train approaching relentlessly —the lights from the carriage windows on Anna's face—her running down the embankment and throwing herself between the cars, then—a prostrated figure on the rails—the train disappearing in darkness—and last, a woman's handbag on the embankment.
>
> "And that's what's left of a human being," I concluded, almost in tears, and turned to Sam who burst into roars of laughter. For years these words remained our special code. We signed telegrams and letters with: "What's left of a human being. . . ."

Which, come to think of it, would have made a much, much better title for this book: Salka Viertel's *What's Left of a Human Being*.

Because for all her success, the life was exhausting, and as the war came to an end, her own began to fall apart: Her marriage with Berthold was continuing to deteriorate, her own love affairs were ending badly, and the perversities of studio life were becoming less and less endurable. One day Brecht drove up to the house on Mabery Road, with a question: "Why shouldn't we be able to do as well as any Hollywood hack?" To which she replied:

> Because what the producers want is an original but familiar, unusual but popular, moralistic but sexy, true but improbable, tender

> but violent, slick but highbrow masterpiece. When they have that, then they can 'work on it' and make it 'commercial,' to justify their high salaries.

In 1947, Salka, now at Warner Brothers, was completing the screenplay for one of her relatively few non-Garbo, non-adulterous films—this one, *Deep Valley*, a vehicle for Ida Lupino and Dane Clark. One day the studio workers went out on strike, and Salka, like most of the writers, honored the picket line. She contributed to the strike fund as well, although her writing partner on the film refused to be intimidated by "communists" and ostentatiously crossed the line.

"It was customary at Warner Brothers," Salka writes, "that when a film was to be previewed, the producers, director, writers and technicians (but not the actors) who had worked on it dined with Mr. Warner." And so, some months later, she reported to the executive dining room, noting her own sense that the enveloping mood doubtless mirrored "the *Gemütlichkeit* when Stalin's staff was dining with their boss." There Warner pontificated on the communist menace and how terribly the Soviets had treated the Jews during the war, finally turning to ask Salka's opinion. No sooner did she speak, however, than the unctuous co-writer "interrupted smilingly: 'Salka is a communist, Mr. Warner.' It was supposed to be a joke—but it prompted Blanke [the film's producer] to jump to my defense: 'She is not!' he said. 'One need not be a communist to say that Soviet anti-semitism is not to be compared to the horrors that the Nazis committed.'"

Be that as it may, and notwithstanding the subsequent success of the film's premiere (after which Warner expressed particular satisfaction with the screenplay), that was to be the last time Salka worked in a major studio, "but it took me several years to realize why."

Thus begins the final section, in some ways the saddest and most dispiriting, of Salka's memoir. Blackballed, her means of livelihood began drying up, she diversified, teaching small acting classes and taking sub rosa writing assignments (notably including consulting on postproduction

and then providing, without credit, the voice-over narration for Jean Renoir's first color film, *The River*). To save money, she and her mother rented out the Mabery house, transposing themselves, along with a much loved dog, into the garage apartment out back.

Salka was deeply lonesome, and her pages chronicling these years provide a different sort of illumination from her earlier chronicle of the cultural history of the first half of the twentieth century. Her book becomes instead a deep meditation on the nature of life and love, grace and forgiveness, equally valid and relevant perhaps for people in all places at all times. In this context, hers is a profoundly *adult* book—and I don't mean in any XXX-rated sense, the way that word has come to be degraded over the years. In fact, on the contrary, her hard-won and generously shared insights get proffered in the context of a finely tuned discretion. Marta Feuchtwanger once told me how the really great thing about Salka's book was "the stuff she left out." Hers was no traditional Hollywood tell-all, though she certainly knew a great deal, having become the nexus of a great many people's lives.*

A meditation on life and love, and indeed a profound love story, though one about not any single love but rather all the sorts of love—for parents, siblings, husband, lovers, children—that can fill out an individual life. Berthold and Salka were clearly the great loves of each other's lives, and Salka writes movingly of the end of their marriage:

> It is terrifying how suddenly fate becomes invincible and how unsuspectingly we accept it. "When our marriage breaks up, I shall cease to exist," Berthold once said. But in spite of all the things

*And I bracket out here the whole question of whether Salka and Garbo ever became actual lovers, a piece of gossip much speculated upon elsewhere. Indeed, Salka's biographer Riffkind recently commented to me how often she got asked that question. "And who's to say," she continued. "There is evidence for and evidence against, we will likely never know, but what's been fascinating to me is how obsessively fascinated everyone else is by the question, and what does that say about them? I will say this: Salka would have done anything for Greta, been there for her in any way she ever needed, and having lived through the Weimar years, she likely would not have harbored any puritanical misgivings at the prospect."

> binding us, all the tenderness and love we had for each other, our marriage was not a marriage anymore. Torn and inconsistent, Odysseus resented bitterly that Penelope had not waited patiently for his return, though he himself had not renounced the Nausicaa's.

And though the two never renounced the love they continued to share, Salka writes with equal grace and verve about what came next for her, how "Much against my wish and my will I did not jump, but slid into a love affair, which to many people appeared quite insane"—this with the much younger son of Max Reinhardt, Gottfried, himself a rising force in studio production.

> "But what did your sons say?" I was asked by a woman, who had herself sacrificed her love, with the result that her children thought her a frustrated and embittered bore. I answered that my two older sons were now adolescents; they understood that I had a right to some happiness. [...] Psychoanalysts are convinced that children want good, simple, conventional moms and dads, preferably sexless; however, I am sure that my sons were not unduly disturbed by the fact that their parents had a complicated relationship.

The "insanity" in question "gave me ten years of happiness and became a very serious commitment," Salka insists, but then "the unavoidable but predictable occurred: Gottfried's falling in love with a young woman he was soon to marry brought an end to our relationship. It is senseless," she went on to note, "to compare one's own grief with the enduring horror suffered by millions, but the consciousness of unspeakable tragedy makes sudden loneliness even more desperate and hopeless."

It was around this time, as the war (and that relationship) ended and the anti-communist hysteria began to take hold, that Salka also learned the probable fate of her brother Dusko. She received a letter from Viktoria, the beloved daughter of family servants, a girl who'd been raised as a virtual member of the Steuermann family. "In 1943," Viktoria now reported, "he came to my house begging me to hide him, but as we were living in a rented place I could not do it, and since the last German *Aktion*

I have not heard from him again." She followed up this news with a request that "Salka, who had always been like a sister to me," send a food parcel to her and the four children she'd had in the meantime. Appalled at the way this virtual member of the family had so "cruelly denied shelter to a hunted Jew," Salka began tearfully to compose an angry letter of recrimination. But then she thought again, "tore up the letter, mailed a CARE package [. . .] and never told Mama what Viktoria had written."

All of which is to say that this was a woman of preternatural balance, judiciousness, and wisdom.*

"Estuary" is how Salka describes these later years (perhaps with a knowing nod back to the gypsy's prophecy). The deaths continued to mount—Schoenberg ("Hollywood did not recognize his genius and only a few attended his funeral"), Max Reinhardt, Salka's beloved mother, and presently even their dog. Still blacklisted, and no longer able to afford the Mabery Road home, Salka was forced to abandon it for more spare and quotidian lodgings a good deal farther from the sea—and then in 1953, she received word that Berthold, now settled in Vienna alongside the woman with whom he had long been living, was in failing health and longed to see her one last time. She immediately applied for a passport, preparing to travel to Europe, only to receive word, by way of an officious, long-winded, bureaucratic communiqué from the State Department in Washington, that her application had been denied on the grounds that "it has been alleged that you were a Communist."

Desperate, she loaded up a car with her few irreplaceable belongings (notably including a heavy suitcase brimming with the decades of correspondence that would come to constitute the basis for this memoir) and headed back East, intending to appeal her case in person. When she finally arrived, at length, in New York, her brother Edward, his eyes averted, had to inform her that it was too late, they had received word

*Such sage and measured sorts of consideration appear to have especially endeared Salka to Isherwood, in whose diaries of the period she repeatedly appears, the two regularly sharing breakfast before the start of their busy days.

that Berthold had died the previous night. (He would be buried next to his friend Karl Kraus.)

She carried on. She appealed her case, eventually achieving surcease, and at long last made her way to Europe, and to Klosters, Switzerland, where her novelist-scenarist son Peter (yet another stellar Steuermann) had recently settled with his wife and young daughter (upon whose birth the couple had decisively separated). And it is there that Salka ends her tale (and an odd place to end at that, given that she would live another decade before she published these memoirs, a decade she chose for some reason to occlude, and beyond which she would live for yet another two decades, only dying, in Klosters, in 1978, at age eighty-nine—for more on which, see her biographer Rifkind's afterword to this volume). Ending it though on a perfect three-word note (and don't spoil things for yourself, don't go peeking ahead, let things come, let them come), the true summation of her essential nature and indeed the words by which the German translation of this memoir would eventually come to be titled.

—Lawrence Weschler