

## *No Small Parts*

### ADINA HOFFMAN

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*The Kindness of Strangers*, by Salka Viertel, New York Review Books Classics.

SHE TOOK Bertholt Brecht's cash-strapped wife, Helli, fruit-and-vegetable shopping at Los Angeles's Grand Central Market. She swam in the Pacific with Sergei Eisenstein and a few of his Soviet cinematic comrades. She served as scriptwriter, acting coach, and trusted all-around protector to her best friend, Greta Garbo. She poured Aldous Huxley and his wife glasses of sherry, then listened to him talk about cheese. . . . Although her name is little mentioned today, and her lasting contribution has a vaporous quality (by virtue of both her modesty and the behind-the-scenes, often unspoken nature of what she tended to be up to), Salka Viertel was perhaps the most important, and ubiquitous, "minor character" of a certain eminent-émigré-packed Southern Californian moment.

Calling her "minor" isn't to underestimate the major role she played in this context. Whether or not she's remembered today, all who knew her attest that over the course of the three decades she spent welcoming guests to her gracious, honeysuckle- and rose-encircled seaside house in Santa Monica, Viertel altered many lives. It's not unreasonable to say that in doing so she also helped to change the course of twentieth-century culture. This she did, not through a single bold and memorable gesture but in a thousand and one microscopic ways, by encouraging—and/or working with, advising, promoting, and playing counselor, translator, bartender, gatekeeper, professional matchmaker, intimate to—a boggling array of some of the era's most brilliant, uprooted people.

Almost from the moment Viertel and her husband, the Viennese theater director and poet Berthold Viertel, stepped off the train in Los Angeles one overcast day in 1928 (he had been summoned from

Berlin by F. W. Murnau to write a script at Fox Films), she became a fulcrum member of the remarkable community of European artists and intellectuals who'd begun to stream west in the early twenties. They would be followed in later years by a storm tide of others, forced more traumatically from their homelands. During these charged and charmed few decades, high culture and low, old world and new, met and galvanized each other in the most vital fashion, so helping to bring about much of what was golden about "golden age" Hollywood as well as the production in exile of various seminal works of late-breaking Weimar arts and letters—novels, philosophy, plays, poems, symphonies. The fact that a good deal of that meeting and galvanizing took place in and around Salka Viertel's living room is no mere coincidence.

But who exactly *was* Salka Viertel? Describing her as the "greatest salonière of modern times," as the writer S. N. Behrman did, hardly begins to account for the innumerable, often invisible, ways she hovered over her many illustrious friends and family members. One of her three sons, the screenwriter and novelist Peter Viertel, later dismissed the idea that his mother had presided over some sort of fancy salon: "She liked to cook for the people she admired and gave tea parties on Sundays," he said, "and that was about all there was to it." That account, though, doesn't sound quite right either. It's a bit *too* breezy in its assessment of just how Viertel saw herself and what she did with her talents.

Born Salomea Sara Steuermann to a well-to-do Jewish family in Polish Galicia in 1889, later a stage actress in Germany and Austria, and eventually an American screenwriter, Viertel herself was never celebrated as a public figure, yet the pervasiveness of her quietly canny backstage presence lingers in the journals, memoirs, and correspondence of many who were—everyone from Theodor Adorno and Arnold Schoenberg to Charlie Chaplin and Christopher Isherwood. The latter spent several contented months living with his then boyfriend, the photographer Bill Caskey, in Viertel's garage apartment, and she appears often in the British writer's brimming diaries—turning up in November 1939, for instance, at an "all-star picnic organized by the Huxleys at Tujung Canyon." Other guests drinking

beer and eating from baskets that day included Bertrand Russell, the screenwriter Anita Loos, and Garbo, who, in Isherwood's words, "was always full of secrets to be discussed in private with Salka, her closest confidante."

Isherwood writes affectionately and in vivid detail about his friend and landlady Salka. (Now he describes her sinking "sensually into a chair, like a big mother cat." Now she's welcoming guests to one of her regular Mabery Road gatherings, greeting "newcomers warmly and [getting] them involved in conversation with earlier arrivals, then. . . disappear[ing] into the kitchen to see how things [are] going.") In the notebooks and letters of other luminaries of that time and place, meanwhile, she tends to warrant only cursory mention as thrower-of-parties, convener-of-musical-evenings. Although he was a regular in her home and relied on her for all manner of screenwriting advice and grocery shopping, Viertel's Santa Monica neighbor Brecht, for instance, records her name just twice in his largely lowercase journals—once as the person who "wrote many of the great garbo films" and once on an abbreviated list of the eleven people present when Charles Laughton read aloud his English translation of Brecht's *Galileo*.

In a memoir of the same period, Isherwood muses on the way Viertel was viewed by the geniuses and glamour girls who wandered in and out of her Sunday afternoon get-togethers. "I think most of her visitors were sincerely fond of her," he writes, "but perhaps they tended to take her for granted. It is slightly shocking to find that, in the indexes to the collected letters of two of her 'stars,' Aldous Huxley and Thomas Mann, Salka's name isn't mentioned." To this he adds a pointed footnote: "To be fair, I must add that Salka herself, in her autobiography. . . mentions [my] move into her garage apartment but says nothing about Caskey. Is this discretion or snobbery? Probably a mixture." For all her openness, her penchant for genial self-effacement, Viertel too was—at least according to Isherwood—capable of designating some characters more minor than others.



But to state the possibly obvious: no one is a “minor character” in their own life, and in that same panoramic, wise, and exceptionally generous autobiography with which Isherwood quibbles, *The Kindness of Strangers*, first published in 1969 and recently reissued by New York Review Books Classics, she is every inch the star. She’s a star, however, who’s happy to share the stage (really the page) with a dazzling ensemble cast, and part of what makes the book so winning is Viertel’s always worldly, not-quite-weary sense of perspective, her willingness to acknowledge and even celebrate the way that she exists—we all exist—in dynamic relation: not just to lovers and children, spouses and friends, bosses, teachers, and daughters-in-law, but also to our historical moment or moments, however humdrum or cataclysmic.

Viertel’s times and her life are held in affecting balance in this book, with both personal and public sagas playing out in genuinely cinematic fashion and with the literary equivalent of the movies’ “deep focus,” in which foreground, middle ground, and background are all viewed with the same sharp clarity. She specialized as a screenwriter in a grandly sweeping brand of grown-up costume drama, with a strong, passionate heroine—inevitably tragic and inevitably played by Garbo—at its heart. (*Queen Christina* and *Anna Karenina* are the best-known examples of movies in this free-spirited-but-doomed-female-centric mode.) Lawrence Weschler is right to wonder, as he does in his insightful introduction to this new edition of her memoir, if Viertel’s scripts were informed by the grand sweep of her own life, or if her account of various heady episodes from her past took on its Hollywood tints only in retrospect. Given the richness of idiosyncratic detail and psychological nuance that pervade the book, I’m inclined to believe this isn’t backward-looking embellishment. Viertel doesn’t seem like one given to exaggeration or self-aggrandizement. If anything, she prefers to sidestep certain loaded subjects. While Isherwood chided Viertel for leaving things—or lovers—out of the book, her old friend Marta Feuchtwanger, widow of the émigré novelist Lion, praised her for precisely the same impulse, the impeccable discretion

she exercised there. Feuchtwanger said she admired Viertel for “what she left out. . . . If she had written what she knew, she would have made the greatest sensation.”

The earlier, European section of the memoir, in particular, has all the heightened pitch and swoony scope of a big-budget prestige picture produced by MGM circa 1935—which is meant as no insult. There’s a farewell scene on a train platform, where an unshaven lover appears with a bouquet of violets as young Salka’s train pulls away, and a dramatic return by horse-drawn carriage to her formerly well-appointed, now World-War-I-ravaged childhood home. If it weren’t for the house’s setting on the banks of the Dniester River and the languages spoken within its walls (German, French, Ukrainian, Polish, Russian), she might have been Scarlett O’Hara, stumbling back—rumpled but unbowed—to the vanquished, post-Civil War Tara.

But just as abundant as these Selznick-worthy set pieces are numerous carefully sketched, wonderfully ordinary scenes from her comfortable, cosmopolitan childhood in the garrison town of Sambor, where her lawyer father was the first-ever Jewish mayor, and where the family lived in that elegantly rambling house, surrounded by lilacs, jasmine, and hundreds of fruit trees. One of Viertel’s brothers, Edward Steuermann, was already a serious musician as an adolescent—he would go on to become an accomplished concert pianist, composer, and protégé of Schoenberg—and she describes with particular emotion the musical evenings that would unfold around his playing as she, her mother, and sister sang.

When Viertel was thirteen years old, her parents sent her to a boarding school in Lwow, run by two sisters, political refugees from the Russian part of Poland, who welcomed her warmly into their fold and introduced her to a surprisingly cheerful group of other, older refugees, each of whom she sketches in her memoir with singular acuity and sympathy. Even in this cosseted setting, the reality of the ordeals these people have suffered registers on her, by way of small, tactile details. She notices, for instance, the wide black-velvet ribbons

wrapped around the wrists of one of the school's administrators, also a political exile, a "lovely, sad" Polish woman. No mere fashion statement, the ribbons "hid ugly scars made by the chains she had worn marching in a prison convoy to Siberia." At this point, she's only a daydreaming, stagestruck kid, but all the ingredients that would later combine to make up those storied Santa Monica Sundays are already present: the gracious home, surrounded by flowers; the lively musical gatherings; the communal warmth; the large cast of keenly seen individuals, many of them refugees, decorously masking scars.



Isherwood's complaint aside, *The Kindness of Strangers* is, in fact, an uncommonly democratic book, in that the sensitive attention Viertel bestows on figures like the sisterly schoolmistresses and ribbon-wearing sad woman of Lwow are not much different in quality and intensity from the sketches she renders of numerous cultural titans. This egalitarian sense that everyone she's encountering is made of the same human stuff—no matter their renown, or lack of it—seems almost based on the Stanislavskian theatrical principle that "there are no small parts, only small actors."

She, of all people, should know, having worked her way up through various Mitteleuropean repertory companies, playing Trojan slaves and a "Siren or Nereid—I do not remember which." She then moved on to larger roles, fell in love with and married the brooding "Lieutenant Viertel," and, through him, met many of the leading figures of the age, dozens of whom have walk-on parts in this memoir. Viertel is scrupulously even-handed; her miniature portraits of these Great (mostly) Men register in much the same emotionally and visually exacting way as when she writes, for instance, of her beloved childhood nanny: "a small woman whose dark, somewhat Mongolian eyes looked at people with a humorous interest not free from suspicion."

Here, meanwhile, is her husband Berthold's hero and close friend Karl Kraus: "a fragile, gray-haired man with a stoop, one shoulder higher than the other. When he began to speak I was startled

by the strength and sonority of his voice, his superb diction." While visiting Prague, she happens upon the composer Anton Webern, "staring at sausages and a single can of sardines in the window of a foodstore, inaccessible to him because of the price and his ignorance of the Czech language." Franz Kafka and Max Brod sometimes come for dinner, and she finds the great writer "very quiet. It was hard to believe that he had tuberculosis, he looked so brown and healthy." And Brecht—later to be a major figure in their lives—turns up at a Berlin café: "thin and dark, with narrow eyes and a sharp nose, his hair combed down over his forehead. He could have been painted on a silk scroll as an Oriental sage, had it not been for his eternal leather coat and cap, which made him seem dressed for an automobile race."

By the time the Viertels made their way to America on a boat with six thousand singing canaries and a stowaway whose fate worried the chronically protective Salka, Hollywood was already functioning as a sort of Weimar outpost with palm trees. Shortly after the couple's arrival on the West Coast, the Swiss-born actor Emil Jannings and his wife threw a party in their honor, attended by, among others, Ernst Lubitsch, Max Reinhardt, the actor Conrad Veidt, the son of the poet Hugo von Hoffmannsthal, and the globetrotting bohemian brother-and-sister writers Erika and Klaus Mann, children of Thomas, niece and nephew of (the other novelist in the family) Heinrich.

Another party soon followed at the Lubitsches, and there Viertel met Garbo, who wore "an austere black suit" and looked radiant. "There is something unexpected in the loveliness of this face," she writes. "It is always as if one were seeing it for the first time." Viertel claims in her memoir that when they were introduced she'd only had occasion to watch one Garbo film—and frankly told the movie star as much, which seemed to please her. While Isherwood would later muse that "I suppose everybody who meets Garbo dreams of saving her—either from herself, or from Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, or from some friend or lover. . . . She is the woman whose life everyone wants to interfere with," Viertel actually did a great deal of skilled, under-the-radar saving and interfering on the actress's behalf. And such maneuvers were made much easier, apparently, by the fact that she

*wasn't* star-struck, and again seemed ready to take a person—in this case among the most famous alive—on her own terms and without fuss, as a fellow human being, and not according to some superficial sense of the tongue-tied or groveling way one “ought” to act in the presence of the most legendary of screen legends. The two captivated each other instantly and within hours of their initial encounter were already taking walks on the beach and conferring about their future work. Garbo suggested that Viertel try writing; Viertel began concocting scripts and dreaming up suitably swanky projects for the star while also serving as a kind of social and professional bodyguard.

Viertel's exceptional tact in her account of this close friendship has naturally led others to speculate about the precise nature of their bond. Were they lovers? Does it matter? In his introduction, Weschler quotes the critic and Viertel biographer Donna Rifkind, who says it may or may not be so, and “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?” (As it happens, Rifkind's recent *The Sun and Her Stars: Salka Viertel and Hitler's Exiles in the Golden Age of Hollywood* mostly has its fascinating subject to recommend it. The biography's dotting first half relies to an unsettling degree on awkward paraphrase of whole passages from Viertel's memoir, though as the book goes on and its scope expands Rifkind does a better job at both marshaling a range of sources and putting her heroine in perspective.) One of the many hidden or hard-to-quantify things that Viertel did for Garbo was to help her cultivate and preserve her mystique—sexual and otherwise—so that we might in fact read her discretion itself as one of the many clever methods that she used to slyly promote her best friend.



So much for the possibly salacious details she omitted from these pages. Just as notable are, of course, the particulars she does set down—and many of the anecdotes that Viertel relates in her amused, almost deadpan way have become staples of other people's accounts of old-time Hollywood and its foibles.

She was especially alert to (and dryly funny about) the absurdities that unfolded when her friends, the highly gifted, highly European high modernists, met the mostly shtetl-born American Jewish studio bosses and their almost willful contempt for lofty notions of artistic integrity. She isn't exactly casting blame, since even in her gently good-natured telling, everyone in this setting comes across as disoriented and slightly ridiculous, too eager to pull rank—as the artists were utterly contemptuous of (though eager to be employed by) the bosses, and the bosses seemed to take active pleasure in putting these eminences in their place, rendering them minor characters of yet another sort, cogs in the studio machine. There was the almost too-cartoonish-to-be-true time, for instance, when Irving Thalberg—ostensibly one of the more refined of the movie moguls, and the model for F. Scott Fitzgerald's sensitive last tycoon, Monroe Stahr—sent another producer to ask Viertel to arrange for a meeting with her brother's mentor, Schoenberg.

Thalberg had heard a radio concert of an early, melodic piece by the Austrian composer and gotten the wrong idea; he now wanted the master of twelve-tone technique to write the score for that shameless piece of Sino-schlock *The Good Earth*. "When I heard the lovely music you have written. . ." Viertel reports the so-called boy wonder saying when he met the avant-garde maestro. "Schoenberg interrupted, 'I don't write "lovely music."'" And so on—with Schoenberg eventually, amazingly, demanding "complete control over the sound including the spoken words," and, after a few days of negotiating and Viertel playing unflappable go-between, Thalberg shrugging and informing her that "meanwhile the Chinese technical advisor had brought some folk songs which had inspired the head of the sound department to write some very lovely music." Schoenberg's services were no longer required by MGM.

Viertel herself adapted quickly to this strangely sunny, even silly, new environment. Her relaxed sense of humor, curiosity, and willingness to relinquish her acting career and instead act in countless other, often unseen ways seem to have saved her—though her husband, the sterner and more stubbornly intellectual (and self-absorbed)

Berthold, had a much harder time reckoning with people like, as she puts it, “the incredibly boorish Sol Wurtzel,” a producer at Fox, and even from their earliest days in Hollywood, it was clear he might not hold on there. “For a man so erudite and creative in his own language,” she writes, “it was torture to confine himself to the primitive vocabulary of Mr. Wurtzel, and escaping to the men’s room to read Kant and Kierkegaard was small relief.” Berthold would eventually make his way back to Europe, where he remained, not exactly happily. Their marriage would both suffer and prove itself oddly enduring, even as they both carried on extended affairs with other people—with each other’s knowledge and apparent approval—and communicated frankly, if often painfully, across an ocean of difference and complex affection. (Much of Viertel’s book is reconstructed from the letters they exchanged during these years of separation.) Even when they finally divorced, they remained the closest of friends—and indeed, in the end, the kindness of one’s *friends* seems a more pressing motif in this book than does the comparatively formulaic “strangers” of the title.



Those multiple friendships, many carried over from the old world, became still more essential—and poignant—as the Hitlerian walls began to close in and, even as the Hollywood exiles threw their dinner parties, played their tennis, many of them were also absorbed with frantic attempts to rescue relatives, friends, colleagues from the European inferno. During this period, Viertel scrambled to bring her own mother out of Russia and learned of the death of her youngest brother at the hands of the SS; she also worked in her usual enterprising if unofficial way to support the efforts of the European Film Fund, founded by two other hugely admirable, female, émigré would-be bit-players, Liesl Frank (wife of the writer Bruno) and Charlotte Dieterle (actress and wife of the director William). The fund arranged visas, studio jobs, or small stipends for various European artists and intellectuals, who, in a chilling sense, had become something like history’s own “minor characters,” major novelists, composers, and

thinkers now nothing but faceless names and numbers on lists of visa applicants.

And they were the “lucky” ones. Viertel recounts a fireside conversation she had with Brecht and, in Viertel’s terms, his “friend and secretary” (actually mistress and collaborator) Ruth Berlau, on the 1942 evening they learned of the slaughter of thousands of Russians by the Germans in one particular Crimean city: “I said,” she writes, “how guilty I felt because I had been spared,” and Brecht responded later that night by slipping the poem “I, the Survivor” under her door: “Of course I know: it is only chance / That I have outlived so many friends. But last night in a dream / I heard these friends say of me: ‘It is the strongest who survive’ / And I hated myself” (translated by Tom Kuhn and David Constantine, from *The Collected Poems of Bertolt Brecht*).

Besides the basic desire for companionship, the people in Salka Viertel’s California circle also now found themselves clinging together as if to a sort of cultural lifeboat, stranded at high sea. On one 1941 occasion, which has been called “perhaps the greatest social gathering in the whole history of the ‘New Weimar,’” Viertel hosted a seventieth birthday party for Heinrich Mann. At around the same time Thomas Mann received an honorary doctorate from UC Berkeley, and as this conjoined celebration got underway, her kitchen was overrun with other refugees “awed by the importance of the evening.” They wanted to help cook, wash dishes, serve the distinguished guests: “For them,” she writes, “Heinrich and Thomas Mann, Alfred Neumann, Franz Werfel, Alfred Polgar, Lion Feuchtwanger, Alfred Doebelin, Walter Mehring, Ludwig Marcuse, Bruno Frank represented the true Fatherland to which in spite of Hitler they adhered.” The Mann brothers delivered dryly appreciative dueling tributes, each at least fifteen pages long, and, for all its tuxedoed formality, the whole performance “gave one,” in Viertel’s words, “some hope and comfort at a time when the lights of freedom seemed extinguished in Europe, and everything we had loved and valued buried in ruins. At the open door to the pantry the ‘back entrance’ guests were listening, crowding each other and wiping their tears.”

These webs of friendship and cultural affinity could be terrifically stimulating, comforting, sustaining. On the other hand, where some saw fruitful exchange and connection, others saw conspiracy—and there are never any minor characters in *those* kinds of plots, only subversives and fellow travelers. So it was that the government agents who hovered around Mabery Road during those years kept closer observational tabs, and more precise written records, than some of Viertel's brilliant literary and musical callers: "On March 31, 1945," reads one typical page of a formerly top-secret dossier (unknown to Viertel, now freely available on the FBI's website), "Bert Brecht's car was again observed at the SALKA VIERTEL residence at 10:15 A.M. . . . Later in the same day BERT BRECHT and RUTH BERLAU were observed at the VIERTEL residence loading suitcases into the Packard convertible of SALKA VIERTEL, license 12 D 422." With the arrival of J. Parnell Thomas and the coarse theatrics of the HUAC, Viertel—who was not only accused by the US State Department of having been "closely associated with known Communists," but who had contributed to a studio workers' strike fund and signed an amicus curiae brief in support of the Hollywood Ten, so becoming yet another sort of friend—landed on a kind of gray list: blacklisted, that is, unless she could persuade Garbo (who had renounced the movies) to return to the screen.

And the sorrows piled up. Without a steady source of income, she rented out her house and moved into her own garage apartment; she mourned the loss of her mother, various friends, of a beloved dog—a last psychological straw. ("Now," she keens at the death of the four-legged Timmy, "no one seemed to need me any longer.") As she grew more isolated, the American government refused her application for the passport she had requested so she could travel to Europe to visit her brother, sister, sons, and the ailing Berthold. She finally got the documents, but by then her ex-husband was already gone.

Although the later chapters of *The Kindness of Strangers* make for generally sad reading, Viertel's unsentimental gratitude for everything she'd experienced, everyone she'd known, somehow still shines through. After a new friend, a younger, American biographer, drove

with her across much of the United States, she began to perk up, admitting that when they'd started their road trip, "I had been dispirited and discouraged, but his interest, his understanding and kindness inspired such confidence that I could talk to him as I had not talked to anyone for a long time." Somewhere in Arizona, he urged her to write her memoirs—which she would eventually do, though she postponed getting down to work and "listened instead to the life story of the motel manager," who also has a small part to play in this big-hearted drama.

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