

Leaving Home

*H*OW HEAVILY THAT RESPONSIBILITY must have sat on my father's shoulders! I thought of him often as I continued reading the letters, always in small bits. Sometimes a single sentence was enough to reduce me to tears. Sometimes I would read a whole paragraph before experiencing the need to pace the floor. My thoughts were in turmoil, and no matter how many times a day I walked the nearby woodland paths, I could find no peace of mind.

Unasked questions haunted me. Childhood memories surfaced and mingled with stories I had heard fifty years ago. Why had my grandparents not been aboard the next ship? Why had they not followed us to Canada? What had happened to Emil and to the rest of the family? There were great gaps in my family story that I needed to bridge. Reading the letters broke the serenity of my adult life, making it seem as fragmented as an unassembled jigsaw puzzle.

Many a night, I walked the country road, trying to find the calmness that might lead to a few hours sleep. Longingly I gazed at the night sky, wishing I could name more than the big dipper. Stars have always fascinated me.

The very concept of a light year dazzles me. Despite its incredible speed, that light has taken countless years to reach me. There is even a good chance that the light of that star died long ago, and still, I see that star winking in the night sky.

So it seemed with those who had written the letters. Their words on paper were as real to me as the light reaching my eye from a distant star. Were any of these people still alive? Was even one of them alive? How could I not have seen what I now saw? Each of these people now existed through their letters as certainly as the stars fixed in the velvet sky.

Numbers do not have meaning for me. It is one reason the study of astronomy has remained a pipe dream. I am hopelessly humanist, and the struggle of a single individual has greater impact upon me than the most accurate of statistics. One parent's agony at the death of a child touches me. My eyes glaze over when children and parents are numbered in the thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands. Millions.

Particularly problematic for me has been the figure of six million, the number of Jews murdered in a deliberate, systematic, state-sanctioned effort to exterminate my family along with all the Jews of Europe. There is no reason why I should not have been among those murdered Jews. Why I am still alive is as accidental and as random as why six million others were caught in the net.

As a child, I had learned not to ask questions that would upset my parents. As an adult, although I questioned many socially accepted premises, I asked no questions about the war. Not until after I had read the letters did I realize the degree of my ignorance.

It was the first letter from my father's sister Martha in Prague that jolted my thinking. The letter was dated April 2, 1939. The handwriting was not hard to read and the German words easily yielded their meaning.

Today, Sunday, it hits us especially hard to be without you. When you left us on Saturday, the house brimmed with sadness.

I had never given thought to the exact date of our departure from Europe. My parents had always been vague. I only remember them saying, "We left

before Hitler.” The letter gave me a date. Quickly I counted backwards the eight days that Martha was referring to, first on my fingers, then on paper. If there are 31 days in March and April 2 is a Sunday, then April 1 was Saturday and the previous Saturday was March 25. That must be the day we left Prague.

Why was seeing this date so unsettling? Something was troubling me, and I needed time to process the new information. I headed for the local library. The history section had a whole shelf of books about the war. I checked for dates. Hitler and his armies marched into Prague on March 15, 1939. That was a full ten days before we left.

But why would my parents have been in the capital of Czechoslovakia? It was miles from our home in Strobnitz, and my mother had often denied seeing Prague. Whenever friends spoke of it, she would say with a sigh, *“Everyone claims it is a beautiful city. Too bad that I never saw it.”*

My mind whirled. I had never connected the dots. To me, the war had always started in September 1939, months after we got to England where we boarded a ship to Canada. I had never thought about events prior to September. Vaguely I remembered something about Neville Chamberlain, the British Prime Minister who tried to buy “peace in our time” at the expense of Czechoslovakia. Now I looked up the details.

Czechoslovakia had been stitched together after World War I by clumping disparate ethnic groups including Czechs, Slovaks, Ruthenians, Poles, Hungarians, and speakers of German into a country with artificially defined borders. The German-speakers lived mostly in areas adjacent to Germany and Austria that were called “the Sudetenland.” From the moment that Hitler was elected chancellor in 1933, he sought to bring the Sudetenland under his wing.

How did the Jews know what Hitler would do and that it was time for them to leave the Sudetenland? From a public telephone booth just outside the library, I called my mother’s friend Mimi. She was twenty-six in 1938 and clearly remembered the pre-packed suitcases waiting in the hallway as her family gathered around the radio. In the early hours of September 30, the major powers of Europe announced the result of their negotiations. Without inviting Czechoslovakia to the table, Britain, France, Germany,

and Italy had signed the Munich Agreement that allowed Germany to occupy the Sudetenland. As Neville Chamberlain, the Prime Minister of Britain stepped from the plane in London, proud to have averted the danger of another war by dealing diplomatically with Herr Hitler, the German army stirred and Chamberlain's name became forever linked with the term "appeasement." Knowing full well what had happened in Germany where Jews had been stripped of citizenship and publicly vilified, the Jews of the Sudetenland boarded early morning trains to safety. That afternoon, German troops crossed the border.

It must have been on that same morning, October 1, 1938, that my parents sought refuge in Prague. Six months later, on March 15, they were still there as Hitler stood on the balcony of Hradcany Castle, accepting Nazi salutes from the courtyard. To the world, he announced that not just the Sudetenland, but the entire country of Czechoslovakia had ceased to exist.

Why had my parents stayed in Prague so long? Had they been hiding, afraid to venture to the highly guarded railway station? Had it been dangerous to be seen on the streets, suitcase in hand and ready to flee? Had they stayed because they had no exit visa and nowhere to go? Was it not until March 15 that my father finally got an exit visa?

He told me the story only once, on one of our Sunday morning walks, but it left a deep impression:

I went to the bank early that day. Some intuition told me to be the first in line. The moment the doors opened, I rushed to the nearest teller and pushed the documents under the grille. The teller sighed and picked up his stamp. Just as he was inking the stamp on the pad, the voice of another employee called out. Automatically, the teller pressed the freshly inked stamp onto the blue card as he turned his head.

TELLER: "What did you say?"

VOICE: "I said 'no more exit stamps.' Orders from above. No more stamps to be issued. We're closing up."

The teller slammed shut his grille, but not before I had snatched back my papers.

Now I understood why the discovery of the dates was so strangely upsetting. Not only had my parents fled twice in less than a year, my father had also received the very last exit stamp to be issued.

How did it feel to be a Jew in 1938 and 1939, waiting to escape the net? These are the days, weeks, and months that my parents never spoke about. I now believe that my mother had totally erased them from her memory.

I found more evidence that we had indeed spent months in Prague. The strongest clue was a postcard addressed to us there. Its message indicates that we fled from the Sudetenland in September of 1938. Six months later, when the card was postmarked, we were still in Prague, hunkered down and waiting for the other shoe to drop.

When I returned from the cabin, I asked my mother about Prague. Once again, she denied ever having been there. I tried to push further, but my mother would not remember. She allowed one concession that shielded her from what she had experienced during those months of uncertainty: *“It is possible that we were there, but only for a few hours. Just in the railway station on our way to Antwerp.”*

Compulsively I checked the dates again. If we left Prague on March 25, 1939, then we were clearly still there when Hitler marched into the city. What experience had made my mother draw the curtain on that part of her life?

I cannot imagine her terror. Had she and my father sat trembling by the radio, listening to Hitler’s raucous voice? Did they analyze his every word, or were they too frightened to think? Who was there? Were we alone, my parents and I? Was it too dangerous to venture forth? Was even the short distance between houses too far? Had the madness in the streets and the wild jubilation that greeted Hitler’s arrival cautioned them to stay hidden indoors, drapes drawn?

Every Jew in Prague would have felt the ground give way. *Kristallnacht*, the Night of Broken Glass, a coordinated attack on Jewish people in towns and cities all over Germany, Austria, and the Sudetenland, had already



A studio photo of Helen, dated and stamped *Prague, 1939* —
proof positive that my family did more than merely pass
through the railway station

happened. On November 9 and 10, 1938, synagogues were torched, businesses and homes looted, and Jews beaten in the streets as onlookers spat and jeered at their plight.

Did my parents not have the documentation they needed? Is that why we were still in Prague? With incomplete paperwork, they would have feared for their lives.

Fearful thoughts must have churned about in my father, literally turning his guts to water. My mother often said that he suffered from “dysentery” on the trip to Antwerp and that he’d “picked up a bug” on the train. How much came from an outside bacterial source and how much came from raw fear?

“*Nobody took the train in those days,*” asserts Mimi when I call her again. “*The planes were rickety, but people flew anyway. Taking the train was too dangerous. You would have had to go through Nazi Germany.*” The letters confirm my mother’s story. We took the train from Prague to Antwerp. The only route was through Nazi Germany.

I try to imagine my parents, heads bowed, determined not to attract attention. Somehow, my toddler energy had been reined in and my inquisitive voice silenced. Although the actual scenes did not stay in my memory, the sense of fear is still with me.

In the film *Julia*, Jane Fonda plays the role of an American crossing Nazi Germany by train. Many times, I have rented the video. Heart pounding, I watch as the Nazis board the train. I wait for the scene where the inspector demands her passport, and hesitates for just a fraction of a moment. Mesmerized, I see my father in the same scene, not daring to breathe as the Nazi inspector scrutinizes his documents.

AMONG THE LETTERS IN THE box is a starkly plain postcard addressed to us in Antwerp. There is no scenic photo, and both the address and message are typed. The only personal touch is the signature: *Emil*. Was the signature of his brother-in-law Emil Fränkel enough to make my father keep that humble postcard and bring it to Canada?

The address reeks of temporary asylum with its amateur abbreviation of *Monsieur* to the understandable but not quite correct *Mons*. This is followed by my father’s full Germanic name: *Edmund Waldstein*. The location is a similar mixture of languages: *Hotel Maison Max*. The street address, *Rue de la Station 40-42-44*, indicates that my parents had chosen a hotel close to the railway, the lifeline of those in flight. Then the French veneer slips off totally as both city and country take on their Teutonic form: *Antwerpen, Belgien*.

Emil acknowledges receipt of a telegram and three letters from us, suggesting that we spent a considerable time in Antwerp. What had kept my parents from boarding the next ship to Canada?

I scrutinize Emil's words in search of clues.

I went to the Canadian Pacific Company today and Mr. Steiner told me that I don't have to make a deposit, but that the boat tickets must be sent from Canada. Because the regulations are changing so frequently, he said to come back in a few days. When I asked him today, he said nothing about a permit, so I must leave all that for you to inquire about the moment you get to Canada. Especially about whether I can emigrate without a deposit of capital and whether I need both the permit and the boat tickets to be sent from over there.

That must be why we stayed in Antwerp. We must have been waiting for Anny and Ludwig to send our entry permit, our boat tickets, and to make a monetary deposit of \$1000 to the Canadian government on our behalf. Mimi told me that because money could not be taken out of Europe, we had arrived in Canada with the equivalent of one dollar.