

My Aunts and Uncles

IT WAS ONLY AFTER I RETURNED from my visit to Germany that I realized how deeply I had been affected by the contact with Tini. Strangely, it was a letter dated September 10, 1998, from her daughter Erni that was the trigger to my feelings.

For three weeks, the letter lay on the kitchen counter. Unopened. Sometimes I moved it to the cupboard, into the box of unpaid bills right next to the “to do” list. Then I would bring it back out to where I could see it. Each time the phone rang, each time I plugged in the kettle, each time I passed through the kitchen, the letter reminded me of everything that I did not want to think about. Sometimes I picked the letter up and held it, noting physical details. The way the stamps seemed to be curling away from the blue airmail paper. The faint grease spots that the paper had absorbed as it wandered from place to place. I held it often, thinking about what it might contain. This I could do. What I could not do was open the letter.

Then came the day, no different from the others, a late January day with thick grey clouds when I knew the time had come. Before I could change

my mind, I seized the bread knife, inserted the long blade under the flap, and slit open the envelope in one quick motion. With trembling fingers, I removed the contents and began to read.

I read almost to the end before a sob broke the morning stillness. The sob was precursor to the tears that I had held back for so long. When at last they abated, I re-read the words that had opened the floodgate.

Perhaps one day we shall walk together in those woods that are our common homeland. I think there is no plural for the word "homeland." Yet for myself, I have decided to have two homelands. I love that sleepy old Bohemia, but these days, I am glad to call Germany my home. For your new homeland, you have chosen what is considered to be the most beautiful metropolis in the world, and Rudi has fetched many illustrated books from the library so that we can have a better sense of Vancouver.

Our roots are entwined but our branches stretch out over separate gardens, and if occasionally a little apple in the form of a thought, a greeting, or a visit falls from your branch into my garden, I shall always rejoice. That you exist is beautiful.

That you exist is beautiful. Words that would bring comfort to any reader. Words that brought particular comfort to me as I sat at my kitchen table, recalling that that I exist only against all the odds.

Why was I wafted across the sea to the safest of all places? What task did the universe lay upon my shoulders like a too short shawl whose design I cannot see? The questions are too big, the mystery too deep. Like a butterfly seeking a floral resting post for its beating wings, so the fluttering heart and darting mind seek momentary repose. There are areas that are safe to think about, others that feel like standing at the edge of a cliff. One misstep and the abyss awaits.



SO VIVIDLY HAD THE TRIP to Germany brought members of my family to life that I sometimes found myself withdrawing from my friends. The missing family members totally absorbed me. I threw myself into the task of deciphering and translating their letters with fresh energy.

Because Tini's description of my father's sister Else had awakened my interest, I began this time with the Urbach letters.

It was July 1939, but my aunt Else seemed to be living on another planet where political events did not intrude.

There are usually visitors here on a Sunday. The children are looking forward to the holidays. Otto wants to go to a student camp for a month and Marianne would like to go away too, because there is nowhere nearby that one can go swimming.

Else's words appeared innocent until I recalled something I had learned long ago: among the first Nazi ordinances had been the banning of Jews from all swimming pools and public bathing areas.

Even as a child, I knew about that ban. From eavesdropping on adult conversations, I also knew that so many Jews had been denied admission to swimming facilities in the Toronto area that some wealthy individual Jews had bought a farm outside the city to establish their own escape from the summer heat. Despite having showered and immersed my feet in the container of disinfectant, I always felt contagious when entering a public swimming pool.

That sense of shame had been reinforced by our first "real Canadian" holiday. I was about 10 years old the summer that my parents loaded up the car, and we drove north to Georgian Bay, Lake Simcoe, and the Muskoka area. It was on that holiday that I saw the posted signs: NO DOGS OR JEWS. Not until 1954, by which time I was in second year university, did Ontario pass fair employment and accomodation legislation that outlawed the advertising of "Gentiles Only" establishments.⁴

It is almost with relief that I turn aside from thoughts of my own past, and bask instead in Else's equanimity. She does not complain. She seems to ask nothing of life beyond what she has been given.

There will be no holidays for us this year. We don't need a holiday. We can sit in the garden if we have time. There is always enough to do: laundry, cleaning, knitting, etc. A week goes by before you know it.

Still, something does not quite ring true. If Else is planning to send both children away for summer holidays, why will she have no time to sit in the garden? Surely not even the most meticulous hausfrau could occupy her entire week with laundry and cleaning! What is it that Else does not say?

I turn to her next letter, written in August 1939, just weeks before the outbreak of war, but this letter is equally placid and bears no trace of anxiety.

My Dears,

Your last, thoroughly descriptive reports really brought enormous pleasure to us all, and we gather that despite all the hard work, you are well and in good spirits. We sincerely hope that it will continue thus for you, and that you will be lucky in all that you undertake.

We are especially pleased that you are in good health and that Helly has adapted so well to the new life. I can imagine that she is everyone's darling, that she will be spoiled and given lots of gifts.

How dearly we would like to see your new home in person and help you just a wee bit with moving in, but unfortunately, we can only do so in spirit. It must be a nice feeling, to watch everything grow and thrive on your very doorstep, things that were sown and planted with your own hands. God grant that your first harvest will turn out as desired!

It really is a stretch of the imagination to picture you, dear Edi, as country squire. Who would have believed it? Amazing, what you have become!

And you too, dear Gretl. Hats off to you for rapidly developing into a farmer's wife! It really seems to be true that one's strength grows along with one's responsibilities.

For the last two weeks, we have been "childless." Marianne is

visiting a friend near Melnik. We visited her there on Sunday. She looks very good, goes dancing twice a week, and has already broken the heart of a butcher and a young apprentice. She is enjoying these few weeks in a village more than summer days in Prague, and everyone is being very nice to her. Otto is in a camp in Vondorf near Budweis. He likes it, and he will visit our dear parents on his way back.

Emil is very pleased that the books arrived, and he will send you something else on raising cattle. I have just finished knitting two little dresses for Dorly, but it is very slow because I have less time than before. Dorly is precious in the truest sense of the word, especially when she isn't wearing panties and is slipping and sliding about in the altogether. Then, we stick her into the washbasin, until everything smells sweet again.

So please continue to be well and be kissed many times by your Else.

Else's urge to make everything smell sweet again touched a chord for me. How often I tell myself to smile though my heart is aching. How often I remind myself that when life has dealt lemons, it is time to make lemonade. Or chicken soup. Knowing the wound is deep, I nonetheless apply band-aids. Sometimes, band-aids are all we have.

Else had a large collection of these. She gave them out freely, to family and friends. She sent them to my parents, in the form of cheerful letters. Her love knew no bounds. Soon, Else sprang to life and became the focus of my thoughts. She became both the person I longed to be and the role model I never had. I envied her warmth, her sensitivity to the needs of others, her ability to make everyone feel welcome and at ease.

THE CONTRAST BETWEEN Else's letters and those of Emil and Martha Fränkel in the summer of 1939 could not be more pronounced. Emil Fränkel gets straight to the point. In June he had already reminded my

father that in troubled times, it is actions and not words that count. According to Emil, my father has failed to act.

Knowing full well that my parents had barely arrived in Canada, penniless and without a word of English, Emil apologizes for having upset my father, but he does not back away. The situation is critical. On his side of the ocean, Emil is doing everything possible to gain admission to Canada, first for my mother's parents and then, for his own little family. Canadian immigration officials have given full discretionary powers to the CPR whose representatives are playing an unsavoury game: holding out hope as they entangle Emil more tightly in paperwork snares.

July 26, 1939

My dear ones,

It really tore me apart to hear that you could use me there while I cannot hasten my emigration. They are making me wait with enormous patience for a response to all the paperwork I have submitted.

I hope you are not angry with me because of my last letter. My whole thrust in life has been toward the future but with a single blow, that future has been cast into the waters. It will soon be a year that I have been stateless here in Prague. I still do not know whether I will be able to reach my goal in the next while. Thus far, I have received no word from the CANADIAN. I went to talk to Mr. Steiner a few days ago. He told me that the completion had not yet happened and that I will have to wait a while yet.

I am already worried about what will happen if I get the okay and I have to come up with the deposit of a thousand dollars that Canada demands. It will be impossible to get dollars here. Dear Edi, it would be a good idea for you to find out whether relatives over there can deposit the money on behalf of the immigrant.

Many friends have permission from the CPR to immigrate but cannot enter because of the currency issue.

I am extremely worried about your parents, dear Gretl. They are still waiting for the exit stamp and not surprisingly, they are

both depressed. I am constantly trying to cheer them up. I almost had all the papers for their lift assembled when I found out yesterday that all the papers have been cancelled.

Why had Max and Resl's papers all been cancelled? Was this some kind of personal retaliation by a bored bureaucrat? Apparently, it was just part of the bureaucratic insanity that had become the norm for the Jews of Prague. Beyond the mountainous task of getting an entry visa lay packages of up to twenty official forms, all to be completed by typewriter to include half a dozen carbon copies. The would-be immigrant would rush off in search of recent passport photos, birth and marriage certificates, character references no more than six weeks old, proof of both citizenship and residency, tax receipts and official Treasury receipts confirming payment of these taxes. He would also prepare lists of assets, some like real estate and jewellery to be surrendered immediately, others like clothing, furniture, household items and books all to be officially appraised and taxed at up to 100% of their value if taken out of the country. The climate of panic and the need for haste were further intensified by residency visas and other documents that could not be renewed upon expiry.⁵

Like my grandparents, Emil himself was only in Prague on a temporary visa. He must have longed to lunge across the desk where Mr. Steiner sat, complacently counselling patience. Steiner would have known that Canadian officials had not issued Emil an entry visa and that they did not intend ever to do so because Canada's policy was to keep Jewish immigration at a minimum. Prime Minister Mackenzie King was obsessed with the notion that the admission of Jewish refugees might destroy the country.⁶

Somehow, Emil does find the patience that Steiner has urged. He uses that patience to learn a trade: shoemaking. Not only is he taking a course, he is also apprenticing with a nearby cobbler who praises his progress.

I puzzle over the riddle of Emil who felt the first tremors of disaster and took up shoemaking as a response. Was Emil like Hamlet, frozen into inaction by his fear of acting impulsively? Some people did escape by routes as distant as Shanghai and South Africa. Some people did get into Palestine despite the British Mandate against Jewish immigration.

Was it his determination to keep the family together and his desire to join us in Canada that blinded him to other possibilities?

MARTHA'S LETTER CAREENS madly between hope and despair. The letter is chaotic, disjointed, and unsettling. One moment Martha is convinced that they will shortly be arriving in Canada, the next, she knows that she is clutching at straws.

My Dear Ones,

On Monday evening, Arnold brought us your last letter. What great and powerful joy reigned in the house! Afterwards, I spent a sleepless night imagining each one of you and mulling over every detail of your report. Emil and I got such a hunger to help you that we longed to sprout wings and fly to you.

What we really regret is that we so depressed you with our last letter. We beg you to excuse us and not to hold it against us. Perhaps you can imagine how desperate we are. There are days when we are totally despondent because there is just no hope at all. So far, we have had no further notification from The Canadian.

May God grant us only the good fortune of coming to you! Work will never be too much for us.

As soon as they get the stamps, your parents are supposed to leave immediately. Emil will look after their lift and their belongings. We hope that the expeditor will also succeed in sending off our own two lifts this week.

Although Ilerl darling is a very quiet little girl, she is so excited now at the prospect of seeing dear Helly again and cannot stop looking at her picture. Write to us soon, dear Helly, if there are nice things that you want us to bring for you.

The fact that Ilerl was so excited at the prospect of seeing me confirms the degree to which Martha and Emil were living in hope. Never would they

have encouraged Ilserl unless they really believed that Canada would open its doors to them.

The rest of Martha's letter rambles in a way that we used to think of as "madness." I think involuntarily of Shakespeare's Ophelia as she walks into the river to drown. Martha wanders about, lost in a maze of topics that lead nowhere. Dorly has just eaten tomato juice with sugar. Friends are thinking of trying to immigrate to Australia. Shall we look for a cheese recipe to bring?



HOW GREAT WOULD HAVE been the excitement on both sides of the Atlantic! Not only were my mother's parents Max and Resl ready for immediate departure, but the Fränkels too. Their bags were packed and they expected to leave for Canada within days.

Martha seems unwilling and unable to end her letter. Having signed off and sent good wishes to all, she then adds a postscript, as if the letter had become a lifeline that she cannot release.

Emil will probably still write this week. Is there still no word for us from cousin Hertha in New York? Where is that American affidavit she promised to send?

A flood of long-forgotten memories washes over me with Martha's reference to Cousin Hertha in New York. I am transported back to the farm where from time to time, a parcel would arrive with special items for me. One parcel contained a brown velvet dress that I do not recall ever having had occasion to wear. Another parcel contained a doll with a china face and a floppy body that failed to evoke my maternal instincts. Both parcels came from Cousin Hertha in New York whose daughter Elaine had outgrown their contents.

However, there were other parcels from Cousin Hertha that opened new worlds for me. These contained books. My first books. I read them voraciously, over and over again. *Pollyanna*. *Nancy Drew*. *The Bobbsey Twins*. In

summer, I retreated with each treasured book to a willow tree down by the brook, a tree whose branches formed a perfect cradle into which I could climb. In winter, I read my books by flashlight under a feather comforter long after my parents had gone to bed.

LESS THAN TWO WEEKS LATER, ON August 8, 1939, the Fränkels again put pen to paper. Martha claims that she wants to thank us for the photos we sent to my mother's parents, but her letter is a cry of despair.

The delays have become interminable. Although my mother's parents have been told that they will be getting their exit visas within days, the Fränkels still have no documentation in hand. Representatives of the CPR in Prague blame it on Ottawa and Ottawa remains mute. No one is responsible.

We think of you again and again. How dearly we would like to help you! Instead, we wait from day to day for news from The Canadian, but we wait in vain. Saturday it will be six weeks since Emil talked to Hornath, the CPR representative in Prague, and we have received no notification.

Arnold told us that ships only cross until mid-October, so we do not know what will happen then. Please do not be angry with us if I ask you to intervene again with Mr. Colley and the CPR in Canada to find out what our situation really is. Even if we gather up all our patience, the matter is still taking too long.

As regards your parents, we hope that they will definitely get the exit stamp next week. Emil spent the whole day with them yesterday and has been getting their things ready for the trip. Three days ago, they set up an exit centre where you have to fill out a pile of paperwork in order to leave with a single suitcase.

Your dear parents and Emil are now making every effort toward the emigration and we hope to God that they will soon be safely in your home. Emil is mustering his whole supply of patience, for you

can imagine what a state your parents are in at having to leave. Still, thousands of people today are happy if they can just get out, so one must not complain. Once they are safely with you, then everything will turn out well again.

Emil went to see Mr. Steiner again. He told him that our case should be moving more quickly in Ottawa.

There are days when we are simply broken. The long indefinite waiting grinds us down. We have experienced so much already that we would have to be made of steel to withstand everything. If only there were some way out.

IN HIS PART OF THE LETTER, Emil moves quickly to serious matters.

My Dear Ones,

This week I was really busy again with your dear parents. Those are the nicest days for me. We got numerous things ready to take on the trip, prepared an inventory listing the value of each item, and filled out twenty different forms per emigrant. The written tasks took almost three days. Papa has submitted all the completed documents to the central office. They say that it takes a week from the day of submission to get permission to depart.

The lift containing your belongings was a lot of work for me at the time, but there is absolutely no comparison to the present difficulties and paperwork.

I have been very worried about your parents, but if all goes well, they will be able to leave in ten days. They are only taking hand luggage and bare necessities for the trip itself—underwear, clothing, and towels.

Caring for my mother's parents has given shape and purpose to Emil's days. Now that Max and Resl are on the verge of leaving, Emil foresees only the endless wait that lies in store for him.

Regarding my own fate, I still have had no word from The Canadian. Last week I talked to Herr Steiner who told me that my emigration to Canada depends on the government in Ottawa. I beg you, dear Edi, to pursue the matter again and to report to us on the situation.

Other than that, the days are all the same, each day slipping into the next one while we constantly hope for a way out. On many days, I lose the hope that, someday, the happy news will come for us too.

