

Why I Wrote *The Sun and Her Stars*

Why did I want to tell this story? First and foremost because it was wrong that so few people thought Salka Viertel important enough to be remembered. Salka knew her own worth: she had written her own account of her life in a magnificent but long out-of-print autobiography, *The Kindness of Strangers*. It's only recently that NYRB Classics re-issued Salka's book in paperback, a worthy and long-overdue decision.

If Salka was a hidden figure, she was hiding in plain sight. She was a screenwriter, salonnière, and former actress who loved the spotlight and could strike a pose. She lived to influence and often to rescue other people. Yet the Hollywood histories largely ignore her substantial role in its Golden Age, except to plumb anecdotes from her autobiography without giving her proper credit.

When I first began thinking about shaping Salka Viertel's life into a book, I thought I would be writing a local Hollywood tale, one that I could manage from my own hometown of Los Angeles. Research trips to Germany, Switzerland, Idaho, and New York dispelled that notion. I also quickly abandoned the conviction that I was writing a straightforward biography. Salka Viertel was a great connector of people, and her life is a testament to the fact that every person operates within a network of complex relationships. So my book became a social portrait, a collection of people who all affected and were affected by Salka Viertel.

Through war and genocide, a vast number of those lives and worlds were lost. Salka taught me that it was important to memorialize them, through her experience, as best I could.

As I was writing her story, my admiration for Salka kept growing. Perhaps most meaningfully for me, she taught me to expand my moral imagination. To understand that global events affect local ones, and that local actions reverberate globally. In this way we are all connected to each other, and all responsible for one another, the world over. Compassion and love are the only effective tools against hate and fear. By embodying these principles throughout her life, Salka offered a blueprint for ways to think, feel, and act during our own bewildering era.

