

Foreword

*M*OVING, SEARING, WRENCHING, INSPIRING—the adjectives that can apply to many memoirs of the Holocaust and the feelings they evoke certainly apply as well to *Letters from the Lost*. Each personal odyssey is individual, though, and this narrative is distinguished by the individuality of Helen Waldstein Wilkes’ story and the insightful clarity with which she tells it. As she searches for her own history and for the family members who perished after she and her parents escaped Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia, Wilkes’ difficult return to that past illuminates the terrain of suppressed memory, as well as its costs. “Memories of our history hold us together as individuals,” Wilkes writes, “as families and as communities. When we forget who we have been, we remain unaware of who we are.” (p. vii) For some four decades Wilkes guarded but did not open the box of letters that held fragments and maps of her history. Not until she was past sixty was she ready to begin that journey of recovery. This memoir is the legacy of her search.

I read these pages as a historian, intrigued by the process of recovering lost memories and historical erasures, and as a Jew, familiar, in much-

diluted form, with the process of self-protective selective forgetting. I was born shortly after World War II, nine months after my Dad was mustered out of the U.S. Army. As a child I learned that the Holocaust had happened, but also, my parents insisted, that it had not really touched our family. This childhood fiction was not an uncommon story for Jewish children born in post-war North America. Even for families like my own, who lost no immediate kin, it was rarely true. My father's family had emigrated to Canada and the United States by 1913; my mother's grandparents arrived even earlier. My great-grandfather fled the czar's army, not Hitler's. But ours was a large, extended family. Numerous cousins remained in Europe, and we may never know how many of them perished. Over three decades after the War ended, my Dad discovered a first cousin he had never known existed, living in Jerusalem, who had somehow survived, hiding in Prague throughout the war.

My story is not unusual. Nor is my parents' denial, or perhaps their attempt to shelter their children from a too-painful and too-recent past. The post-war years have, for the survivors, brought the gradual process of remembering, of painful reconstruction, and the inevitable questions about what might have been. This work of memory has generated a dense and varied literature of Holocaust memoirs: by survivors^I, by child survivors^{II}, by the children of survivors^{III} And there is a growing literature of reclamation, of the search for lost family members rarely mentioned, and then cryptically, or in whispers, those who might have been forgotten in time, to protect the next generations from painful memories. Daniel Mendelsohn opened *The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million* with his childhood experience walking into rooms only to watch elderly relatives burst into tears at the very sight of him, as they remembered the great-uncle he resembled. When they spoke of the family they had lost, they switched to Yiddish, to protect the children.^{IV}

Each person's journey into these suppressed pasts has been at once shared and intensely personal, as individual as each life taken, each story lost. *Letters from the Lost* impressively combines honest self-revelation, moral clarity, and compassion. It is unusual among survivors' memoirs because Wilkes' journey is almost without historical parallel. Born in

Sudetenland, that portion of Czechoslovakia the Allies ceded to Hitler in April 1938, her family was, according to her father, the last to receive an exit visa that enabled them to leave just days after German troops entered Prague. Even more remarkably, they were among the very few Jews who gained entry to Canada. “Someone was asleep at the switch,” Wilkes surmises, when her aunt and uncle entered Canada through a Canadian Pacific Railway program to recruit farmers. Someone was asleep again when her aunt sponsored Edmund and Gretl Waldstein and little Helen. No one, apparently, realized that they were Jews.

Both the United States and Canada refused entry to most Jews in the immediate pre-war years. Both had admitted Jews through the early twentieth century. Canada, unlike the United States, had permitted Jewish agricultural colonies on the prairies. But neither welcomed Jewish immigrants during the 1930s. The United States severely restricted European immigration in 1924, and during the 1930s resisted appeals on behalf of European Jews. Canada separated Jews as a class from others who shared the same citizenship and then quietly restricted Jewish immigration.^v Britain, too, closed its doors, and prevented Jewish immigration to Palestine as well.^{vi} Although Germany allowed Jews to leave until 1941, few escaped the Holocaust not because they could not leave but because no country would take them. Canadian immigration policy was more generous after the War, and thus most Canadian Holocaust memoirs have been written by survivors who emigrated after years in hiding or in concentration camps.^{vii}

Letters from the Lost differs from most narratives of the search for lost relatives because Helen Waldstein Wilkes was one of very few children to escape with her parents, and one of even fewer to enter Canada before the formal onset of the War. Her narrative speaks not only to the Holocaust, but also to her difficult transition to Canada as an immigrant Jewish child. The search for her roots, for those who were murdered and the few who survived, also helped unlock how her parents’ experiences, and the memories they had hidden or forgotten, affected her own ability to connect—with people, with Canada, with Judaism. Although most children of survivors carried their parents’ pasts in some ways, each response was particular. Some survivors adamantly held to Orthodox Judaism; others had

not been particularly observant before the War and remained so afterward; some abandoned most religious practice in response to a faith that had not prevented the brutality they endured. Their children, like most, grappled in their own ways with Jewish and national identities.

The first steps toward healing from trauma and violence come with breaking silence. I had a colleague in the early 1980s, one of the first children born to Holocaust survivors, who told me how empowering it was for him to meet with other second-generation survivors, to find people who shared what he had thought were his own personal quirks. “Like what?” I asked him. “Well,” he replied, “we are the only people I know who have all discussed with our spouses which city we will try to meet in if there is another Holocaust.” Like my colleague, Wilkes planned ways to protect her children should another Holocaust separate them. Her personal journey, too, brought her to other second-generation survivors, and to new engagement with Judaism.^{viii}

Many who read this book will have no personal experience of the Holocaust. We all inherit its history, its unprobed silences. Breaking silence and recovering memory are essential steps for personal healing and for historical truth and reconciliation. The memoirs of Holocaust survivors record wrenching tales of loss and endurance. Because they mostly center on the concentration camps or years of hiding, they can seem far removed from Canada or any of the Allied nations that liberated the survivors. The Waldsteins’ story, though, records the complex legacy of the nation that at once provided haven for them but which erected the immigration restrictions that kept them from saving the rest of their family.

Nations, like individuals, erase those memories too painful to confront. For Canada, the missing bits of memory are like missing tiles in a multicultural mosaic, the jagged empty spaces of “what might have been” if any of the countless lost had been welcomed. “When we forget who we have been, we remain unaware of who we are”—and of who we might yet become. Helen Waldstein Wilkes, to her enormous credit, embraces the complexity of a Canada that has done harm, but which promises “the best of a world still to be brought fully to fruition.” (p. 234) To claim that

complex promise, nations—like individuals who have survived deep trauma—require the courage to face their pasts. This book is one beginning.

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Calgary, December 2009

¹ For Canadian survivors' memoirs, see for instance Olga Barsony-Verrall, *Missing Pieces: My Life as a Child Survivor of the Holocaust* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2007); Tommy Dick, *Getting Out Alive: A Memoir* (Toronto: Azrieli Foundation, 2007); John Freund, *Spring's End: A Memoir* (Toronto: Azrieli Foundation, 2007); Rachel Shtibel, *The Violin* (Toronto: Azrieli Foundation, 2007); Vera Kovesi, *Terror and Survival: A Family History* (Montreal: Concordia University Chair in Canadian Jewish Studies and The Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies, 2005); Jack Weiss, *Memories, Dreams, Nightmares: Memoirs of a Holocaust Survivor* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2005); Leslie Vertes, *Can You Stop the Wind?: An Autobiography* (Montreal: Concordia Chair in Canadian Jewish Studies and The Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies, 2001); Helen Rodak-Izso, *The Last Chance to Remember* (Montreal: Concordia University Chair in Canadian Jewish History and The Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies, 2001); Paula Draper and Richard Menkis (Eds.), *New Perspectives on Canada, the Holocaust and Survivors: Nouvelles Perspectives sur le Canada, la Shoah et ses Survivants* (Montreal: Association for Canadian Jewish Studies, 2000); Perec Zylberberg, *This I Remember* (Montreal: Concordia University Chair in Canadian Jewish Studies and The Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies, 2000); Sam Smilovic, *Buchenwald 56466* (Montreal: Concordia University Chair in Canadian Jewish Studies and The Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies, 2000); David Jacobs, *Remember Your Heritage* (Montreal: Concordia University Chair in Canadian Jewish Studies and The Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies, 2000); Michel Melinicki, *Bialystok to Birkenau: The Holocaust Journey of Michel Mielnicki as Told to John Munro with Introduction by Sir Martin Gilbert* (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2000); Rose Ickovits Weiss Svarts, *Forces of Darkness: Personal Diary of Rose Ickovits Weiss Svarts from 1938 to 1946* (Montreal: Concordia University Chair in Canadian Jewish Studies and The Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies, 2000); *Memoirs of Holocaust Survivors in Canada* (Montreal: Concordia University Chair in Canadian Jewish Studies and The Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies, 1999); Lisa Appignanesi, *Losing the Dead* (Toronto:

McArthur, 1999); Joil Alpern, *No One Awaiting Me: Two Brothers Defy Death during the Holocaust in Romania* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2001). These represent a small sample of Canadian Holocaust survivors' memoirs, and much smaller sample of survivors' memoirs from all countries. For more on the genre, see Norman Ravvin, *A House of Words: Jewish Writing, Identity, and Memory* (Toronto: McGill-Queens University Press, 1997).

^{II} See Andrew Shlomo, *Childhood in Times of War* (Montreal: Concordia University Chair in Canadian Jewish Studies and The Montreal Institute for Genocide and Holocaust Studies, 2001); Marian Finkelstein, *Out of the Ghetto: A Jewish Orphan's Struggle for Survival* (Montreal: Concordia University Chair in Canadian Jewish Studies and The Montreal Institute for Genocide and Holocaust Studies, 2000).

^{III} See for instance Bernice Eisenstein, *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2006); Paula S. Fass, *Inheriting the Holocaust: A Second-Generation Memoir* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009).

^{IV} Daniel Mendelsohn, *The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2006), 3–5.

^V See Irving Abella and Harold Troper, *None is Too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe, 1933–1948* (Toronto: Lester and Orpen Dennys, 1986); David Rome, *Clouds in the Thirties: On Antisemitism in Canada, 1929–1939: A Chapter on Canadian Jewish History, 13 vol.* (Montreal: National Archives, Canadian Jewish Congress, 1977–1981); Janine Stingel, *Social Discredit: Anti-Semitism, Social Credit and the Jewish Response* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2000).

^{VI} Unlike the United States and Canada, Britain did make room for 7,500 Jewish children from 1938 to 1940.

^{VII} See Abella and Troper, *None Is Too Many*; Irving Abella, *A Coat of Many Colours: Two Centuries of Jewish Life in Canada* (Toronto: Lester and Orpen Dennys, 1990).

^{VIII} The congregation that Helen Wilkes mentions in her text, Congregation Or Shalom in Vancouver, is affiliated with Jewish Renewal, a non-denominational movement that has provided a point of reconnection for many Jews of the post-war generations. See <http://www.aleph.org> and <http://www.orshalom.ca>.