

Finding Home

*O*NCE AGAIN, ABRUPTLY, THE LETTERS ENDED.

What happened to Arnold? Why were there no more letters from him in the box? True, he had declined my father's invitation to resettle with us in Canada, but why was there no more correspondence? I was nine in 1945, old enough to have remembered the arrival of further letters.

Otto immigrated to Canada a short time after the war, and he lived with us in Hamilton for some months. Then, he entered a business partnership with Ludwig, purchasing a small clothing store with him on Boulevard Saint-Laurent in Montreal. Unfortunately, the partnership came to a sad end and created bad blood between Otto and my father. The years of working side by side with Ludwig on the farm had led my father to respect his brother-in-law deeply. My father probably sided with Ludwig, and the resulting rupture between the two brothers never quite healed. In 1991, thirty-three years after my father's death, we were notified of Otto's death.

The mystery of Arnold could not be easily solved. Rightly or wrongly, I had put aside the post-war letters, unwilling to experience again the

emotions that ripped through me when I first read them. Above all, I had not wanted my mother to re-experience the grief of her own dreadful loss.

And then, my mother's health declined. She did not linger long. On September 30, 1999, as we sat stroking her hands—her beloved granddaughter on one side, I on the other—her breathing became ever more shallow until it stopped.

There was no one left to ask.

MONTHS LATER, IN THE spring of 2000, my friend Rick phoned me from Toronto. “*What are you doing in September? How about meeting me in Prague for a ‘roots’ trip?*” It was the second time that, unknowingly, Rick was to change the course of my life.

The first time had been in November 1992, on a lazy Sunday morning as we sipped coffee in my kitchen in Vancouver. Rick and I share so much history. His mother Mimi was once my Aunt Anny's best friend. When Mimi and Robert bought their first house, it was just a few streets away from our home in Hamilton. I was twelve years old when Rick was born, and proud that Mimi and Robert trusted me as his first babysitter.

As adults, Rick and I have always been able to talk. Somewhere along the line, he began referring to me as his older sister, an honorific title that means much to me. As an only child, I have always yearned for siblings and for an extended family. Anny and Ludwig were all that I had. Unfortunately, Anny and my mother continued to play the game of good sister/bad sister that they had learned as children, thereby making my closeness to Anny an issue of divided loyalties. On the farm, there had always been jealousy and dissension between the two women, with my father and Ludwig alternately playing the role of peacemaker. When my father and then Ludwig died, my mother began to clutch me ever tighter while allowing the unresolved rivalry with her sister to fester.

Rick does have his brother Fred, and their family dynamics are very different. Their father Robert was born in Prague, and he was only seventeen in 1939 when his well-to-do parents heard that there was a Gestapo official

who accepted bribes. Unwilling to risk arrest themselves, Robert's parents sent their only son on a mission to Gestapo headquarters. Riding in the back of the family's chauffeur-driven Daimler, Robert held in his lap a briefcase stuffed with Czech Kronen. The rumour had been correct, and he returned with exit visas in the now empty briefcase.

Robert never quite forgave his parents for making him the guinea pig. Family tensions were only exacerbated when Robert dropped out of university to marry Mimi, a struggling immigrant some ten years his senior. Neither her intelligence nor her charm could ever thaw the ice of her in-laws.

Now, Rick struggled to understand his father just as I was striving to connect with my mother. At some level, they were unreachable. As we refilled our coffee cups, Rick wondered aloud whether our general sense of disconnection with the world might have something to do with our backgrounds. Despite having many friends, neither of us feels that we belong. We are always on the outside looking in, and we are both prone to a real but nameless discomfort.

Still, I was taken aback by Rick's question: "*Helen, do you think that what our parents experienced in Europe has affected us?*"

In retrospect, Rick's question seems naïve. What is astounding, however, is that neither of us had ever asked ourselves that question. Our parents' silence about certain years of their life had been so total and their reluctance to talk about the past so manifest that it simply had not occurred to either of us that we'd been shaped by matters of which we knew very little.

Rick's question reminded me of an announcement in a Jewish newspaper passed to me by a neighbour. She had said, "*I know that you're not religious, but sometimes this paper has interesting articles.*" And indeed, the words *Second Generation Holocaust Survivor* had caught my eye.

It was a concept I'd never thought about. In my world, there were "survivors," but I had seen no reason to draw a line connecting these emaciated-looking people with haunted eyes and tattooed numbers on their arms to my parents. Indeed, both Mimi and my mother had always insisted that because we came to Canada, we had escaped "it," as the Holocaust was called in the early post-war years before it was given a

name. Indeed, I never heard either my parents or Mimi use any word but “it” for the experience of Dachau, Auschwitz, Treblinka, and all the other concentration camps.

Still, at a gut level, I felt that much had been passed on to us, if only in the form of unspoken fears, nameless enemies, and shadowy threats to our very existence. I searched through the pile of papers in the recycling box and found the notice about the conference to begin Sunday at 11 a.m. It was now 10:30.

In a flash, Rick and I had our coats on, were out the door and across town just as the keynote speaker was introduced. Her name, Helen Epstein, with its echoing tones of my pre-marital Helen Waldstein, spoke to me. So did her words and those of many workshop participants we met that afternoon. We spoke of our common experiences: the larger than life shadows cast by the silence imposed upon the past; the importance of being a *good* child who does not upset parents by asking, let alone doing the wrong thing; the need from an early age to parent our parents, and protect them in a world whose language and customs they never quite mastered.

One of the people I met that afternoon was a rather unprepossessing chap with the crumbs of lunch still clinging to his greyish beard. He introduced himself as Yitzhak, a rabbi who was starting a local group of “second generation survivors.” So much had resonated for me at the conference that I agreed to attend at least one meeting. And so began my journey of return.

YITZHAK WAS THEN RABBI of a small Jewish community in Vancouver called Or Shalom. He explained that the Hebrew words are typically translated as “the light of peace” but that the word *Shalom* also means wholeness. Perhaps peace and wholeness are the same, for as I began to integrate the bits of my life into a coherent whole, I felt wrapped in a greater peace than I had ever known.

Out of curiosity, one Saturday morning I went to the living room of the

rented house where Or Shalom held its weekly service. The service itself seemed, if not actually alien, then certainly odd and unfamiliar.

I had attended Sunday school in the United Church of Canada. I attended because my parents had wanted me to have some knowledge of religion, because our next-door neighbours were willing to take me to church every Sunday, and because my parents had wanted to protect me from the centuries-old hatred that had destroyed their own lives.

I brought home and treasured the pamphlets given to me at Sunday school. They showed a blond, blue-eyed Christ healing the lepers, blessing children, and riding a donkey on the way to Jerusalem. Later, when we moved from the farm to the city, I again found myself in the United Church, home to Canadian Girls in Training. I proudly wore the CGIT white blouse, dark tie, and assorted badges of achievement.

I was ten years old when my parents became members of the Jewish Reform congregation whose services they had attended for the High Holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Much as he loved my mother, my father was reluctant to attend services. He deemed twice a year to be more than enough religion.

It was mostly an awareness of the passing years that triggered official synagogue membership. As my mother put it, *“We have to belong somewhere. If we don’t belong, they won’t bury us if, God forbid, ‘something’ should happen. I don’t like the idea of worms eating my body, but it is better than the alternative.”* That was as close as my mother could come to stating that given how her parents had died, cremation was out of the question.

My father always insisted that being a decent person is what matters above all. In Europe, his family had known that they were Jewish because it said so on their birth certificate, just as it does on mine. No one in my father’s family had ever paid much attention to religion. They ate pork roast and sausages along with their neighbours and attended the same village school. It was a precursor of my own experience in Canada except that here it was bologna and hot dogs.

That Saturday morning at Or Shalom introduced me to another world. From those long ago High Holiday services I attended as a child, I remembered only one prayer: *Shema Ysrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad*, the

age-old affirmation that there is but one God. What moved me deeply at Or Shalom was the music. On the farm, my favourite song had been “Jesus loves me, this I know.” Later, I had often sung “Rock of Ages.” Now, the Jewish melodies awakened something deep within me.

One song in particular thawed my frozen heart. “*Barchu*. Dear One. *Shechinah*. Holy Name. When I call on the light of my soul, I come home.” I wept from the moment the voices of the congregation rose until after they faded away. As the silent tears rolled down my cheeks, I knew that I had indeed come home.

Something changed for me that day. I’m reluctant to call myself “religious” or even “spiritual.” There are days when I still question the existence of a personal God and even more days when I wrestle with the validity of biblical passages and their traditional interpretation. Nonetheless, there has been a major shift in how I think and feel and experience the world. At the very least, I have peeled off a layer of the onion and reached a millimetre closer to knowing the core of my own being.



WHEN I BROUGHT MY mother to Vancouver to spend her last years with me, she too had a sense of coming home and asked to be buried in the Jewish cemetery here.

At her funeral, sadness flowed from Jew and non-Jew, from believer and non-believer. For me, there was something quintessentially Canadian that emerged: the best of a world still to be brought fully to fruition.

Integrating my own world and that of my family into contemporary Canadian awareness is another facet of coming home. My Canada is both a world of smug citizens and a land of diverse peoples who acknowledge their separate ways of being and perceiving. It is a land that means well, but has done harm to many groups. Still, what characterizes my Canada is its willingness to learn from the past.

I needed to face my own past. The time had come. I would start with a visit to my place of birth. A year after my mother’s death, I returned to Europe.