

# *Epilogue*

*I*N WRITING THIS MEMOIR, I HAVE RARELY allowed myself to think about the Holocaust. I have been to Yad Vashem in Israel and I have visited the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. I have chosen not to visit Auschwitz. Still, sometimes I think about the unthinkable.

Even with conveyor belts, it could not have been easy to move thousands upon thousands of dead bodies from the gas chambers into the ovens. I remember watching a baker in Germany push loaves into a brick oven with a long paddle. Did pushing corpses into the ovens become as routine as baking bread?

Did they wear aprons, those men who gave each corpse its final push into the oven? Did they wear gloves? Were their faces covered with masks to protect them from lingering traces of gas? Who were these men who saw, but did not speak? Were they ordinary townsfolk, eager for well-paid work? Or were they Jews whose only choice was between inhumanity and death?

I think again of my grandfather Josef who had remained cheerful in Theresienstadt, determined to help others with a reassuring hand on troubled shoulders. I imagine him struggling to hold his head high as he

entered the gates of Auschwitz. I visualize the living hell that led him to his own truth: *"I cannot live with what I see."* Compassion for his fellow humans led him to stop eating even the bits of mouldy bread and watery soup. Sorrowfully but consciously, he said farewell to a beloved son and to this world.

Yet no matter how noble my grandfather's death, it did nothing to halt the German juggernaut. Until I found Arnold's letter, that death was both meaningless and anonymous. Josef was but one of six million, each one no more than a number. Like the Germans, I too had lost sight of the individuality of each of those numbers.

Is it humanly possible to imagine six million individuals? I see them like candles flickering on a giant birthday cake, all blown out with a single breath of human hatred.

Like a child with a tattered security blanket, I drag the past behind me. It threatens to trip me up, this long strip of cloth woven together so long ago. Still, I cannot lay it down. Not yet. Its usefulness will only come to an end when that past is turned into a meaningful present.

---

ON FEBRUARY 14, 2005, I said the Mourners' Kaddish for Emil.

*Yitgadal ve-yitkadash sh'mei raba b'alma di v'ra khirutei.*

Traditionally, the ancient Aramaic words are spoken by a son. There is no son, there are no daughters, nor are there brothers or sisters. There is no one but me.

*V'amlich malchutei b'hayeikhon u v'yomeikhon u v'haye d'khol beit yisrael.*

I sought comfort in the wailing words intoned by Jews in every land for thousands of years.

*Ba agala u viz'man kariv, v'imru amen.*

Moments later, someone touched my arm. A gentle voice spoke.

*"I saw you standing among the mourners. I saw you struggle with your grief. Have you just lost someone close to you?"*

*"The man to whom I owe my life."*

*“Your father? I am so sorry. When did he die?”*

*“Not my father. This man died in 1945.”*

Silence greeted my words. I remained lost in my inner world of lamentation. A hand softly stroked my arm until slowly, with thoughts and words still intertwined, I began to tell my story:

Today I mourn an uncle by marriage. Emil Fränkel. I need to speak his name because no has done so. I do not remember him, for I was too young to retain conscious memory. Single-handedly, he pushed us out of Europe in 1939 and he refused to let us look back, lest we turn to pillars of grief at so many loved ones left behind.

As the nations of the world slammed shut their doors to give Hitler tacit permission to do as he pleased with the Jews of Europe, as leaders and conference delegates basked in the luxury of Evian and the warm sunshine of Bermuda, listening to Britain express fear that the Nazis might change from a policy of “extermination” to one of “extrusion,” Emil scrambled to keep his family from the crowded box cars headed for the concentration camps.

It is so easy just to blame the Nazis, or even just to blame Hitler. Yet at some level, the slaughter of Emil and his family required the complicity or at least the silence of countries and individuals everywhere. The Canadian government was scrupulous about conducting polls to ensure its anti-immigration policies reflected the wishes of the people.

In Europe, ordinary people cooperated in myriad ways. Many saw it as the practical way to get ahead economically. Some cooperated because they were afraid to say “no.” The Danes said “no” and because they refused to identify or surrender their own citizens, only 500 Danish Jews were transported and only 51 of them died. Over 7200 Jews were smuggled in boats to safety by Danish volunteers.<sup>11</sup> Yet elsewhere, Europeans were jumping on the Nazi bandwagon. Not just Germans but Czechs, Austrians, Poles, Hungarians, and even the French.

Today, everyone who lived through the war claims to have been either a freedom fighter or an angel who hid Jews in the attic. Perhaps it was indeed one of these unsung angels who helped the Fränkels elude the hunters.

While others were quickly snared in the Nazi net, it was not until March

6, 1943 that the Fränkels were shipped to their first concentration camp. Theresienstadt. Teresin, as it is now called by those who seek to destroy the memory of the German imprint upon their soul.

The records I photocopied in Prague had been carefully kept. Four sequential numbers: 60114, 60115, 60116, 60117. First Emil, then Dorothea and Ilse, and finally Martha. The parents' numbers seemed like two book-ends, seeking to enclose and protect the children. Together these four people walked through the gates whose chilling inscription still stands: ARBEIT MACHT FREI.

When I visited Theresienstadt, I had to force myself to place one foot in front of the other in order to walk through the archway bearing those mocking words. Like a mantra, I kept repeating, "*Theresienstadt was a good camp, Theresienstadt was a good camp.*"

Theresienstadt had no gas chambers disguised as showers. Its crematorium was only for the thousands who died of hunger, dysentery, and disease. Like my grandmothers Fanny and Resl.

*Y'hei sh'mei raba m'varakh l'alam u l'almei almaya.*

For more than twenty months, the Fränkels survived in Theresienstadt. I do not know how this was possible. I do not know how Martha kept insanity at bay. Though I had nothing to fear, my body shuddered when I entered the dank barracks. My eyes froze as they encountered splintered boards and unidentifiable remnants of metal instruments. I longed to run full pelt from the suffocating stillness of windowless tunnels in the underground warren.

I have read much about Theresienstadt. I have read very little about the Fränkels' next destination. Those books, I cannot bring myself to open.

On October 19, 1944, still bearing identification numbers 60114 to 60117, the Fränkels were shipped to Auschwitz.

I cannot bear to read the books. So many images are already burned into my brain. Piles of glasses and children's shoes in the barracks named "Canada," the land of plenty. Emaciated skeletons too weak to emerge from their tiered bunks as the liberators stare in stunned silence. The two line-ups, those still capable of work directed to the right, women and children, the old and the sick to the left. Emil would have been forced to watch

USTŘEDNÍ KARTOTÉKA — TRANSPORTY.	
R. z. <u>9207</u>	
<u>Fränkelová Dorota</u>	
Rodná data: <u>10.7.1938</u>	
Adresa před deportací: <u>PRAHA XII. Korunní 53</u>	
<u>1. transport</u>	<u>2. transport</u>
dne: <u>6 III. 1943</u>	dne: <u>19.10. 1944</u>
<u>Cv</u>	číslo: <u>ES - 1432</u>
<u>364</u>	do: <u>Osvětim</u>

This transport card for Dorly Fränkel shows her date of birth and last address, as well as the date on which she was shipped to Auschwitz (Osvetim). How is it possible that Emil and Martha kept Dorly and Ilserl alive until November, 1944?

Martha take that final walk, Dorothea in her arms and Ilserl holding her hand. Did he let himself realize that it was their final walk? The smell of burning flesh from the crematoria enveloped Auschwitz.

No death date is given for Martha, Dorothea, and Ilse. They would have removed their clothing, and then gone straight into the chamber where the Zyklon B gas entered through the nozzle in the ceiling. Death would not have been instantaneous. The claw marks in the walls of those who tried frantically to escape bear mute testimony to the agony of those final moments.

For Emil, there is a place and a date of death. The place of death is Dachau. At first, I thought it must be a mistake. Auschwitz was in the dreaded East, in Poland. Dachau is back in Germany, not far from Munich, the happy, beer-loving Bavarian capital. The date was February 14, 1945.

The day of roses and chocolate hearts has taken on a different meaning for me. No one has been able to tell me why Emil was shipped to Dachau. It is possible that Auschwitz simply could not handle all the numbers waiting to be gassed. It may also have run out of Jews still capable of dragging corpses to the ovens. Fear of the Russian advance led the Germans to expedite the killing in every possible way before it was too late, including transports to other concentration camps and long death marches away from the Eastern front.<sup>12</sup>

1945. *Emil almost survived. In the end, did he succumb to exhaustion, heartbreak, and disease? Or did they have to kill him because with nothing left to lose, he defied his captors until the last?*

---

THE HAND CONTINUED TO stroke my arm as tears seeped beneath my eyelids.

No one had said Kaddish for Emil Fränkel. My parents had said Kaddish for their parents and I had said Kaddish for my parents. For Emil, there had been no one left.

Not until I read the letters. And now, there is no going back. Where forward is, I am still not sure.

*Yitgadal ve-yitkadash sh'mei raba...*

---

SOMETIMES LIFE FEELS stranger than fiction. While visiting Cham, my mother's hometown in Germany, I met Max Weissglas, the man known there as "the only Jew in town." Seven years later, I received a phone call from his wife Melanie informing me that her beloved Max had died. I expressed my condolences and thanked her for letting me know.

Many months later, I received a puzzling envelope covered in Greek stamps. I opened it to find the following letter.

*Makrygialos, 13.2.06*

*Dear Mrs. Helen!*

*I am writing to an unknown woman who was born under the same star.*

*I am slowly awakening from unconsciousness following the loss of my dearly beloved father Max. I know that you held him in high esteem and the reverse was also true. He often told me so. There was something very spiritual that connected my father and me, something that cannot be expressed in the best of words. He has died, but he is not dead. That gives me the strength to believe in life.*

*As you know, I have been living for some time in a Greek fishing village 50 km south of Thessaloniki. I chose my husband quite deliberately for being a non-German and left Germany. Since you are a highly intelligent woman, I need not explain to you the whys and wherefores.*

*Our daughter, now 17, is totally and from the bottom of her heart a Jew. Not in terms of belief but in terms of values and attitude. She looks a lot like her beloved grandfather and he adored her. She (Rebecca) will graduate from high school next year and we are very proud.*

*These have been important and unimportant lines from a German-Jewish-Greek heart.*

*If you like, starting this summer, we will be getting an Internet connection. In the meantime, I would love to get a handwritten letter from you.*

*You are embraced and thought of by  
Your Sonja Weissglas-Zampas from Greece.*

I was of course flattered that someone I had met so briefly had thought so highly of me. While Max had made a deep impression on me, I had not thought to be able to offer much to a man who had seen the inferno and been scorched by its flames.



Standing with Max, the man locals refer to as “the only Jew in town,”  
in front of the former cemetery of the Jewish community,  
an impenetrable fortress with a locked gate to prevent desecration

At the same time, I understood his daughter’s need to reach out to anyone who might help her deal with the loss of a beloved parent. Still, there was something about the letter that continued to puzzle me. Surely Max and Melanie had other friends who knew him better, and surely he had told me little that Melanie herself did not know.

One day, as I struggled to formulate my thoughts before setting them down in German, a light went on. I am Sonja’s only connection to her Jewish roots. Like so many others who rejected God for standing by while the Nazis exterminated those who had sung His praises, Max had rejected all Jewish ties after his experience in the concentration camps. He wanted nothing more to do with religion.

Sonja had been raised with absolutely no connection to anyone or anything Jewish. Her mother Melanie is not Jewish, and all other Jews in her hometown had vanished. The handful who survived the concentration camps chose not to return to Germany.

Sonja had never met another Jew. I am her only thread to a vanished tradition.

Or almost. In her seventeen year-old daughter Rebecca, Sonja claims to see a Jewish soul reborn. What does Sonja know of the Jewish soul? Why did she name her daughter after the great Jewish matriarch? Why does Sonja claim that this child, born and raised fifty kilometres from Thessaloniki has a Jewish heart? What can Sonja know of these matters, and more importantly, why does she care?

Tentatively, I ask a friend. He tells me *“her soul is stirring, that in her father, she has lost an anchor, a wise one who kept her grounded.”* He advises me to share my memories of her father, but to tell her also of my own struggle to find my roots.

And so it has begun, this new dialogue between strangers who have not met. Two women of different generations living on different continents who each sought refuge, the one in a Greek fishing village, the other in urban Canadian anonymity. Two women raised in the safest of places and in the safest of times, yet linked by the shadow of the past. We exchange letters and emails. She shares with me the major events in her life, and I rejoice when Rebecca is admitted to the university or when Melanie writes that she will be going to Greece to be with Sonja. At Rosh Hashanah, I describe to Sonja the sound of the Shofar, the ram’s horn that seems to shake my very soul. I tell her that we dip apples in honey to symbolize a sweet New Year and I explain why we fast on Yom Kippur.

I catch myself using the “we” word and realize with a shock that I now identify as a Jew.

---

*Der Apfel fällt nicht weit vom Baum.* When an apple falls, it lands near the tree.

I ponder these words as I look back across the span of years. Even though I was not raised a traditional Jew, I always knew of my Jewishness. Now it is my adult children who say the same. What I did not have was not mine to give. And yet, there is much that was transmitted to me that I have passed on, often in surprising ways.

A remarkable sensitivity to minority rights has surfaced in both of my daughters. Each of them has chosen to balance the scales of injustice in her own special way. Each also shares my abiding gratitude for life and its richness. Only recently did I learn that this is a hallmark of Jewishness. From the moment of waking, our tradition teaches us to give thanks for a heart that beats, for lungs that breathe, for plumbing that works, and for all that is not ours to control.

I have learned so much since I first opened my father's box of letters, I am also putting down roots that draw ever more strongly upon the nutrients of Judaism.

In 2007, for the first time ever, I ventured to hold a Passover Seder in my own home. My parents had never held a Seder. Perhaps it would only have reminded them of all the family members absent from the table. When my daughters were little, my tradition had been to send them on a treasure hunt for Easter eggs. Now, I was inviting them to a lengthy ritual that encompassed retelling the story of our liberation from slavery in ancient Egypt.

To my great delight, they accepted the invitation for themselves and for their partners who each graciously donned a skullcap for the ceremonial evening. Despite the ultra-abbreviated compilation that replaced reading a lengthy traditional Haggadah, it was *My First Passover*, a small hardboard book purchased for my year-old twin grandsons that became prime reading for the adults in my family.

In many ways, perhaps we are all operating at the level of understanding of a year-old child. Once upon a time, especially in my teens and early twenties, I thought I knew so much. Life has been a long process of realizing how little I know, and how shallow are the roots of my strongest opinions.

My life journey feels different now. I do think that at the very least, I am moving in the right direction. Life feels effortless and sometimes it even feels joyful now that I am no longer paddling against the current.

Somehow, alongside of my Jewishness, they live on in me, those family members whose lives were so prematurely interrupted. I have inherited

something of their essence along with their stories. They flow through me, and to some degree, they shape me.

Perhaps that has been the lesson learned, this opening of the channels. Perhaps now, the healing waters can flow through me to lap at new shores. I know that this year, when I looked across the table at my twin grandsons dipping slices of apple into a bowl of honey, a tear fell upon my mother's white tablecloth.

