

Preface

*H*ISTORY IS BOTH POTENT AND PERSONAL. Memories of our history hold us together as individuals, as families and as communities. When we forget who we have been, we remain unaware of who we are.

My memory had huge gaps. I had erased much from my consciousness, especially my early years. Forgetting is rarely intentional, but the avoidance of pain is a basic tool of human survival.

My parents had also done a lot of forgetting. It was their way of coping. The details of their trauma had always been a shadowy presence in my life. As I celebrated my 60th birthday, I knew it was time to unravel the mysteries in order to be present in my own life.

We underestimate the storehouse of memory. It holds far more than we imagine, and reading the letters brought to life people I had known and lost. These absent family and friends occupy my thoughts. Occasionally, I have paraphrased or shortened their letters, but otherwise, they are reproduced, translated by me, as they were written, by very real people.

With the exception of one family, I have used the real names of those whose lives intersected with mine. These people matter greatly to me, and I

hope they will see themselves reflected in a positive light with all the high regard in which I hold them. If my memory of events has allowed some details to fall away and others to stand in sharp relief, I beg forgiveness for any unintentional slights or oversights.

I have attempted to share with the reader my own journey into a past of which I knew more than many, yet understood very little. Because we are not and cannot be separate from our history, to learn from it is our only chance of moving beyond it.

I invite you to share in my journey and, in so doing, perhaps to cast light upon your own shadows, explore your own history, and come home to yourself.