

Imagining

I CANNOT YET REACH FOR THE HANDFUL of post-war letters. I procrastinate instead, allowing my imagination to float to an earlier time. In my head, I create vivid scenes of the family. Mostly, I imagine them at the train station, everyone waving goodbye to us.

“Write often!”

“Don’t forget to take photos!”

“Watch out for snakes and wild animals!”

“Eat as much as you can on the ship! You’ll need strength.”

The sharp whistle of the train cut through the babble of last minute suggestions. A sudden silence fell over the little group huddled on the platform. Tears streaming down her cheeks, Gretl leaned once more out the window, waving wordlessly. At her side, Edi stood woodenly, his arms wrapped tightly around little Helly. Squirming with excitement, she alone seemed happy as the train lurched, then slowly inched forward.

A final chorus of shouts and a single deep-voiced “farewell” floated forward from the platform as the train gathered momentum. Not “goodbye” with its

cheerful hope of early reunion, but “farewell” with the full weight of resignation to a final parting.

“Whose voice had it been?” Edi wondered as he set down the child and took her hand. Had it been his father, the family patriarch whom everyone called Papa Waldstein? Or had it been Gretl’s father, Max Grünhut? Perhaps it was his brother Arnold, the eternal optimist experiencing a rare moment of doubt. More likely, the voice had belonged to one of the two Emils, the brothers-in-law who shared more than the coincidence of their first names.

Emil Urbach was the older man, and the vest of his dark three-piece suit seemed a trifle snug, as befitted the prosperous father of two teenagers. Edi imagined the four Urbachs walking arm in arm along the platform, then stopping by the exit to wait for “the old folks.” The four grandparents would walk more slowly as would Emil and Martha Fränkel with their young family. Martha would be carrying the baby while Emil strolled hand in hand with Iserl. She would be bombarding him with questions.

“Papa, will it be a very big ship? Bigger than the castle on the hill? Papa, is it true that Canada is full of bears? Won’t Helly be scared?”

And finally, the most important question of all, the one he so desperately wished he could answer. “Papa, when will we see them again?”

As Emil lifted his eyes, he saw that the Urbachs had indeed stopped to wait at the exit.

“There’s Uncle Emil and Tante Elsa. Wait with them while I help Mama. Her arms must be getting tired.”

Iserl skipped ahead, and seconds later, she had been scooped up by her cousin Otto Urbach and placed on his shoulders. From her perch, she surveyed the train station. What a giant place it was! Higher than her head, a few pigeons roosted on metal girders, and higher still, beyond the sooty glass roof, grey clouds hovered. Her ears rang with the buzz of voices and the creaking of luggage carts and the hissing of trains waiting impatiently on their tracks.

Just then, she caught sight of her Omi and Opi. They were walking slowly. Opi had given his arm to Helly’s grandmother, Oma Grünhut. Opa Grünhut seemed to be making a speech. His moustache twitched and his arms flayed the air as he spoke. How strange it was to see her grandparents dressed for

travel. They were probably taking the late train to Budweis. Iserl wanted to go with them, but her parents had already said “no” in that strange, tight voice that warned her not to ask again.

Not that it would be the same without Helly there. The grown-ups never seemed to have time for anything these days. Whenever the family got together, all they did was sit around talking politics. Often the talk sounded like an argument, and nobody seemed to be happy anymore.

Maybe this afternoon they could at least go to a park, and if Otto and Marianne came along, they might play hide and seek in the bushes. But lately, even Otto and Marianne seemed different. Just now, Otto had scooped her up onto his shoulders, but he hadn’t even teased her about her curly braids looking like pigs’ tails. Something was very wrong.

Of course, they were all sad that Helly and Uncle Edi and Tante Gretl were leaving, but surely, they would be back, even if it took a long time. Meanwhile, there would be letters from Canada. Iserl could read quite well, and Mama had promised to look for a new school where Iserl could also learn to write. Then she could send letters to Helly, and they would not forget each other, not ever, no matter how long it took until they could see each other again.

Otto reached up and set her down carefully. Iserl pushed back her right braid just as Tante Elsa issued the expected invitation: “Let’s all go back to our house. We can have coffee and Kuchen. The children can play in the garden while we talk. It will make us all feel less lonely if we are together.”

“Great idea” echoed her Emil, smiling as he thought of the ramshackle villa at the edge of town that seemed always to be full of friends and family. How lucky they had been to live there since the hasty sale of their house in the Sudetenland. Remembering those tense days, Emil’s smile faded. Despite the rumours, surely that was all behind them now!

Emil pictured the villa as they had first seen it. The windows had been grey with soot from a nearby factory, and the whole building had smelled dank. The kitchen speckled with mouse droppings had been particularly foul. A decaying broom propped open the pantry door, but the pile of debris had been left to rot in a corner.

Afraid to see disappointment written across Elsa’s dear face, he had uttered the thought that was uppermost in his mind.

“Small wonder they were willing to let Jews live here. No one else would want it.”

To his surprise, Else had reached out a gloved hand and smiled.

“Let’s take it. It has many rooms, and we’ll need the space if we are going to share with the Fränkels. Marianne and Otto could each have their own bedroom, and if we’re lucky enough to find a maid willing to work for Jews, there will be room for her too.”

“But it’s so dirty, so unlike our beautiful house in...”

“Never mind,” she interrupted. “I know how to work. My mother taught us well. Besides, I never expected to marry a rich man.”

“I wasn’t so rich at the beginning. Do you remember how long it took before I dared ask your father for your hand? I never thought he’d let you marry someone who was not yet established.”

“But it was never a problem. I was so totally in love with you that all I could think of was being with you. Besides, Papa would never have denied me anything. Now with the boys, it was another story. Papa was so strict with them. I never thought it would work out, when Edi went back to Strobnitz to help run the store. I was sure his life would be over before he had a chance to live it, and now look at him! He has a wife and a daughter and soon he’ll be in Canada.”

Else’s words took Emil back to that conversation in the cold kitchen just a few months ago. It had come as a shock to Emil when the Nazis had taken, or rather, had been handed the Sudetenland. As far as he could see, Czechs and Germans, Jews and Gentiles had always lived side by side, especially in small towns like Krumlau that had been home for so many years. How had it happened, that his fellow doctors had meekly gone about their business, uttering not a word of protest when Emil had been stripped of his right to practice medicine?

It had seemed sensible to move to Prague where he could at least hang out his shingle. But in only six months, everything had changed. Hitler was now in Prague and the same anti-Jewish regulations had come into effect. Thank goodness, they had taken the old villa, and Elsa had worked her magic to make it a home where family and friends felt welcome. When the Fränkels had arrived from Austria with a babe in arms, there had been room enough for them.

Most of the Jews who had been forced to move had settled near the train station. District 32 of Prague had become the temporary haven of refugees from Pilsen, Marienbad, Karlsbad, and from a host of Czech towns close to the German border. There they huddled within suitcase carrying distance of the trains that they hoped would carry them to safety.

Another voice intruded upon Emil's thoughts. It was his brother-in-law Emil Fränkel, with the baby asleep in his arms.

"We'll need at least two carriages, but it shouldn't be a problem at this time of day. Otto and Marianne can squeeze in with the two sets of grandparents. That will give us a bit of time alone to talk about a few things. I'm worried about Max and Resl. How will they manage now that both daughters have left? Resl still seems pretty frail and Max has no concept of reality. All he does is pray. He really believes that God will look after everything.

"At least he has his faith. That's more than we can say. We are being persecuted for an accident of birth that means very little to either of us."

THERE ARE OTHER SCENES AND CONVERSATIONS that live in my head. Else standing in the doorway of her home in Prague, graciously receiving visitors:

Gently, Else closes the door and reaches for the tray of Brötchen, the little open-faced sandwiches that she had placed on the sideboard. She proffers the tray to her guests as she moves smoothly about the room. Sometimes she stops to listen thoughtfully, her dark head cocked to one side.

She has been stockpiling happy memories and fills the silences with tidbits from better times. Her stories are fragrant flowers grown in her garden, redolent of a world that her guests long to inhale. She invites friends, she invites family, and she invites visitors passing through town. Every Sunday afternoon in Prague, people gather at her table for "Jause." For Kaffee und Kuchen. The coffee is rich and dark, and there are sugar cubes and slender silver tongs on a tray. The tray also holds a bowl of Schlag, the wonderfully sweet whipped cream popular far beyond the confines of Vienna. Else serves Hefenteig, its fresh yeasty smell still lingering faintly, or Apfelstrudel, its tender crust still warm from the oven, or Mürbteig, its buttery crust topped with fresh fruit or a chocolate glaze.

Der Tisch biegt sich. Delicacies abound. In the early days, there are no shortages. Elsa's home is a welcoming place, and the worse things get, the more often people seek comfort in her presence. They enjoy her baking, but mostly, they come to bask in her company. They drink of her good cheer. For brief moments, it is still possible to let food and companionship sweeten the circumstances.

EMIL FRÄNKEL OFTEN intrudes upon my thoughts. His frustration flows like lava over the obstacles in his way:

I must do something. But do what? They keep changing the rules. "Juden raus! Jews, get out!" But where can we go? No country will have us. How can we get out? It's crazy making.

At first, moving in with Martha's sister Else and her family seemed like a good idea. I've joked often enough that it was fated, or why else would my brother-in-law and I have the same first name?

Now my jokes about the two Emils are wearing thin. Besides, humour is not my brother-in-law's strong suit. He has always left the social niceties to Elsa. She is gracious to a fault, but ever since they stripped the Herr Doktor Urbach of the right to practice medicine, our Emil is not an easy man to live with.

True, the apartment is spacious, but it was not built to accommodate eight people. Four Urbachs and four Fränkels. Frictions are inevitable. I know I should count my blessings, but it's hard, especially when Martha seems so frail. All this uncertainty is too much for her, especially following so closely upon a risky pregnancy. She tries to hide her tears from Iserl and from me, but she's a poor actress.

OFTEN, IT IS MARTHA herself who takes centre stage in my thoughts. As she picks up her pen and stares at the blank page, her inner monologue seldom varies:

How can I write when my emotions are so close to the surface? I must not start crying again. It upsets Ilserl to see me in tears. She's such a good little girl. Almost an adult at seven. What a shame that her childhood has been cut so short. But what else could we have done? There have been too many decisions to make, each one more disabling than the last. How can I not weep for all that is lost?

Home in Linz is the past, and I must learn to live in the present. Prague is home now, and yet I feel homeless. I long for the familiar. For the home that Emil and I furnished together. For the nursery that we had painted after Ilserl agreed to move to her first "grown-up" bed. For the hand-embroidered linens that were part of my trousseau. For the cheerful blue and white cups that I used to fill each morning with hot milk and sugar and fresh-brewed coffee. Small things that I miss as much as the friends who used to gather at our table. Will we ever go home again? Is all this lost forever?

Here I sit, writing at a table that is not ours, under a roof that is not ours, in a city that is not ours. Only for my brother Arnold and his wife Vera can Prague be called home. They are the magnet that drew us here, and they have been incredibly kind. They are always so positive, so optimistic about everything. Perhaps it is Arnold's training as an engineer that has given him this reliance on reason. I always fall into an emotional swamp. Vera too has this calm air of being able to cope with whatever life brings. When they are around, I actually believe for a while that my world has not come to an end.

Maybe it is simply easier for Arnold and Vera to be cheerful because they have not experienced flight. My sister Elsa and her husband Emil don't want to live here either, but they had had no choice either when Hitler crossed into the Sudetenland. Things were a little easier when Edi and Gretl and Helly were here. Helly was a godsend, especially when we found out that Ilserl would not be allowed to go to school with other children.

Would things be different if I had not gotten pregnant at the worst possible time? It was just before Hitler's tumultuous welcome to Austria that the doctor confirmed my pregnancy and advised against travel. I cannot bear to remember those months after the Anschluss. All along, Emil had been certain that Austria would invite Hitler to come and fatten the nation's coffers. Emil kept saying that the good citizens of Austria would no more worry about the fate of

a few million Jews than had the Germans. Greed would win the day because people always support politicians who promise to make them rich.

It's hard to feel settled while Emil continues to fret. He sings only one refrain: Somewhere, anywhere. Somewhere far from Europe.

Emil and I have spent hours discussing the options. We don't have many. We worry, especially for the children. At least as the youngest of five siblings, I had the good fortune of growing up loved by everyone. Arnold stepped into the role of the wise older brother ready to advise me at every turn. Sister Elsa has been my little mother since childhood. Smooth, sweet-talking brother Otto taught me how to deflect the discipline Mama often promised but rarely delivered. And until now, dear, soft-hearted Edi has always been there to dry my tears. Will Ilserl and baby Dorly know what it is to grow up surrounded by a loving family?

Poor Dorly! Born at a time of such great turmoil in the world. While the Austrians cheered Hitler as the new saviour, while Hitler ranted about creating an economic miracle by ridding the country of its Jews, I was in labour, giving birth to one more Jewish child. No one cares that our family is not religious. Now they lump all Jews together.

What lies ahead for Dorly? And Ilserl? She was so happy during those months when everyone was in Prague. She and Helly grew as close as sisters. Now Helly has gone to Canada and Ilserl rarely smiles. Emil will not let up on the idea that we must go to Canada too. Perhaps if we can find someone to teach Ilserl English, Canada will not seem so far away.