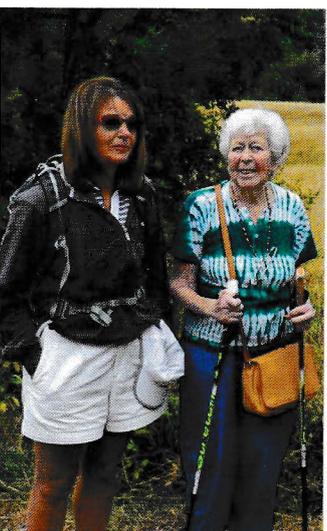


Professor Gerta Vrbová-Hilton MD, DSc



Top: Gerta in 1932 at her parents' house in Trnava. **Left:** Gerta with her first child, Helena, 1952. Image courtesy of publisher Vallentine Mitchell. **Below:** With her first husband Rudi Vrba in Bratislava. **Below left:** Gerta (right) with Robin Vrba, the second wife of Rudolf Vrba, on the Willow-Wetzler Memorial march in August 2015. **Below right:** Gerta in Prague, 1946. Image courtesy of Vallentine Mitchell.



Gerta Vrbová-Hilton died on October 2, at the age of 95. She was a distinguished neuroscientist who made significant advances in her field. She had escaped both the Holocaust and Communist Czechoslovakia.

Née Sidonová, she was born in Trnava in Slovakia in 1926. She described her amazing early experiences in two autobiographical books, *Trust and Deceit – A Tale of Survival in Slovakia and Hungary, 1939-1945* and *Betrayed Generation – Shattered hopes and disillusion in post-war Czechoslovakia*. She tells of her pain when in 1939 her friend Marushka told her they shouldn't play together any more, because Gerta was Jewish, and how nice it would be when her family took over Gerta's house.

After escaping with her parents to Hungary, she and her mother returned clandestinely to Bratislava in 1944 with false papers. There she met her childhood friend the hero Rudi Vrba, who had escaped from Auschwitz (one of the very few to do so) to alert the world to the horrors of that place. She and her mother were betrayed, and taken to the Gestapo HQ. During the days of their interrogation they were made to clean the offices and one day, seeing an open first floor window, she jumped to freedom. Her mother chose to stay behind, and they never saw each other again.

Gerta returned to hiding in Budapest. There she forged more papers for other Jews in need of them. After the liberation, in May 1945 she returned to Slovakia. She arrived at her old family home in Trnava; the door was opened by the Slovak now living in it, who had worked for her father before the war. "Oh God," he exclaimed, "you are still alive." The Russian Army was still in Trnava, so Gerta returned with a Russian officer who ordered the new occupants to leave.

Her parents and many of her relatives had perished in the camps. In 1945 she moved to Prague to study medicine, and worked at a research institute studying the function and interaction of nerves and muscles. She and Rudi Vrba married, and they had two daughters, but the marriage ended in 1956. In her words, "Because of what he had been through he was very suspicious and couldn't trust anyone."

In 1957 at a scientific conference in Prague she met the British physiologist Sidney Hilton, and they planned to marry. Taking advantage of a conference in Warsaw in 1958, and a technical error in her travel visa, to get to Britain she added her daughters' names to a visa; secretly walked across the Polish border in the Tatra mountains to collect her children; walked them back into Poland; and flew

from there to Copenhagen. Then she flew to Britain, to take up a job she had waiting for her at medical school in London. British bureaucracy, however, refused her entry and sent her and her daughters back to Denmark. She finally got here in 1959 and married Sidney.

She worked in London, Birmingham, Australia, and in 1976 at University College London, where she stayed for 40 years, becoming professor (and subsequently emeritus professor) of neuroscience. Her research groups at Birmingham and UCL worked on electrical muscle stimulators now much used in sport and rehabilitation.

Sadly, the two daughters she and Rudi Vrba had predeceased her.

Her remarkable life was featured on BBC Radio 4 in their *The Last Word* series on October 16. It described her as "a leading physiologist who specialised in nerve-muscle interaction", focusing on how it is not the chemical properties of, but electrical activity on, a muscle that makes the difference to how that muscle responds.

This had important practical consequences, for example in helping children with genetic neuro-muscular diseases like muscular dystrophy remain ambient for longer, and in improved treatment for people with serious injuries.

Importantly, she turned her back on personal gain from these advances, believing that science should be shared, not competitive. Her son Peter Hilton says in the programme that she had positivity and resilience in spades, as was shown by the eminence she had achieved in her field, despite being both foreign and a woman. You can hear the programme at www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m000nd0z about 8 minutes in.

She was a member of the BCSA for many years. Her wish to help younger people was shown by her being one of the main speakers at our Intergenerational event in October 2017. On that occasion she spoke of her discovery when she came to Britain that there were different types of freedom: here she could travel where she liked, make friends with whom she liked, and say what she liked; but also, as a woman, she felt much less free than she had been in Czechoslovakia, where women had more opportunities. She praised the British for their tolerance, but not for the difficulty of finding childcare so she could work.

She was runner-up in our writing competition in 2010, with *Our First International Meeting in Prague*. This told not only of the physiology conference held in Prague in 1956 but also of her own first meeting with her British husband.