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Canada

Searching

Milly Charon

A Thesis

in

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of

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ABSTRACT

Searching

Milly Charon

Searching is a collection of short fiction based on true events. Each story has a different geographical setting and different central characters. Spanning a period of over forty years of this century, the stories are linked thematically by two common elements--the search, and individual destiny. Many of the characters in the stories have only the slenderest clues to help them uncover missing portions of their lives. Their need to search is often obsessive, but necessary in order to find roots in a rootless and ruthless society.

Presented in simple, direct language, the stories employ conventional narrative techniques. The point of view varies from third person omniscient and limited omniscient to first-person narrative. The element of the unexpected plays a significant part in each tale.

Searching is about determined people who persist and persevere. The stories present an insight into the remorseless, indifferent and even horrifying aspects of the human condition, but also touch on the more hopeful themes of dedication, survival and love.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This collection of fictionalized stories based on true events does not follow the standard short story form. The stories have been culled from various sources--newspaper clippings, magazine articles, casual conversations and real-life encounters--to retain a degree of casualness, reportage and colloquialness. However, each incident has been reinforced by research and altered, where necessary, to give it the significance of art.

I am indebted to a number of people too numerous to list. A chance remark from Henry Dugas, whose ancestors had been deported from Acadia to Louisiana, suggested the story of "The Journal". In 1970 Rabbi Allan Langner used the bare details of "A City Divided" in a sermon at Beth-El Synagogue in Montreal. I arranged to have the story reprinted in The Jewish Digest the same year.

"The Cemetery" originated with an Associated Press, London, article reprinted in the Montreal Gazette on August 28, 1985. Additional material came from The Precious Legacy, edited by David Altshuler, (Summit Books, New York), 1983. An article in the May, 1949 issue of Reader's Digest was the source for "The Brooklyn Subway". "Searching for Peace" was based on a "true confession", and "Bingen on the Rhine" was the result of a 1978 Australian trip I took of special significance. "Boxcars" and "The Golden Cross" were suggested by personal experiences in my childhood.

To avoid any embarrassment to any person living or dead, the names in the stories have been changed.

Nothing of itself will come
But we must still be seeking.

. William Wordsworth

CONTENTS

The Train

I could tell you stories you wouldn't believe. Do you want a story? I'll tell you a good one. One of my friends, a very quiet and shy person, told me this one. I knew him for a long time before he could talk about it, so I'm sure he must have been affected by it even though he was born in Canada and didn't know what it was like to live through a war. It happened to his grandfather and grand-uncle. His father heard it from his father and then passed it on to his son, my friend.

It begins during the early years of the Second World War in Poland, when the Nazis were rounding up Jews, street by street, ghetto by ghetto, city by city, and shipping them by train to the concentration camps. Lodz had a large Jewish population, and the trainloads kept moving westward to Dachau and Bergen-Belsen and southward to Auschwitz with their terrified human cargo.

Berel and Yitzhak Goldstein were seventeen and nineteen respectively at the time. They came from a large Jewish family in Lodz and had been separated from their parents and siblings. The Germans had picked them up with a number of others while they were attending a meeting to plan an escape to Palestine. Within a short time, they were dispatched--

shabby, hungry, unwashed and unshaven--with other Jews on a train for Dachau in Germany.

The windows were locked, and two crossed pieces of wood had been nailed across to prevent anyone from breaking the glass and jumping from the train. The passengers were packed into old decrepit passenger coaches, and at each end in the narrow passage between cars, stood a soldier with a sub-machine gun.

Berel and Yitzhak had been very close all their lives. Yitzhak, the older, had always felt responsible for his brother. From early childhood on he had watched over Berel, guided him, and helped him in every way. But now they were both trapped in a situation from which there seemed no escape. They knew they were going to their deaths, even though they had been told they were to work in labour camps for the glorious Third Reich.

"Berel, we have to get out of here," Yitzhak told his brother. "They are going to kill us."

"I know, but how? There are guards on either end, and we can't get out of the windows. They're locked and boarded up, and we're going too fast to jump."

"Berel, we've been along this track before. This is how we'll do it. Do you remember that summer we went to visit Auntie Rivka in Germany? Do you remember that long tunnel that takes about five minutes to get through? We have to

work om the windows before we get there. It will be a few hours before we get to the tunnel, and it will be dark when we reach it. The lights will be dimmed on the train at night, and it will be hard for the guards to see too much. We have to jump before the tunnel. Once the train enters it, the guards won't be able to do anything until the train comes out on the other side. The delay will give us enough time to get as far from the railway line as possible. Anyway, I don't think they'll know we're missing with so many people crammed in here. Take your blanket and pull it over your head as if you are trying to sleep. Turn sideways and use your right hand. I'll work on the window from my side, and you from yours. Use your belt buckle, or whatever you have, to pry up the window. Once we have it open a few inches, slip your hand through and push at the board to force the nails away. They'll give."

It took a few hours, but somehow they managed to raise the window slightly and apply enough pressure on the wooden boards to release the nails. One good shove would be enough to allow them space to get out. It was tedious and dangerous work. Once a guard decided to walk down the aisle to talk to the soldier at the other end of the car. Berel hastily pushed the window down as the soldier approached.

Yitzhak whispered that it would be perfect if the two guards could be occupied this way when it came time to jump.

They wouldn't notice anything until it was too late. Berel was the one to notice the sign flash by, indicating the tunnel was six kilometres ahead.

"Now," whispered Yitzhak. "You go first and I'll follow."

Berel turned white. "I can't. I'm afraid. The train is going too fast."

"It slows before it reaches the tunnel. Get ready."

"No, I can't."

"Then I'll go first, and you follow. Slide through like a snake and twist into a ball when you are almost through. Roll when you hit the ground and keep rolling until you are away from the train."

"Okay, I'll do it."

As the train began to brake a kilometre before the tunnel, Yitzhak slithered through the window. He hung on bumping against the side of the train, then pushed off, curling himself into a ball. He hit the enbankment and rolled down the slope. He remained in hiding in the tall grass to give his brother time to escape from the carriage farther up the line. When the train had passed, he stayed in the grass for another fifteen minutes before he dared to move. He slithered his way forward, keeping the railway tracks in sight, and followed the line to where he expected his brothere to be waiting for him. And he kept going...and going.

There was no sign of Berel. He became uneasy, then panicky. Berel must have been seen! He's been caught and shot! That's what they did to escapers. My God, he's dead! Yitzhak imagined all kinds of horrors. For hours he ranged up and down the track, a mile up and a mile down, looking for his brother. Overhead the moon played hide-and-go-seek with ragged clouds, giving him periods of brightness and then blanketing the countryside in total darkness. He stumbled and fell a number of times. Once, when he tumbled into a ditch, he fell on his arm and wrenched it. He remained where he ~~lay~~ as his anguish burst over him.

He's dead. I must say prayers for him. I must. "Yisgahdal v'yiskahdash shmay rahboh. . . .'" he mumbled. His voice broke. The tears ran down his cheeks and his body shook with wrenching sobs. "Berel, Berel, it should have been me, not you. I should have pushed you out first and not listened to you," he whispered.

Finally he climbed out of the ditch and crept toward a stand of trees, looking for a place to hide. He knew it would not be wise to remain near the track. The Germans would send soldiers back with dogs to look for him after his escape was discovered. The train would stop at the next station, and they would send messages out alerting the patrols. In a short time they would be out hunting for him.

He stumbled deeper into the woods. He heard rustling

sounds around him and little animal noises. Once shining eyes peered back at him as he blundered into a clump of bushes. He turned and ran. Finally he climbed a tree and wedged himself into the angle between the trunk and a thick branch. Removing his belt from his trousers, he wound it around his arm and the tree limb so he would not fall if he dozed off to sleep. He thought there might be wolves in the woods. He shifted restlessly for a long time, trying to find a comfortable position. Every little while he would break into tears as he remembered his brother. He thought about their youth, their growing up together. It was agony thinking about the past.

Finally a broken sleep overtook him, but his subconscious would not give in. Nightmares tormented him. Berel was in all of them...always out of reach. Berel was caught in a fast-flowing river, grasping a root protruding from the bank. Just as Yitzhak reached to grab him, the root broke and Berel was swept away....Berel was hanging from a cliff, his hands clutching a stunted tree. Just as Yitzhak lowered the rope to pull him to safety, the tree broke loose, and Berel fell a thousand feet to his death....

Yitzhak awoke in a cold sweat, his clothes drenched. He sneezed. A heavy dew had fallen, and it was damp and cold. He rubbed his hands and arms, trying to get some warmth back into them. In the east the faint light on the

horizon warned him that daylight was coming.

I have to get out of here. They must not find me. There has to be a town not too far off. I'll head westward. He unwound the belt from his numbed arm and replaced it on his trousers. Then he slowly climbed down the tree, his cramped limbs making it difficult to move. He was thirsty and hungry, and felt lightheaded. His throat was raw, and he suspected he was coming down with some kind of illness. He was certain he had a fever. He started walking, picking his way carefully through the woods. He was sure he had walked for miles. It was getting more and more difficult. He found himself stumbling and falling. Chills shook his body, and his feet felt like lead.

The sky was getting lighter when he stumbled out of the woods into the outskirts of a town. Somewhere he heard dogs barking. He knew he had to be careful to avoid them. He skirted what appeared to be a main street and chose a narrow, cobbled street to enter the town. He moved slowly, walking close to buildings so he could dart into a doorway if someone should appear. He listened. No one seemed to be stirring, but he could hear the sounds of a cart rumbling through a street a short distance away. The horse's hoofs clip-clopped on the stones. He pushed cautiously forward.

Suddenly he froze. He could hear the tramp of booted feet and then a sharp command in German. The sound seemed

to be coming right toward him. He didn't know in which direction to run. A few feet away was an alley, with doors opening onto it. He darted into the alley, trying to make as little noise as possible. He could hear the sound of marching feet more clearly now. At the other end of the alley was a high wall. He couldn't get out that way.

Yitzhak panicked. He decided to take a chance--a chance that could very well cost him his life. He was trapped. There was no choice. He ran to one of the doors and knocked urgently on it. After what seemed an eternity, it opened a crack and a middle-aged man peered out. He didn't seem shocked to see Yitzhak. Instead, he pulled him in and bolted the door. Yitzhak told him in German that he had to hide or the Nazis would kill him.

The man nodded and whispered, "Bitte, wollen sie herein zu kommen?" And he turned and led Yitzhak down a long, dark passage to the kitchen. The shutters were drawn, and a single oil-lamp cast dark shadows on the walls. Seated at a table hidden in an alcove in a corner of the room was a man, barely visible until Yitzhak's eyes adjusted to the gloom. The man turned and looked up, and Yitzhak's heart gave a mighty thump against his ribs. "Berel, Berel," he whispered. "I thought you were dead? How did you get here?" And he burst into tears.

Berel rushed to his brother and threw his arms around

him. "I know I was a coward making you go first, but I knew I couldn't be without you for long. I jumped off the train just as it emerged from the tunnel. It was still going at half-speed, and I had to backtrack and come around to where you had jumped. I spent the night in some woods, but I heard rustling all around me and imagined all kinds of dangers. I remained hidden, and before dawn I started hiking toward the town, hoping to find food and a place to hide. I almost blundered into that German patrol outside and ran in here. This man was kind enough to take me in. And you?"

"I looked for you for hours. We were probably quite close to each other in the dark. How long have you been here?"

"About half-an-hour."

"Can you imagine the luck that brought us both to the same place within such a short time?" Yitzhak marveled.

"We could have been searching for one another for years. Or not searched, each believing the other was dead. It is uncanny how we found each other this way."

"Listen, Berel, we have to make plans. When it gets dark tonight we leave. And this time we make sure we don't get separated. We have to find a way to get to Palestine. Come sit down. Our host has some bread and chicory coffee for us. You must be very hungry."

What do you think of that story? And you know, those two kept moving, escaping across borders until they reached Palestine. After some years they came to Canada where they married women who were sisters in a double wedding. Each was godfather to the other's first-born son. Berel and Yitzhak went into business together and bought homes beside each other. That vow they made in 1940 in that dimly lit kitchen in a small town in Germany was kept throughout their lives, and they made arrangements to keep it in death. The brothers bought a family plot in a cemetery and arranged to be buried beside one another.

Oh, they're still alive...in their sixties...and still active. Their grandchildren listen to their stories of the war and their escapades in Europe and Palestine with a wonder bordering on awe. My friend told me those two are a pair of heroes whose deeds should have been recognized years ago. I wish I could write well enough to record their history.

A City Divided

"Take a look! Come here quick!" Bayla Pechat commanded her husband. Hairbrush in one hand, she pulled aside the curtain on the bedroom window in their small flat in Jerusalem. "Those two are going out together again. Imagine their nerve being seen together in our Holy City!"

"Busybody," muttered Borach under his breath. Seated at the kitchen table, a cup of hot coffee at his elbow, he had been reading the morning paper. Two more terrorist attacks on the border near Lebanon. When is this insane killing going to stop? he thought. He heard his wife's insistent voice again demanding that he come to the window.

"Bayla!" he raised his voice. "What are you picking at those two women for? Leave them alone. They have a right to choose their friends and companions. Mind your own business!"

Bayla's voice became more strident. "But it is my business. They live just a few doors away on our street. Where is it written that an Arab woman and a Jewish woman can live together in the same house. We're enemies, aren't we? We've been fighting them for years, and those two are living together. It's a scandal, I tell you!"

"Bayla, be quiet. The Good Book writes, 'The lion and the lamb shall lie down together.' So they are practising a

Bible quotation instead of just reading it. Leave them alone and attend to your own work. They're not harming anyone."

"But it's wrong!" Bayla continued. She pulled the hairbrush through her hair a few times, punctuating her protests by stabbing the brush in the air as if fighting an unseen enemy. "We are on the opposite side. Mrs. Zemer next door agrees with me even if you don't. It's giving the neighbourhood a bad name."

Borach raised his voice in irritation. "Hang Mrs. Zemer! She's the street yenta, and you're running a close second to her. What is this, a contest to see who can be the nosiest on the street? Enough woman! Hold your tongue!"

Bayla subsided, but not for long. "Borach, what do you suppose makes them behave that way? Can't that Dvora Garon find a nice Jewish woman to live with? Why does she have to live with an Arab?"

"How should I know? Ask them if you're so curious. I don't want to hear another word. If you say one more thing, I'm leaving. You're giving me a headache. You hear me, not another word!"

Bayla sniffed. She stalked into the kitchen, poured herself a cup of coffee and then slammed the cup on the table. Borach ignored her. Busybody, he thought, everything is her business. Why do I have to listen to this day in and day out? He shrugged. He turned a page of the newspaper he had

been reading and went back to his morning news. But he couldn't concentrate on the words. They began to blur as he remembered....

The past...the war...the first war in 1948. That was the beginning. He had fought and lived through it and all the other wars, and now he was too old to fight. It was time for peace, and an end to the terrorism, the killing and the hatred. His mind returned to the first war and the seige of Jerusalem....

* * *

At four p.m. on May 14, 1948, David Ben Gurion proclaimed the rebirth of the ancient biblical homeland--Israel. Just after midnight, five Arab armies--poised on the borders and committed to the destruction of the new state--launched their attack, initiating a conflict that would continue for decades.

The Jews retaliated, and panic and uncertainty lent wings to the Palestinian Arabs' exodus. In many cases, Arabs, who had been warned by their leaders to leave, were assured that the Jews would be driven into the sea and that they would shortly return in triumph to their homes.

The Arabs fled in their thousands--a flood of frightened, bewildered people--their belongings hastily thrown in-

to sacks, cartons and battered suitcases. Clutching squalling infants, dragging youngsters, they used whatever transportation was available: bicycles, donkeys, taxis. Most were on foot. All of them were heading in the direction of the nearest Arab country--Jordan, Syria or Lebanon. On their heels pressed a rag-tag army of Jews, many fresh out of the concentration camps and displaced-persons camps in Europe, determined to defend their right to live in the Promised Land.

On May 15, after desperate street fighting in Jerusalem, the Haganah captured from the Arabs the Hospice of Notre-Dame, overlooking one side of Musrara, the Arab district. Attack and counter-attack swung back and forth against a backdrop of panic and looting while the Israelis pushed their advance units into Musrara.

* * *

Yossi Garon and his men stealthily crept forward, their guns ready, down narrow Musrara streets. They peered carefully into doorways and checked rooftops for snipers. Sirens wailed above the gunfire, and the crump of artillery could be heard above the din. Bodies lay in doorways, on the cobbled streets--Arab and Jewish blood mingling in the gutters.

Yossi and his group split up as he assigned each to a

house to check for hidden marksmen. Up the street a dog barked and from a distance another howled in answer. From somewhere came the sound of a woman weeping, then the high-pitched wail of a baby.

* * *

In 1948, a wall was erected in the heart of Jerusalem to divide the Old City from the New. Pierced by the Mandelbaum Gate, this barrier was as effective as the Berlin Wall, cutting the ancient city into two. For nineteen years there was no movement between the two Jerusalems.

* * *

Borach blinked. "What, what did you say?" Bayla was saying something, and he hadn't heard a word.

"Aren't you listening to me? You act as if you're deaf. I said I'm going to the market to pick up some food. We need fruit and vegetables." She took the folded metal cart, dragging the squeaking wheels across the tile floor. She closed the door on her way out, louder than was necessary.

"She's mad," grumbled Borach. "She's driving me crazy with her nagging and she's mad. I should be mad." He scratched his cheek. He walked over to the small bookcase

and absently pulled out a book on the Six Days' War. He aimlessly flipped the pages, glancing at photographs of the war. Too old to fight, too old to work, he thought, but not too old to eat.... How many of us are left with our memories of those three wars--1948, 1956 and 1967? And how many more wars after this? Another five years, ten years and it starts again. When will peace finally come, and how? Not in my lifetime...maybe never. He took the book over to the table and sat down to read it.

* * *

The end of the Six Days' War in June, 1967, opened the Mandelbaum gate and brought the wall down. The Holy City was reunited. Jerusalem had been subjected to an intensive bombardment, suffering the worst damage in the entire war. In those six days, more than five hundred civilians had been killed and wounded in the long-range shelling by the Jordanian army. Night bombing from the air had left the skies red with flames.

Under cover of darkness, two Israeli armoured columns encircled the Old City. When the Israeli tanks and half-tracks clanged into the old area after three days of fierce fighting, they knew victory was theirs. By ten a.m. the holy heart of the city--the age-old Wailing Wall--was secured.

* * *

One morning, several weeks after Jerusalem had been reunited, a middle-aged Arab woman in flowing robes made her way from the Old City to the Musrara district. She picked her way slowly to avoid stumbling on rubble that had been left by the bombardment. Everywhere was evidence of construction as crews of men and women loaded rock, stone, and plaster onto trucks. Scaffolding had been erected along the walls of buildings under repair, and workmen were climbing up and down carrying tools, bricks and cement.

Hegira Hasseini had been recently widowed. Three children had grown and left her. Life had not been kind. Nineteen years before, she and her family had fled Musrara and had endured a miserable existence as refugees trying to establish themselves in Old Jerusalem. Many times she had thought of her old house, her friends and what she had left behind. But there was no way she could get back through the Mandelbaum Gate. Now at last she was going home, though she did not know whether there would be a house to return to.

If it's still standing, others may be living in it, she thought. That's the result of war. You lose everything. How can I claim what is mine by right? How shall I ask for it? She trembled as she walked. She had not eaten that morning. She had been in too much of a hurry to leave before dawn.

Perhaps along the way I will find a coffee vendor and buy a strong sweet cup of coffee to give me energy. No matter, I'm almost there.

She found the street and instinctively slowed her pace as she felt her heart begin to beat more quickly. When she reached the spot and saw the house was still standing, a wave of relief swept over her. Her palms were wet and beads of sweat stood out on her forehead and upper lip. She noticed immediately the colour of the door and window frames had changed. They had been painted blue when she lived there and now were yellow. She noticed the tiles on the roof had been replaced and wondered if her garden was still at the back of the house.

Gathering up her courage, she knocked on the door. A Jewish woman wearing black and the traditional armband of mourning answered. She was middle-aged and her face was marred by large dark circles under her eyes. There was a look of sadness in their depths.

"Shalom," she said, "how can I help you?"

Hegira explained that she had lived there before 1948 and asked if she could be permitted to have a look around her old house.

The woman hesitated for a moment, a look of suspicion appearing momentarily in her eyes. She looked directly at Hegira as if appraising her and then nodded.

"Please come in. You look so tired. Let me make you a cup of coffee."

Hegira was grateful for the kindness. She sank into a chair and closed her eyes. She blinked when she felt the coffee cup placed in her hand, putting it to her lips and sipping until the trembling stopped.

"Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Hegira Hasseini. I am a widow. My husband died just a few months ago. What little we had was spent on medical expenses, but nothing helped."

"What was the matter with him? Was he wounded in the war? Was he a soldier?" Maybe he was one of those responsible for Yossi's death, she thought. If he was anywhere near where it happened, I'll send her packing.

"No, no, he was too old for the military. What medical care he received was very inadequate. I don't think the doctor knew exactly what was wrong with him. He said my husband had a 'wasting disease.'"

The Jewish woman nodded her head. "It could have been one of several things. Oh, forgive me. I have forgotten to introduce myself. My name is Dvora Garon. My son and I live here. As you probably noticed by my clothing, I, too, am in mourning. I lost my husband three weeks ago. He was killed in the fighting in the Sinai." Her eyes glistened suddenly, and she raised her hand to brush her fingers across them.

"These insane wars. When will they stop? When will the killing be halted? So many wives and children left alone with nothing but their memories."

Hegira nodded in sympathy. "To be alone is to be very unhappy. Once we lived in peace so many years ago when I was a child, and then the wars began and we lost everything. All my happiness was in this house, and when we were forced to leave it I left everything here. You would not think me a liar if I told you that when I lived here, we hid some valuables, hoping that we would soon be back to claim them?"

"How do I know you are speaking the truth--that this is indeed your house? Perhaps it belonged to your neighbour or a friend, and you knew there was something hidden here. Can you prove you are telling the truth?"

"I can tell you exactly how the house looked when we fled in May, 1948. If you have lived here since then, you will know I'm not lying."

"You could have been in here visiting a friend."

"I could tell you where my valuables were hidden and exactly what there is and how they were wrapped. Would you believe me then?"

"Perhaps."

"If the money is still there, I will share it with you, half and half," Hegira offered.

"No, no, why should I take what is yours, if it is

yours? Your treasures belong to you, if you are telling the truth. Describe them and tell me where you hid them."

"There are twenty-eight gold coins, a golden thimble, two gold rings, and a heavy gold chain. They are in a leather bag wrapped in brown cloth under the bathroom tiles."

"Well, then let us go dig up the tiles and see what is under them." Dvora scrabbled in a drawer in the kitchen for a screwdriver and led the way to the bathroom. A few minutes' work was all it required to pry up four tiles. Sure enough, below lay a leather pouch wrapped in rotting cloth. Inside was a handful of gold coins and the other items Hegira had described. Hegira clapped her hands with delight. She counted the coins. "Twenty-eight...exactly what there was...our life savings!" She beamed and thanked Dvora over and over again.

That afternoon marked the beginning of a friendship. At least once a week Hegira would come to visit Dvora. Hegira met Dvora's son when he had three-days' leave from his compulsory army service. As the months passed their friendship deepened and both women opened their hearts to each other. They spoke of their families, their children, of happier times and of sad times--the wars and the senseless killing. On one of these weekly visits, Hegira was describing the horrors of her flight in 1948.

"There was one night, you know, when our street was

like the front line and the noise was deafening. We felt we were doomed. We knew we had to escape and ran without thinking. We grabbed the few belongings we could carry, took the children and ran." She paused as she heard dishes rattling in the kitchen.

"It is only Uri home on leave. He must be making something to eat. He's been working in the garden tying up the drooping stems. Please, do go on," said Dvora.

"In the darkness we went two different ways at the corner. I was sure we would meet on the other side. We had an eight-month-old son. I thought my husband had taken the baby, and he thought I had him. Imagine our desolation when at last we found one another in Old Jerusalem and realized neither of us had the baby! Oh, Dvora, this has sat on my heart all these years--losing a child and then my husband."

Dvora's face turned pale. "When did this happen? Do you remember the date?"

"It was on the second day after the war started in 1948."

"Hegira," said Dvora, "there is something you should know. My husband was one of the Israeli troops who entered Jerusalem to comb out the Musrara area. The men came through the rear beyond the garden. He heard a baby crying and followed the sound. Under the bushes at the very end of the garden adjoining the neighbour's land, he found an infant

screaming in fear and hunger. The baby must have crawled out of a house in the confusion. My husband asked the authorities if he could keep the house and adopt the baby. We had no children. Permission was granted. Hegira, why did you not speak of this earlier?"

Hegira's face was ashen. Her hands flew to her face, but she couldn't utter a word.

"Uri, please come in here, now." Dvora raised her voice. It was strained and cracked on the last word. The door was pushed open and Uri stood there in his army fatigues, his arms full of tomato stakes and gardening shears in one hand. The look on her face frightened him and he started toward her. She burst into tears. Reaching for his hand, she extended it to Hegira.

"Behold your son...and mine!"

Hegira clapped her hands together and wailed, rocking back and forth in her chair. Tears ran down her face, while the young soldier stood there in embarrassed amazement. When both women could speak again and explain, he joined in the celebration.

"I have two mothers," he said simply.

Dvora broached the subject first. "Look, Hegira, we are both widows and live alone. Our children have grown and left us. This house has brought us both luck. You have found your son...I mean, our son. Why don't we live together and enjoy

him together?"

* * *

Borach's nose was deep in the book when he heard the door slam. He had been thinking that the answers and questions, too, lay in the past before the wars began. The answers were in the human misery, and mankind still hadn't learned anything from the time some caveman had crawled out of his hole to devise a better weapon to club his neighbour with. Now Bayla, he thought wryly, didn't need a club. She had her tongue.

Bayla rushed in dragging her cart. "Borach, you won't believe it, you won't. I met Mrs. Zemer at the market, and she told me something she discovered only a little while ago about Dvora and that Arab woman!"

"Not again," he groaned. "I won't hear it," he yelled. "I don't want to hear any more of your crazy talk about those two."

"No, no, it's not what you think. I'll never say anything bad about them again. Just listen to this. I never heard anything like it in my life. The story begins in the past--about twenty years ago--it happened right here in Jerusalem during the 1948 War and..."

Borach rolled his eyes toward the ceiling and resigned

himself to listen.

Boxcars

When I was a teenager growing up in Montreal's immigrant ghetto in the late 1940s, I knew nothing about the hardship and savagery that most of the displaced persons there had endured in the Old Country. Most parents tried to shield their children from the knowledge of the horrors they had encountered in their lands of origin. In many cases, events were so hard for our parents to talk about that any information we came across was generally from other sources. At times we were shocked by what we learned. We had been unprepared for life's realities outside of the daily struggle for food, warmth and shelter.

The vital link in the ghetto life of immigrants and displaced persons was Montreal's Main Street. Although it had another name--St. Lawrence Boulevard--it was called The Main, for it was the main street for commerce and social encounter; thus, for generations of ethnics fleeing war, economic conditions or repressive military regimes, it became the main avenue of life. Everyone in the area was motivated by the urge to attain something better in life. But there was one person I blundered into by accident who was not driven by any wish for self-advancement, but by hatred and a blind, unreasoning desire for revenge. Vasil Boronski and

his search were to flit in and out of my mind and niggle away at my subconscious for many years.

Because my parents went out to work, I was left at home--when I wasn't at school--to take charge of the house and a younger sister. I had a key dangling from a cord around my neck at the age of six, and I would be given a list of groceries to pick up at stores along The Main as soon as classes finished in the afternoon. It was my job to start dinner so we could eat by the time Papa came home at seven.

One Friday I stopped at a butcher shop near Roy Street to pick up some chops. Friday was payday, and for many of the immigrants it was the only day of the week they could afford to buy meat or chicken. By Wednesday the following week, meals were usually potatoes or noodles with cheese, if one was lucky.

The store was crowded and, in the normal way of things, children were disregarded as adults elbowed their way to the counter to be served. I wasn't aggressive and, as usual, was the last one served. But the delay gave me a chance to look at the customers, to study them and wonder about them.

Just beside me I noticed a man who had the saddest eyes I had ever seen. They were deep-set in dark sockets, ringed with black shadows like bruises. I thought he might have been punched. Maybe he's here to buy a steak to put on his eyes, I imagined, thinking of the folk-medicine remedy. He

fidgeted restlessly, his eyes darting from right to left, left to right. He turned and looked backward a few times. I figured he must be very nervous. From his build and bearing he appeared to be in his twenties, but the ravaged face suggested a much older man. I was curious, but I didn't dare talk to him. Mama had warned me about talking to strangers. They could be dangerous.

I kept an eye on him, moving behind him and out of his line of vision so he wouldn't see me. I noticed his clothes were shabby, but then most of the people in the shop were dressed that way. In the ghetto, few people looked like the fashion-plates in department store windows or the glamorous models in fashion magazines. He had one hand in his pocket and a piece of paper in the other--his shopping list most likely.

The crowd thinned out, and I moved closer to the front. The man was behind me. I noticed a customer collect his brown-paper parcel from the top of the display case and turn toward us, pushing his way through the waiting housewives.

I heard a gasp and looked back at the man I had been studying. His face had gone ashen and his eyes bulged. His hand was clenched, crushing the shopping list. A look of pure hatred crossed his face. He looked like a savage animal snarling at an unseen enemy. He's gone crazy, I thought. Why does he look like that? He moved forward past me, his

other arm raised, toward the man with the parcel. I heard him shout: "You bastard! Remember Babi Yar, you murderer! You killed them all, every one. Now it's your turn!"

The man looked up in astonishment--a look rapidly replaced by one of fear. He jostled a woman as he tried to evade the madman pushing toward him. Suddenly he turned his back and darted toward the front of the store and around the counter while the butcher stood there in frozen movement, a cleaver poised in midair over a quarter carcass of beef. The woman screamed and fell. I heard a shriek as a woman in the crowd fainted. In the confusion the accused man ran out through the back door of the store into the service alley. After him ran the madman. What's going on? I wondered. Who's Babi Yar? She must be someone's grandmother. That's what Babi means in Russian and Yiddish. What did it mean? I couldn't make any sense out of it. Around me rose a babble of excited comment in half a dozen languages. I took advantage of the excitement to slip forward. I knew I would be in trouble if I didn't get my order filled. I completed my purchase and ran home, half an hour late. The strange incident had intrigued me, and I would have liked to stay and hear more, but Papa was very strict about punctuality at mealtimes. I didn't want to get yelled at.

I started the cooking and set the table to make up for lost time, and when Mama came home I asked her about Babi

Yar. She had never heard the name before. At the time I didn't realize that Babi Yar wasn't a person. It was a place, and what happened there was to set in motion a series of coincidences that would haunt me for years.

I went back to the same butcher shop a few days later. Although I was shy, my curiosity got the better of me. I asked the butcher about what had happened. He paid little attention to a nosy child, but a woman standing beside me chimed in with her own barrage of questions, and the butcher did respond to her.

I learned that the man I thought was crazy was called Vasil Boronski, a Polish Jew, who had emigrated to Canada a year or two before. He had lost his entire family in the Holocaust. The man he had accused in the shop was someone he thought he recognized as a high-ranking officer in charge of carrying out the massacre at Babi Yar. Again I heard that name and I got up enough courage to ask if she was Boronski's grandmother. The adults laughed at my ignorance, but they explained to me that Babi Yar was a place in the Ukraine near Kiev, where hideous massacres had been carried out. The story revolted and fascinated me. It was my first encounter with the personal side of the impersonal statistics and war news that I had read in the daily papers.

I felt I had to speak to that man. I had to find him. I asked the butcher if Vasil Boronski came in every week.

Like a clock, every Friday, came the answer, after he collected his weekly paycheque.

The following week I rushed from school the minute classes were over and spent an hour or more waiting for him to appear at the shop. He didn't. I went back the next week and the next. A month later I finally saw him at the store. I didn't know how to approach him. I was afraid of him, but I had to know. When he paid for his meat and left the shop, I followed him. If my mother had known what I was doing, she would have killed me. I caught up with him near Napoleon Street and timidly asked: "Excuse me, Mr. Boronski, please can I talk to you?"

He looked down at me, slowed his pace slightly and snapped, "For what?" He had a thick accent.

"It's important. I have to know."

"What do you have to know?" He scowled, and I almost panicked.

"It's about something that happened last month at the butcher's. I want to talk to you about it. I want to know."

"What are you talking about? What's your business, little girl?" He looked angry.

"I heard you yell something about Babi Yar. I think something like that could have happened to my own family."

His face changed. He didn't look so angry anymore. He nodded and with his head motioned for me to follow him away

from the crowded sidewalk to the side of the building.

"Ah, you are too young for such terrible things...you don't know...you should never know what went on over there," he said turning to face me. He looked down at me, stooping to peer into my face.

I waited.

"You're too young to understand," he continued, "but I'll tell you anyway. When you grow up and have a family, you tell them so no one will ever forget. Everybody should know. Everybody should remember."

I nodded, afraid to say a word.

"I grew up in Poland, and when the Nazi armies attacked and occupied my country in September, 1939, they packed thousands of those who weren't killed into boxcars, like fish into cans and sent them away to labour camps in Russia. I was one of those. Germany and Russia were allies at the time. Thousands of prisoners were put to work as slaves on farms, in mines and in the forests. The very few who escaped went into hiding until they could find a way back to Poland without being picked up by the Russians on one side of the border and Germans on the other side.

"When the Germans attacked Russia in 1941, they stepped up their mass murder of Jews, gypsies--anyone who stood in their path. Now the shoe was on the other foot. Russia had to protect her country from the Nazis.

"I had escaped from a labour camp in the Ukraine. I knew there were many Jews living in Kiev and nearby. I went into hiding there. As they advanced eastward, the Nazis took thousands of us--men, women and children. By truckload and in columns on forced marches, we were all brought to Babi Yar near Kiev. It is an area that is hilly and full of woods and ravines. Helped by the Ukrainian police--filthy collaborators as savage as the Nazis, may they rot in hell--the Germans beat and robbed these poor people of everything they had brought with them. Their clothes were stripped from them. The Germans pushed them, bleeding and in great pain, to the edge of the ravine, where they were shot. Their bodies were thrown into the ravine."

He clenched his hands and swallowed convulsively. His lips were trembling. I thought he was going to cry, but he controlled himself and continued.

"And it did not stop. The killing went on until layers and layers of bodies were piled up. Many were still alive when the next layer of bodies were pitched down on them. If anyone moved or groaned, the soldiers would come down the footpath, walk on the bodies and bayonet or shoot where the sounds were coming from. Close to 34,000 of us were wiped out in a matter of days.

"I was one of those. When the first shots rang out, I dropped limply, but unhurt, into the ravine, and others fell

on top of me. Covered in blood, I didn't move until nightfall. I listened to the whimpers and groans around me and the laughter of the Nazis camped on the edges of the ravine.

That man, that animal I saw in the butcher shop was one of the Nazi officers. Before the group I was in was thrown into the ravine, I saw him pacing up and down, a sadistic grin on his face, barking orders at the soldiers. He ordered the beatings and the killing and the rape of young girls and attractive women. His soldiers used them before killing them. I'll never forget that face...the face of evil. I swore in those days and nights of horror in 1941 that I would force myself to live, and if I had to search the whole world over, I would find that bastard killer, that murderer. I would never rest until I had my hands on his throat, squeezing the life out of him. In that night in the pit, I imagined what I would do to him, how I would torture him--rip his flesh to pieces to make him suffer as he had done to so many..."

I had listened in silence, but tears welled in my eyes and ran down my face. He touched my cheek, and his fingers were wet. His eyes burned into mine, his lids red and dry. He was beyond tears. He had no more to shed.

"I waited until the middle of the night," he said, "and slowly I crawled over the bodies in the darkness, inching my way without raising myself. The watch-fires at the edge of the ravine had burned down to glowing coals. Except for the

guards stationed at the mouth of the ravine and around the woods, the soldiers were asleep. I struggled to get to the path that had been dug around the side to allow the troops to climb down into the ravine. I decided it was too dangerous to move along it and crawled past it to the side of the hill instead. Digging my hands into the soft soil, I hauled myself up, clinging to roots, clumps of grass and outcroppings of rock. Up over the side I dragged myself and crawled into the woods. I kept going until I was far enough away to stand and then stumbled toward the west. I was caked with earth and blood and smelled like a charnel house. Luckily I still had my clothes because the Germans stopped removing their captives' clothing by the second day of the massacre. They were in a hurry to finish the job.

For days I hid in the fields and woods, living off whatever I could find--roots, berries, rotten potatoes, the tiniest carrots missed in the harvest. The few times I dared to approach a barn or farmhouse, I was lucky they took pity on me and gave me what they could spare--some bread, soup, whatever. And in this way I reached Poland, and finally Warsaw.

"I didn't remain free very long. Without ration books, papers and passes, you couldn't get very far in those days. I was swept up again with a small group in hiding during the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto in April, 1943.

"Once again I was in a boxcar, this time heading westward. We were packed in so no one could breathe or move. Half of us died from starvation and suffocation by the time the train reached Dachau, a death camp in Germany. How I survived that journey, I'll never know, but it was my hatred, my need for revenge that kept me going. Do you understand that, little girl? Can you understand it?"

He put his hands on my shoulders and shook me. I was terrified, and he must have seen the fear on my face for he released me abruptly and muttered: "I'm sorry."

"How did you get through Dachau?" I asked.

"All my life boxcars have appeared when a new catastrophe was looming. Boxcars have moved me from one disaster to another. When we were liberated by the Allies, camp survivors were recruited by agents to go to Palestine where a national homeland for Jews was to be established. A group of us rode the boxcars again to a port in Italy where we were to board a ship to take us to the eastern Mediterranean. My survival instincts were still working. I had this overpowering feeling that I shouldn't sail. I never boarded that ship, and it left without me. I found out later it never reached its destination. Somewhere along the way, it sank. I never discovered if it was an accident or deliberate. It could have been sabotage."

He stopped and remained silent. I worked up enough cour-

age to ask, "How did you ever get to Canada from Italy?"

"Well, first, I caught a boxcar for Paris...no, actually I didn't ride inside. I was beginning to feel boxcars were my nemesis. I rode on the roof and made sure I lay flat when we neared tunnels. There were many others like me riding the same way."

"And then?" I prompted.

His face hardened. "I wanted to go to the United States and applied at the U.S. Consulate in Paris. But one day during my wait for processing, I happened to walk past the Canadian Embassy and I saw him come out."

"You mean the man from Babi Yar?" I asked.

"The same," he replied grimly. "For a moment I froze and that was my undoing. It gave him time to get away. He hailed a taxi and drove off. It took me a minute to get another taxi and follow him, but I lost him in the traffic around the Arc de Triomphe."

"What happened next?" I asked. I felt I was living a horror story, but this was real. No one could make up something as gripping as this.

"I had seen him coming from the Canadian Embassy, so it seemed probable to assume he had gone there for the same reason I had gone to the U.S. Consulate--to get as far from Europe as possible and start a new life. I was sure he would be doing this under a false name. I didn't even know his

real one.

"Who would listen to me if I pointed the finger at him? Would anyone care? No, I knew I would have to be the one to find him and bring him to justice--my justice.

"So I went to the Canadian Embassy, too, and applied for emigration papers. If he was going to Canada, I was going to follow him. And it looks like I was right. I've seen him here and I'm going to get him. I spent the last month in Toronto because I suspected he might run there after I recognized him here in Montreal. He won't come back to that butcher shop. Too many others saw him. But I'll pick up his trail and run him down if I have to spend the rest of my life hunting. But I need money to travel and as soon as I have enough, I'll move on."

I didn't know what to say, but I wished him luck and offered any help I could. I think he knew I meant it. He patted my shoulder and once more said: "Never forget", and left. I didn't think I would ever see him again, but his story stuck in my mind. I couldn't get rid of it. I had to know the outcome--if there ever was one.

To my surprise, I saw him once again, by chance, about six months later. On the corner of St. Lawrence Boulevard and Marie-Anne Street there is a small park where many of the people in the immigrant ghetto would gather on weekends to meet and talk. The park benches were always occupied, and

it was common to see two men engrossed in a game of chess, the board on a small folding camp stool between them. Sometimes there was a group of four men playing cards on a collapsible bridge table or others throwing dice on a blanket spread on the ground. And there were those who just sat or stood around and talked interminably--politics, history, music, philosophy--rehashing the events of their past lives.

I went past there quite often, and as inconspicuously as possible I would stand and watch the games. That was how I learned the rudiments of chess and the rules for poker-dice and a game they called "craps". Some of the slang names for the throws were funny. Two single spots on the dice were "snake-eyes", a two and a one were "craps" and a pair of sixes was "boxcars".

That was what Vasil was doing when I found him--throwing dice in a crap game. I didn't understand it too well, but I stood and watched for a while, trying to learn it. Vasil seemed to be a really good player. He didn't say a word although he knew I was there. Once he winked at me as he made a good throw. And finally when he threw two sixes, he said, "[illegible]rs! That's it! I'm finished. After this I lose. No more playing today."

His opponents protested. "But that's no reason to quit. You're ahead. Give us a chance to get even. Your next throw could be the best you make."

"Not for me," said Vasil. "For me, boxcars are bad luck. I stay away from them. It's my own special bad-luck omen." He got up and moved off the blanket where he had been kneeling. Then he came over to where I was standing.

"So, little girl, has your curiosity got you into anything interesting lately?" he asked.

"Not yet," I admitted, "but I keep asking and hearing stories and one day I'll put everything together and write a book. But I have to know more, much more and I have to be very smart. Is there something new in your search? Have you discovered where that man went to yet?"

"If he's not in Montreal, he's in Toronto or maybe in Winnipeg. I have reported him to a watchdog organization. Apparently he's a war criminal important enough to be on the list of Simon Weisenthal's Institute in Vienna. Do you realize how many of these Nazi murderers managed to sneak into Western countries without detection, and how many of their victims were refused entry permits? Is that justice? No, my justice will be surer." His fist clenched, and a muscle rippled in his cheek as he tightened his jaw.

We said our goodbyes and parted. About a year later, I saw him again in Montreal. I caught a glimpse of him on a crowded street, but although I raced after him I lost sight of him. After that there was nothing. I haunted the little park on weekends to see if he would turn up. I asked some of

the men who were playing "craps" if they knew where he had gone. One said, "Maybe, Toronto," and another, "Winnipeg, I think", and I knew that Vasil was still searching. His man-hunt might take him all his life, but he would never give it up.

* * *

The years passed, and I grew up and went on to other things. But every once in a while I would think of Vasil Boronski and wonder.

Fifteen years later, the final chapter to this bizarre search filtered back to me from a friend whose husband organized gambling junkets to casino centres in the United States. Her husband had just returned from one of these trips and had told her of a curious incident in the casino at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas. He had been standing at one end of the crap table waiting for someone to cash in his chips and leave his seat. While he waited, he watched the play. Two men were doing well. One of them, a neatly dressed man with grey hair, had amassed a sizeable heap of chips in front of him. Luck certainly was with him--it seemed he could do no wrong. He was on a winning streak and was so intent on the game he could have been playing by himself.

Suddenly he looked up across the table, and spectators saw his mouth split into a wolfish grin. His eyes almost started out of his head. He was looking at someone on the

other side of the table. He threw the dice onto the green felt where they bounced and tumbled. Before they stopped moving, he had launched himself up over the side, took two running steps across the table toward an older man with white hair and glasses, who was watching the game. The attacker knocked down several people standing behind the white-haired man as he landed on him. His hands were around his victim's throat, and growling sounds were coming from his mouth as if he had gone mad. All eyes were riveted on the two men, but Brenda's husband noticed the dice stopped tumbling and had come up two sixes.

Three men jumped on the madman, trying to tear his hands from the man he had attacked. They must have been casino employees. The attacker was shouting as they pried him loose. The older man, his face a mottled red and his eyes bulging in fear, ran into the crowd clutching his throat. His attacker fought like a demented animal trying to break the grip of those holding him. Suddenly his face went slack. His jaw dropped, and his body became limp. He moaned in pain. "No, no, not now, not yet." His restrainers released him, and his body slumped to the floor. He writhed for a moment and then went limp.

I was stunned. Brenda didn't know the story I had lived with for so many years. It couldn't be, I thought. But the "boxcars" on the dice were too coincidental, and that unpro-

voked attack on a stranger could be nothing else but Vasil at the end of his quest.

I questioned Brenda. Was she sure about the dice? They landed right in front of her husband, she said. He noticed them. What else had happened, I asked? What happened to the man who passed out?

Brenda replied that the casino doctor had arrived within minutes and pronounced him dead of a heart attack. There was nothing anyone could do.

"Was there anything else?" I asked. "Did the man say anything?" I had to know if it was Vasil Boronski. Even if boxcars were his nemesis, it still wasn't enough. Brenda's husband supplied the clue. He had heard the man shouting, and his words were: Remember Babi Yar, you murderer! Your time has come!"

I felt something uncoil in my stomach. It <u>was</u> Vasil. It couldn't be anyone else. And somewhere out there the Nazi killer was still on the loose. He had escaped again, and a man whose whole life had been dedicated to that one moment of revenge had been cheated of it. He had lost...to death. He had spent years searching and all for nothing. It seemed ironic that a throw of the dice had brought up boxcars and Vasil had not even seen it. The only thing I could console myself with was that, of the Nazi and Vasil, only Vasil had found rest.

Searching for Peace

Working as a nurse in a senior citizens' residence is a lot different from working in a hospital or private nursing. Hospital work is like short-term parking--patients in and out as quickly as the government can manage, so it doesn't have to foot a big Medicare bill. Private nursing is better--it pays more and you only have to look after one patient at a time. The costs being what they are, though, few people can afford to keep us too long on any given case. We're like quick-change artists. If we're lucky in our schedules, we shuttle from one house-bound patient to the next. And if we're not lucky, sometimes there's a week or two waiting or more between cases and no money coming in to pay the rent and the food bills.

Now a senior citizens' residence is a little like a hospital, but it's a lot more homey. It would be okay, except that it does get kind of depressing. No one gets better and goes home and that's why there's such a turnover in the nursing staff. No one can stand the stress for a long time. It gets to you after a while. You know the place is a dead end. All senior citizens' hospitals and residences are, and I can kid about it but it doesn't change anything. We're so crowded people are fighting to get in and dying to get

out. That's about the only way you get released here. Most of the patients are terminal. Our job is just to keep them as comfortable as possible. That's not easy. But I've seen worse places, believe me. This one is pretty good. The rates are high, but we take a lot of hard work and care off the backs of families who can't take proper care of aging parents or other family members. We're custodians--custodians of human pain and anguish--and sometimes we become the recorders and archives of human experience, both good and bad.

I could write a book on the lives of some of these old people. If so many weren't senile, there would be enough material for an encyclopedia. One day I'd like to do it. So if you ever see me with my little tape recorder tucked into my uniform pocket, or see me taking notes, you'll know what I'm about. I figure if you don't get these stories down, they're lost forever. Families rarely think of collecting these oral histories. They take everything for granted and don't consider it important enough to bother with. They make their weekly duty visits on Sunday to see their old parents or grandparents; a few come twice a week. It's rare to see anyone visiting more than that. But there is one man, a huge bear of a man, who comes here three, often four times a week--almost every other day. He must be six feet three or four inches tall, and his mother is a tiny little thing. He's so gentle and loving with her that I never cease to

wonder at it. That's an unusual case. I've talked with both of them, mother and son, many times. She's a little hard to understand because her accent is very strong. Her name is Mrs. Faerman and she was an immigrant who came from Czechoslovakia to Canada after the war. Her son Miklos--Mike for short--was just a youngster when he arrived with his parents.

I've picked up a few bits and pieces of information about both of them. That family really went through a hell of a lot over in Europe and didn't have it too easy here. I guess you could say we're pretty lucky here in Canada. We've never had a war on our soil, unless, of course, you want to call those mini-battles during 1812 a war. When you think of what happened all over the world and what took place in those two World Wars, you have to be thankful you live in North America.

Once the survivors of those wars get over here, they aren't through with their anguish and emotional scars just because they've moved to a new place to get away from it all. Their scars are usually inside and invisible, but they're like itching scabs you can't help scratching. And the kids who lived through that mess are the ones who grow up with bad dreams, scrambled emotions, anti-social behaviour or confused personality patterns. These are the splintered kids who carry their emotional baggage into their relation-

ships and marriages, and damn few people recognize the signals they're sending or understand why they behave the way they do.

Take Mike, for instance. He never married, probably because of what happened to him as a child. Would you believe that this gentle giant of a man with a grey beard like a biblical patriarch was the youngest kid to survive Theresienstadt? You do know where it was and what it was? Yes, that's right, one of those camps. This one was in Czechoslovakia, but it was a stopping-place on the way to Auschwitz and the gas-ovens. Can you begin to imagine what that experience must have been for a little boy and what his mother must have had to do to keep him alive and near her? Luck, you say? Maybe something beyond luck. The other inmates of the camp became a sort of extended family for the boy. He was watched over by a number of people, but the horror of living and growing up in such a place and witnessing what went on during those years must have affected his emotions.

And there was one other thing as well. Mrs. Faerman told me about it. She had another boy Jan, just a little older than Mike. The two kids were inseparable, so close to each other in age. Jan was torn from his mother's arms and killed because she fought the soldiers and refused to be separated from him. It's odd that they let her keep Mike

with her, but who can figure out those Nazis? Mike wasn't more than three or four and he must have suffered, but he couldn't articulate his loss. The effects appeared later in behavioural problems. I tried to get more details from Mrs. Faerman, but she began to cry and wring her hands whenever I raised the subject.

Once the war was over, I guess those who were still alive tried to find members of their families who might have survived. Mrs. Faerman was reunited with her husband who had been in another camp. That in itself was a small miracle. The family emigrated to Canada and had another child, a sister to Mike. They somehow managed to retain their religious beliefs despite the fact they had been persecuted because of them. Over the years I've run into many people who went the other way. They either renounced their faith in despair and became atheists or converted to another faith. Being Jewish cost too much. They were unwilling to go through any further miseries because of their religion. But Mike's family was different. They went back to strict Orthodox practice, observing the Sabbath very strictly, as well as all the regulations involved with food preparation--you know, keeping kosher.

Mike started rebelling when he was ten, according to Mrs. Faerman. She called him a Banditte. That's a little different from 'bandit' in English. I guess the closest

equivalent would be a Holy Terror. He got into all kinds of fights and scraps, probably an expression of the fears and aggressions he had had to bottle up. Mr. Faerman tried to punish him but found it difficult to be severe with him, because he could never forget that this child was a miracle of survival. After you lose one kid, you're kind of protective of the other, especially an only son.

So Mike grew up a rather unruly kid, and when he reached his teens he went on to the next stage of misbehaviour--smoking, drinking, playing cards and failing courses. He flunked so many classes he finally dropped out of school. His parents were heartbroken. Here was an only son for whom they had expected great things, obviously heading for trouble. They envisioned him with a criminal record, afraid he would end up the neighbourhood juvenile delinquent. On one of his visits here Mike told me his father had yelled at him a lot, even threatening to strap him. Nothing appeared to help. Then Mike admitted with a sheepish grin on his face that he had joined up with a teen-age gang. I asked him why he had behaved that way? What made him carry on in that fashion? Did he blame his parents for something they had done or hadn't done?

He confessed that he felt as if a part of himself were missing. "There's only half of me. I'm trying to find the other part, but it seems whenever I feel as if I'm within

touching distance, it vanishes. I've always felt I was searching for something--something I can't see, but I can feel--something inside me. When I couldn't find it, I turned to destructive behaviour out of sheer frustration and anger. Oh, but I was a rotten kid, those years. I nearly drove my parents crazy. It was a good thing my sister was a quiet little kid. Two like me in the family would have killed my parents."

I let him talk. Apparently it did him good to unburden himself. Mrs. Faerman, now, she kept saying it was Mike's bad friends who got her Miklos into trouble. Somehow she never realized that the reasons were deeper than that and went back to the camp period.

I got the story piecemeal--a bit from Mrs. Faerman and a lot from Mike. Each time he came in, he divulged a little more. It was like a serial of 'This is Your Life'. It explained the way Mike related to his mother. She was over eighty, and he must have been in his early fifties or close to it. I watched how Mike held his mother's hand. He'd kiss her and joke with her. Somewhere deep down in his soul there was this incredible compassion for her, as if he could try to make up with his love for the loss of his brother and all the terrible things in their lives.

When visiting hours were over, he'd come to the nursing station at the conjunction of the two corridors, and we talked for about twenty minutes or so while the other nurse

on duty did the rounds to shoo dawdling visitors out. Mike began telling me a few more things he remembered as a kid in Canada and some of the crazy stunts he pulled at school. He looked a little ashamed, but he kept talking.

"We went through some pretty hard times trying to stay alive in Europe and it was hard work surviving in Canada," he said. My parents were working full time to feed us and keep a roof over our heads." He shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe I resented the lack of attention and was looking for some way to make them spend more time with me."

"What did you do?"

"I barely scraped through high school and then went from job to job, making a little money and throwing it away on cigarettes, booze and gambling. And if that wasn't bad enough, I got involved with some guru who was preaching Zen. Suddenly I turned my back on the religious beliefs I had been raised in. One of my friends introduced me to the guru, and the next thing I knew I was into the drug scene. It started with pot and I went on to other things.

"Well, I don't have to tell you what it did to my parents. They tried to straighten me out, but it was useless. They begged, they pleaded, they threatened, but I was determined to do my own thing, whatever the cost. Looking back on it now, I think it was what helped kill my father. I was such a disappointment."

He looked so sad that I impulsively reached over the counter and patted his hand. "Don't be so hard on yourself. Lots of kids go astray, but there are plenty who pull themselves together and make something out of their lives."

"You haven't heard the worst," he said, tugging at a strand of hair in his beard. "You'd think I'd have had enough sense to quit at that point. But no, I bumbled along in a haze, and somehow my guru convinced me that I had to make a pilgrimage to India to find myself and the true religion. He said India was the seat of religion and I had to go. Of course, at that point I didn't need much convincing. I borrowed money from my parents and told them I was going to get my head together on the trip. I would find myself that much quicker. That's funny that expression, 'finding myself'. I was so lost by then a pack of bloodhounds wouldn't have been able to pick up my scent."

I wanted to hear more but a light on the room monitor was blinking. Someone needed me. "Mike," I interrupted, "a patient is calling for assistance. Next time you come, please stop by at my desk and tell me the rest. I'd like to hear it."

He nodded and smiled. As I headed down the hall, I glanced back and saw Mike turning the corner on his way to the elevators. I'd have to control my curiosity until I saw him again.

A couple of days later he was back, and we had another chat after he left his mother's room.

"You were telling me about going to India," I prompted. "What happened then?"

"Oh, I went off in search of myself and spent two years there. I practised yoga and became a strict vegetarian. I learned how to cook Eastern food and I wandered around from place to place, visiting holy men and temples. When my money finally ran out, I lived like a pauper and then was reduced to begging. See how big I am? I was down to half my weight. I must have looked like a scarecrow flapping along in my loose, scruffy cotton clothes.

"After two years of living with poverty, starvation and death around me on a daily basis, something got through to me. It was a simple incident, but it had meaning for me."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I suppose I had become indifferent to the misery of seeing millions of people starving and kids dying on the streets, reaching their hands out to me. Maybe it was the stuff I was smoking...I don't know, but somewhere on a street in a village outside Calcutta, I was sitting dozing against a wall. I glanced up and saw a boy of about seven standing in front of me. He was staring at me. He raised his arm and pointed at me and looked so accusing, I felt like running and hiding. But I couldn't take my eyes off him. He

looked so much like my older brother the last time I'd seen him that I was rooted to the spot. I wanted to get up and run to him, to hug him and hold him, but I felt absolutely paralysed. I struggled to stand up, staggered and fell and when I got to my feet and looked again, the boy was gone. I knew my brother was dead and there was no bringing him back, but I asked myself if I had really seen him."

"What effect did this 'vision' have on you?" I asked.

"I guess that was the turning point. I started thinking about returning to Montreal and picking up the pieces. But my obsession still had a firm grip on me. I did something really stupid. My parents had arranged a ticket and sent me some cash through a travel agent when I wired that I was broke and couldn't get home. I was so worried that I wouldn't be able to get hash to keep my habit going back home as freely as in India, that I took the money and bought a good supply. If my parents had known where the money went, they would have left me there. I figured that if I couldn't get a job back home, I could sell some of the drugs and have some money to live on for a while. How could I have been so dumb?"

"You're right." I shook my head. "You weren't thinking."

"Well, I don't know if it was my appearance, the stamps in my passport, or the length of time I had been away, but something made the Customs officers suspicious when I landed at Dorval Airport. They went through my dufflebags with a

fine-tooth comb and found enough junk to arrest me and put me away for two years. It didn't do any good to plead personal use. I was carrying enough for them to charge me with "possession and intent to traffic". It was dirt cheap in India, so I had been able to buy enough.

"That finished my father. His son was a jailbird, a drug addict and a pusher. He went into a decline, barely hanging on. I had ruined my life and his with my stupidity.

"But you know something? That prison sentence was the best thing that could have happened to me. It straightened me out. I realized I had been acting like a damn fool. I was searching for something on the other side of the world, searching in a drug haze, when all along the solution was there, inside myself. I was the only one who could find it. I needed discipline--not parental discipline--but the kind I got in prison. I had to toe the line. They put me to work in the kitchens, and that was my salvation. What I had picked up about cooking in India and the two years' training in jail gave me a good trade when I finished my prison term. I became a cook in a restaurant, then qualified as a chef and ended up making everything from soup to dessert. I didn't need drugs any more. I even quit smoking ordinary cigarettes."

"That's wonderful," I said. He looked so proud of himself and he should have been. "That was quite an accomplishment."

"My father died shortly after I got out of jail, and I blamed myself. But instead of going into another tailspin, I threw myself into hard work--up to twenty hours a day--so I wouldn't get back on that cycle of self-destruction. I guess because of what I had put her through, I had to make it up to my mother somehow. I spent a lot of time with her. As soon as I had earned enough money which she matched with some of her own, I opened a restaurant with its own bakery attached. She came in to work with me, so we could at least be together during the day and I could look after her. Here was this little lady in her seventies perched on a stool in my kitchen, peeling and cutting fruit and vegetables and helping out whichever way she could. She did a lot to make that place successful.

"But when she got sick, I had to find someplace that could look after her, because I couldn't keep an eye on her while I was out all day and part of the night at the restaurant. Do you think I did the right thing?"

I knew he was worried, and I tried to reassure him. This man had been through such terrible experiences from childhood on and still had self-doubts about his behaviour. He had somehow avoided any long-term relationships or marriage, and now with his mother old and sick, his link with a female figure would soon be at an end. But perhaps it was his devotion to her that had prevented him from seeking involvement with

other women. It was hard to say. There weren't too many women around who would think of throwing in their lot with someone as far gone as he had been.

I asked him what finally made him realize that he was down at the very bottom. He looked at me for a moment.

"I think it was that kid who looked like my brother, standing there and pointing silently at me. There was so much anger in his face. For a second I thought he looked the way I felt inside."

"You mean the Indian boy," I said.

"Yes, but he wasn't Indian, though he was dressed in rags like the other Indian kids. I swear to God, he was white. How could it be? I could never figure it out. Was I so doped up that I saw something that wasn't there?"

"Maybe you were meant to see it. Maybe it was your brother finally getting through to you. Who knows?"

Mike left soon after, though he continued to come and visit until his mother passed away almost six months later. I never forgot what he told me. Every time I see that he or his restaurant has been written up in the newspapers, or I hear something about him on the radio, I feel very proud of him. He dragged himself up from hell and made a new life for himself. In some way he has shown me something as well-something I felt as a student when I first went into nursing. Nursing is about caring, I suppose, about people. And people are all we've got....

The Journal

You never forget a man who has saved your life. Bravery under fire puts him on a different level from other soldiers in the unit. The man I mean is Andrew Dugas. He and I served out our three-year stint in the United States Army during the Korean War in the early fifties. Dugas was a slightly built, wiry man with even features, snapping black eyes and an infectious grin. When I first met him in boot camp he had a mop of dark hair he had trouble controlling. But he told me the army solved that problem when the regimental barbers got through with him.

Most of the guys in our unit were okay. There was always the odd jerk who grated on our nerves, but sometimes pressure from his peers and a few scuffles or punches would straighten out the misfit. Let's face it, you have to live at close quarters with a bunch of strangers, and you know that some of them won't come back alive. You don't like to think about it happening to you, but you never know when your number is on a bullet, grenade or shell. So you develop a sort of camaraderie--a little like a polygamous marriage minus the sex. Who knows if you'll get it when you least expect it! The barracks bravado and boasting you play at before you go overseas are a hell of a lot different from

what you need when you're actually on the battlefield. Then you know, if you're religious, that your life is in the hands of God; if you're not, it's in the guts of one of your buddies. And if he has no guts, you're dead.

Now, where Andrew Dugas was concerned, I instinctively felt he was the kind of guy who couldn't and wouldn't let me down. Maybe it was his intensity, his passion for life that made me sense it. Everything he did, whether it was card-playing, basic training, flirting with girls when we were on a week-end pass, was different. I often wondered what made him so unlike the others in our unit. He puzzled me, but strange as it sounds I had the feeling that there was a history behind this man. He had a sense of destiny.

Perhaps it was this feeling that made us more than buddies. It was unspoken, but we both knew that we would die for one another. And it damned near happened that way in June, 1952. During an attack somewhere in the area of T'osan, the advance line of our company blundered into the edge of a minefield. By some miracle I was five yards behind the men who set off the blasts. They were killed outright--blown to bits--but the fragments caught me and messed up my legs. I couldn't get up or out. I just lay there. Beside me was part of someone's leg, the boot shredded and bone fragments jutting out of the bloody mess of mangled flesh. I couldn't even vomit.

The next thing I remember was Andrew bouncing like a cat on the pads of his feet. He jumped and landed beside me, hoisted me on his shoulders and ran out of there in a crouching hot-foot shuffle that had me screaming with pain from the jolting. It seemed as if he knew where to step and where to jump. It wasn't until we were out that I went into shock and lost consciousness. One of the medics who tended me told me later I would have bled to death or lost my legs if Andrew hadn't applied tourniquets and field dressings and sprinkled some antibiotics into the wounds.

It was a while before I saw him again because I was transferred to a field hospital behind the lines. The first chance he had he tracked me down and came to see me. It was the kind of reunion you don't see too often. I was afraid to show too much emotion in case the guys in the other beds got the wrong idea, but Andrew didn't let that bother him. He grabbed and hugged me so hard he almost gave me a hemorrhage. I couldn't catch my breath. He was special, all right, and you knew he really cared. It didn't matter who you were or what you had done. He would have risked his life to save anyone around him in trouble. It seemed that singlehandedly he had pulled four other guys from the trap in the minefield, and one of the medics from whom I got the story said Andrew was up for a medal.

I kidded him about it on one of his visits, and he

blushed. I couldn't get over it. The guy was actually embarrassed.

"Hey, listen, Gene," he said. "I was on some kind of adrenalin high. I didn't even know what I was doing. I was scared shitless. I didn't even want to move when I saw the crap going off. When I saw you go down, all I could think of was getting you out. If not for you, I would have been curled up in a ball at the edge of the field." And he grinned.

It was just like him to look for a way to play down his bravery. But I never forgot. I owed him one, a big one.

When I was shipped back to Seoul for rest and rehabilitation, Andrew somehow wrangled a pass and got time off at the same time. Maybe he was due for it or maybe it was the fact that he was becoming a sort of legend. We all knew he was in line for a promotion. And it was that week we were in Seoul that we really got to know one another--not just ourselves, I mean, but our backgrounds, our roots. I had never given it much thought. My family, the Herberts, had been in Virginia for a couple of hundred years. My mother was a family-history buff and had even commissioned someone to research our ancestry and draw up a family tree. My first name had been commonly used for generations, and I had a cousin and second cousins named Gene. Mom hadn't been too happy to learn that one of her early ancestors had come

off a prison ship and had been indentured as a servant. England had a habit of disposing of her undesirables in this fashion--shipping them out to the colonies. If my ancestor had been black he would have been called a slave. The labour and treatment were no different.

Andrew, on the other hand, knew more about his background than I. My impression had been right. Perhaps this was what gave him that appearance of commitment, destiny, call it what you will. He had something in his possession that marked him as a man with a purpose. He was searching for something. And one day he showed me what he had. He carried it in a metal box and he said the original was wrapped in velvet and then in oilskin so it wouldn't get damp and moldy. The original was an old journal that had been handed down in his family from father to son for almost two hundred years.

He told me he carried the copy around with him with the rest of his gear in his foot locker.

"I rewrote what was in the journal for the next generation in case the book is lost or destroyed. It's my good-luck charm," he said. "The journal is so old the binding came apart many years ago. It's written in a fine spidery handwriting, faded with age but still legible. If anything happens to me, Gene, the book goes to my mother and father along with the typewritten copy I had made at the same time

as this one. Then it goes to my brother, and he'll pass it on to his son. I don't have a wife or kids. It's in a safety deposit box in New Orleans, Louisiana. My parents have the location and number."

I knew he had been born somewhere in New Orleans, but he had never elaborated. Now in the hotel room in Seoul, a couple of big bottles of beer in front of us, he started to tell me about his family. His father had been one of those Cajuns who had left the bayous in Louisiana and moved to New Orleans, where he had assimilated completely into southern life. He'd married a girl from New England who had moved south and he forgot his Creole patois, except for the odd word. He left his children a different heritage from that of his ancestors.

"My father," said Andrew, "even gave us English names. If I had been born in the bayou country, I would have been called André. My father changed his first name to Henry from Henri and pronounced Dugas the English way. He said it was time we moved into the twentieth century and assimilated instead of living in the past. Do you know anything about the Cajuns, Gene?"

I confessed I didn't. "I thought they were the descendants of an Indian tribe that had intermarried with the white men."

"No," said Andrew shaking his head. "Their bloodlines

go back to France in the 1500s. When Jacques Cartier planted his first colonies in the New World in the 1530s, one of those colonies was Port Royal in what is now Nova Scotia. As the population increased from less than one thousand in 1714 to about ten thousand in 1750, the people moved inland and settled what is the Annapolis Valley. It was called l'Acadie in French--Acadia--and there were a number of settlements, one of which was Grand Pré. Another was Port Hébert--l'Acadie's port to the sea.

"The Cajuns of Louisiana are the descendants of the Acadians. The Acadians wanted to remain neutral in the perpetual wars between France and England, but England was afraid they were a potential fifth column and tried to force them to swear allegiance to England. When the Acadians refused, the English decided to get rid of them by deporting them to English colonies to the South. Some of them ended up in Louisiana, a French possession at the time.

"But I'm not trying to give you a history lesson, Gene, just the background of this family journal. What happened in 1756 was brutal. Women and children were separated from husbands and fathers. Whole families were split up and shipped off at random. Destinations were changed, in many cases once the ships were at sea; some unscrupulous captains sold the Acadians as slave labour in Virginia and the Carolinas, and some of the ships were wrecked off Cape Hatteras, a trea-

cherous and storm-ridden area. There were few survivors of the wrecks. A number of the Acadians dispersed in the colonies were left to shift for themselves; others found their way back to French territory. A colony remained in Louisiana in the bayou country. These people kept to themselves, did not integrate and developed their own Creole language from French. They remained isolated and stiff-necked, stubbornly determined to keep the outside world out of their territory.

"This was my background, and this was what my father turned his back on. And when I came of age, he passed this journal down to me as I must pass it on."

I was curious. "Who wrote the journal? What's in it?"

"It was written by a woman called Marie Hébert and covers a period of forty-five years as well as a retrospect of her life and memories before her marriage at the age of seventeen. When she was eight or nine, she was taken with her mother, sisters and brother from Grand Pré and deported. The ship was no better than those used to transport slaves. Many died on the voyage, and their bodies were thrown overboard. There was fever; the water was bad. They were violently seasick and were not allowed above decks for air and exercise. The holds were dark prisons, reeking of vomit and shit. Off the coast of Cape Hatteras in North Carolina, the ship went down. There were a few survivors, one of whom was

Marie Hébert, who had been lashed to a spar with a woman's dress--probably her mother's. She was washed ashore unconscious, and fisherfolk who lived in the area found her. I don't know about the other survivors, only what is in this journal. Her rescuers tended to her and because they could not understand her speech, called her Mare--from the sea. I think it's Latin. It was close enough to Marie, and she accepted the name as her own.

"She was raised by a poor, but kind, family and learned their language--English. Year by year she lost her mother tongue, but not her memories. When she was sixteen, she was courted by and married a man--a fellow Acadian whose name was Dugas and whose family had been one of those sent to the English colonies. It was Dugas who gave her back her past, her first language and her heritage. He taught her to read and write French and English. When they had been married a few years, they moved to New Orleans, and when they realized there were others from Acadia in the bayous, they moved there to be among their own people. Probably they were searching for family who might have gone there as well. Marie Hébert was my ancestor. I won't even try to figure out how many 'great-greats' she would be."

I was amazed. It was an unusual story. "How did you learn so much about the history?" I asked.

"Well, the journal made me curious, and there were also

hints my father dropped casually over the years. I had to have the journal translated because I don't know Cajun or French. And I decided the history was worth following up. But you know something, Gene, if I live through this lousy war, I'm going to Acadia, to where it once existed, and see if I can find any of my roots. I mean, there have to be records of our people there. They lived, died, were buried. The best place to start would be the church records and the graveyards. There must be names on stones, on family burial plots. I have to find anything that would give me a feeling of continuity, a sense of ancestry, other than this journal. Don't you ever have the feeling that you would like to visit the homes of your ancestors? You said your ancestors go back to the settlement of Virginia, so somewhere in England there must be some evidence that your roots grew in another soil."

"To tell you the truth, I never thought of it." I absently pushed the beer bottle aside and traced a wet circle on the tabletop with my forefinger. "You've made me see something I never saw before. But I guess you're right. It would be one hell of a search. If I get out of this mess over here alive, I'm going back to Virginia and take a look at that family tree and ask my mother some questions. Look, let's make a pact. We'll keep in touch with one another to let each other know how we're doing. It would be funny if we discovered that one of my ancestors had fought against one

of yours at the Battle of Hastings." I laughed.

He grinned. "Sure...more likely at Crécy, Poitiers or Agincourt."

"And how about at Waterloo?" I kidded. "We English were there, too."

We both laughed. It was funny. We finished our beers and a few more after that. The room began to revolve. I was too polluted to make it to my room down the hall and flopped on the other single in Andrew's room. The week sped by, and pretty soon he went back to the front, and I was given a desk job at army headquarters in Seoul until I could walk properly. It took a while for my legs to heal, and I ended up with a permanent limp. It didn't stop me from pushing a pencil though, and the money was useful.

The war ended in 1953, but it was 1954 before Andrew was discharged. I figured I might as well stay and wind up some of the army's paperwork and I got back to the States just a few months after Andrew. We kept in touch, but it was 1955 before we saw one another again. Meanwhile I hadn't been idle, although it was kind of hard settling down to civilian life after four years of military life. I used to get nightmares at times. I'd be back on that minefield, seeing bodies and limbs flying in all directions. Once I woke up screaming. I had dreamt I was sitting on the ground in a widening slick of blood while I cradled a part of a shattered

leg in a chewed-up army boot in my arms like a baby. I woke up in a cold sweat and looked at my hands expecting to see them covered in blood. It wasn't so bad during the day as long as I kept busy, but the nights were the worst. I was afraid to fall asleep.

And I tried really hard to keep busy, even though I couldn't find a job I'd be happy with. I had talked to my mother and gone to see the agency that had researched and drawn up the family tree. I poked around in some libraries and archives. Whenever I could, I would take material to my bachelor apartment and read about that period. There were some old records and books that could not be released from storage areas, but I took a lot of notes. What I found threw me into a flap, a nice flap. It was impossible, and I tried to find other sources of verification. I was getting as bad as Andrew with his family-history kick.

I don't know what it was, maybe delayed reaction to the effects of the war and my wounds, but I got sick. I wasn't getting enough sleep. Those nightmares broke up my rest, and I was afraid to close my eyes again after they woke me up in near hysterics. I guess I went into a kind of depression for a while and couldn't function ~~too well. The medics at the~~ veterans' hospital gave me all kinds of pills to help me sleep and pep me up, but when that didn't help, I added to it with booze. I hit the bottle a bit too much and probably

would have ended up an alcoholic if I hadn't received a phone call from Andrew who was at his parents' home in New Orleans. What I said, or in this case, what I didn't say, must have disturbed him because the next thing I knew he was at my door. I had lost all conception of time. He took one look at me and exploded. First I got a punch on the jaw that sent me reeling, and then a hug that almost cracked my ribs. And then he started yelling.

"You son of a bitch! Is this what I saved you for? So you could kill yourself with that Goddamn rotgut? I should have left you to bleed to death in that minefield. It would have been a lot quicker than this!"

I know I smelled. My apartment stank of stale liquor, vomit and unwashed bedding and clothes. I hadn't shaved in I'd forgotten how long. Talk about a lost weekend...this was a lost six months. Andrew hauled me into the bathroom, shoved me into the shower and scrubbed me. He tossed the clothes I had been wearing into a wastebasket and made me put on fresh ones he found in the closet. He bought food, cooked it and forced me to eat. He shaved me and cut my hair. After two weeks of this, I started feeling like a human being again. He tossed out the bottles and kept me away from places that sold or served liquor. When I could think clearly again, he told me where we were going.

"You and I have a date. Two hundred years ago, the ships

left Acadia with my ancestors. Over a period of eight years, 10,000 or so were dispersed. We're going to Acadia to find my roots; we're going to England to find yours, and then to France to trace my origins. We have our army pay, and we're going to use some of it or all of it if we have to. I want to know...I have to know, and it has bothered me long enough. I promised myself if I lived through the war, I would go back and look up my ancestors. I'm not leaving you here to the bottle. You're coming with me."

I looked at him. He was trembling with an intensity, an eagerness that was infectious. He was willing me to go with him. I couldn't say no. I knew I had to go. But I couldn't tell him what was eating me inside. I had to find the right time for that and other things as well. How would he handle my screaming nightmares?

And so we made arrangements, and a month later we were up in the Annapolis Valley in Nova Scotia, wandering around the countryside with our dufflebags. We went from town to town, village to village, sticking our noses into libraries, into church records, hunting up little cemeteries off country roads. We had a set of maps and wandered where we pleased. There was usually some house or little inn where we could stay. For a bit of money there was always a roof over our heads and enough to eat. The people were very hospitable.

When we reached the Grand Pré area, we found our first

clue. There had been a huge clan of Dugas living there before the dispersion in 1756, and some had managed to get back since then. We started checking them out. From a few local people we got bits and pieces of information that led us to some very old cemeteries. It took a lot of hunting. Some of the tombstones had cracked and crumbled. The lettering on some had been obliterated by wind, rain and time. There were a few stones that looked as if they had been tended throughout the centuries. The stones had been reset, cemented, weeds had been pulled and even flowers planted. It was an act of love that must have spanned two hundred years.

Our hands got dirty and scraped as we brushed and rubbed aside an accumulation of centuries of neglect. We found some old stones that went back to the early 1600s. There could have been others much older, but the lettering was barely legible. Those old monuments had such a history engraved on them. Some groupings carried the same date of death or an interval of a few days. I was sure it could only refer to whole families dying at the same time or a few days apart from an epidemic or perhaps an accident. We hadn't realized how much those simple stones could tell.

And then I found something. It was a stone on which were carved the names of a family--Hélène Hébert, mother and children, Marie, Francine, Carole and Paul. It was in French but easy to translate. The roots were the same as in English.

The date was July, 1756 and under it the word Banni. I had learned from Andrew that this meant Banished. I yelled for him to come quick, and he ran over. He dropped to his knees in front of it and then prostrated himself on the ground. He reached up and began brushing away at what looked like some scratchings at the bottom of the stone. Carefully he wiped away at the letters with a handkerchief, and the dust or soil embedded in the grooves came away, bit by bit. The words were Jamais Retrouvés and under them, Mari Jean Hébert, Retourné 1770.

"What does it say?" I asked.

Andrew looked up at me and moved back onto his knees. His eyes were luminous, and his jaw was set. His lips were trembling. He looked close to tears. Never found and Husband Jean Hébert, returned 1770, he translated. "So that's it! Hélène was separated from her husband Jean, who was on another ship. The one she was on went down, and her daughter Marie, or Mare, was the only survivor. Jean would have spent years looking for them and discovered the ship had never arrived. He couldn't have known he had a daughter still alive, and even if he had, she would have been impossible to find. He probably searched in the Carolinas and Virginia, as well as in Louisiana. Then he must have returned here to set up a stone in their memory. I guess that's the story."

I put my hand on Andrew's shoulder and squatted so I

could look directly into his face. "Andrew, there's more. That's not the whole story. I don't know how to start...how to say this. I did some digging into our family background when I got back from Korea. My mother was a little ashamed of that relative who was shipped to the colonies as a convicted criminal. But that ship was full of prisoners, all right, political prisoners, exiled by the English, and it came from Port Hébert in Acadia. One of the passengers was a Jean Hébert who found work with a printer. He married and started a family. And the descendants of that family were my ancestors. My name was Hébert originally, not Herbert. It was anglicized over the years and my name, Gene, is an anglicized version of Jean, which really is John in French. There seem to be 'Genes' in our family back to the early 1800s. I remembered what you said about cemeteries and I went looking in Virginia just as we did here. I found Jean Hébert's grave. He must have come back here to set up that memorial and then returned to Virginia to live out his days with his second family."

Andrew's face went white. He pushed himself to his feet and slammed his fist into his other hand. "My God, we are of the same stock, of the same period! And look how we met and became friends! Look what we have been through together! Could it have been blood calling to blood, or something else? And think of how we ended up in the same unit from different

induction centres in different States: It's not possible!"

I shook my head. I didn't want to get emotional, but I could feel tears welling in my eyes. I just grabbed him and hugged him as hard as I could, and we stood there for a few minutes before that stone marker, gathering the memories of the centuries into our hearts and souls. Had anyone seen us there, he would have thought we were mad. But who cared? The Héberts had found each other after two hundred years. We wouldn't be separated again.

And as for the nightmares, I hadn't had one since we started out three weeks before. Somehow I had the feeling there would be no more.

The Cemetery

My family were graveyard caretakers right back to my great-grandfather, and perhaps even farther. We always thought it was an honourable profession, though many people view our work with distaste. There is no doubt it can sometimes be a sad and depressing occupation. As the caretaker of an old and large cemetery in Warsaw, I have seen sorrow and grief on a daily basis. My job is to cut the grass, tend the graves and make certain there is no desecration of the tombstones. I also keep track of records in the office at the small stone house where I live, at the entrance to the cemetery.

I'm sure I don't have to tell you what went on in Europe during the war. Those who died before the war and were already here were lucky. They escaped the fate of those unlucky millions tagged for systematic elimination. Yes, death comes as the end of everyone, but it is much more reassuring to know, at least, that a burial plot has been prepared--a plot where family can come and pay respects. You may find it hard to believe, but this act of paying respect to the dead was responsible for reuniting a family after forty-six years of separation. Only once in my years as caretaker did I experience anything as unusual as that, and it was all the

result of a man's search for a burial plot.

The story began, or I should say ended, on a sunny morning in July, 1985. I had just opened the cemetery gates at nine and as they swung silently inward on well-oiled hinges I thought the day was another to add to eternity. A few minutes after I had entered my little cottage near the entrance and hung up the keys on a rack, I heard a knock at the door. I opened it to find a man in a grey summer suit. The grey of his hair appeared to match his pearl-grey cotton shirt. He was of medium height and slender build. Before I could say anything, the man introduced himself as Aaron Amdursky of London, England. He spoke a broken Polish with a marked British accent.

"I will need your help," he said looking a little apologetic. "Forgive my poor Polish, but I have not spoken it for a long time. I'm looking for the grave of my father Moses Amdursky who was buried here in the summer of 1936. I was twenty years old when my mother, brothers, sister and I followed the hearse through those iron gates. The last time I was here was in 1939 just before the Germans attacked. I don't remember where my father is buried, and I've come all the way from London to pay my respects."

"Of course, I will help you," I said. "Let me look up the files so I will know where he is buried. It is a good thing you came this early. I'm about to start my rounds.

Come with me and while we walk I'll give you a history lesson you'll never forget. You won't think of this cheerless place as a burial ground of dead hopes as I once did. You'll have an entirely different point of view after we've finished."

Amdursky smiled and nodded his head. "How often do you make your rounds?" he asked after I had checked the cemetery map against a small white card.

"Once a day. There is quite a distance to cover. And I check to see what needs repairing or if the grass has to be cut or flowers planted."

I picked up a straw basket of gardening tools, locked the cottage, and we started up the road.

"Please be careful where you step when we leave the paths to examine some of the stones," I warned. "I wouldn't want you hurting yourself or knocking over a venerable testimonial to a human existence."

"I'll be careful. You lead and I'll follow."

"Now Mr. Amdursky, over in this area we have stones so old they can be considered historic monuments. See how they lean against one another like old friends, propping themselves up against their immediate neighbours? The stones are markers to different eras in Warsaw's culture and history, and they date from the fifteenth century to the twentieth. From these thousands of stones, we learn something of the

people buried there and the periods they lived in. Not only are the names, dates of birth and death and lineage carved on them, but in many cases the professions are indicated along with epitaphs and benedictions or blessings."

Amdursky pointed to a group of stones. "What are those very plain ones over there?"

"Those tombstones go back to the 1400s. You'll notice they are covered with Hebrew characters carved in bas-relief in the sandstone. The epitaphs are unusual, I've been told."

"What are they?"

"I'm sorry. I can't read them. You find that surprising, don't you? But I'm not Jewish. You don't have to be Jewish to be a caretaker in a Jewish cemetery, the same way you don't have to be Jewish to take care of a synagogue. However, if you are interested, there are translations, and I can tell you where to find them in the cemetery archives."

Amdursky looked pleased. "Yes, I would like that. Thank you. Perhaps on our way back."

We turned left onto a small path where I pointed to a group of stones. Amdursky leaned over to have a closer look.

"These are from a more recent period--the 1500s--see how the styles have changed? Not only are the stones made of pink and white marble but you can see the carvers have begun to copy the characteristics of the Renaissance--floral and animal forms, columns, archways and decorated capitals."

I stopped to pull some weeds at the base of a monument

and dropped the bunch on the path for pick-up later. I waved my hand to the right and Amdursky walked over to look. I followed him.

"Here you see seventeenth century stones. They have a more geometric form. The writing and the ornaments are mixed and balanced, and you see more family and professional crests. After this period, you'll find some of the stones are carved with frames in curved or linear designs. Some are very elaborate, while others are given a third dimension. Constructed like tents from two upright stones joined by a roof, they are supposed to symbolize the desert tents of the ancient Israelites."

"But that is amazing," wondered Amdursky. "Where did you learn so much about this place?"

"It runs in the family. We've been doing this for generations--probably as a means of self-preservation--trying to keep sane doing what is incredibly depressing. So the family decided away back in my grandfather's time to make a study of the place and dig up the history of the monuments, the periods and the artistic movements that influenced the architecture of the stones. My father continued the work, and I have become even more fascinated with it. I'm even thinking of studying Hebrew so I can translate those stones myself--you are smiling."

"But, of course, I'm smiling. I think it is wonderful

to have such an unusual interest. I wish you luck in your studies. I have come to find a grave and am pleasantly surprised to meet a scholarly guide. Tell me more about the stones."

"Well, there are many people here who were famous in their own time, and they lie alongside others who have left no other trace of their existence but a few simple facts recorded on those monuments. I know by the mark of the profession whether they were musicians, writers, teachers, doctors or lawyers. See the violin carved on this one and the book carved on the one over here? One means a musician and the other that either a scholar or a bookbinder is buried here. Perhaps the Hebrew inscription would tell us.

"So, you see, this place of the dead is also a reflection of life. These narrow paths and the crowding recall the conditions under which these people must have once lived in their ghetto. In their lives, they witnessed plague, constant persecution and pogroms. Of course, there has never been anything in history to equal that dark period of destruction that began in 1933 in Germany and plunged the entire world into a war...."

Amdursky's face changed. A look of sadness appeared in his eyes. He took out a handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his face. Even with the shade trees in the cemetery overhanging the paths, the heat was beginning to increase.

Out of respect he kept his hat on, but he removed his jacket and draped it over his arm.

"What section are we coming to now?" he asked.

"This area is a more modern part of the cemetery. Let's take a look at some of the stones. Over there you have the eighteenth century burial plots and again, the styles have changed. The greatest difference occurs in the nineteenth century, for there was a great influence in European taste from the French impressionistic movement and the styles favoured by the Victorians in England. In some cases you have a mixture of both--a bit much, if you want my opinion. I hope I'm not boring you. We are almost there."

"Here we are back in the twentieth century. As you can see, there are many stones and larger monuments commemorating thousands of unnamed victims who lost their lives between 1914 and 1918. Not all were soldiers. And farther on we'll come to the burial ground dedicated to the memory of those who died in the Holocaust.

"But first come down this path to the section where your father is buried. These stones are from the 1930s. Step over here where we can get a clearer view. Let me see...1931... keep walking...1932, 1933...look at that unusual stone. The carving is a work of art--a floral in stone--1934 and continue all the way down this line. This one needs some cement work. I'll do it next week. And here are the stones from

1936. Slow down now. If you walk so fast you'll miss it."

Amdursky had quickened his pace and walked right by it. "Here it is!" I exclaimed putting my hand on his shoulder and pulling him back gently. I moved out of the way and pointed at the tombstone while Amdursky fished in his jacket pocket for a small prayer book so he could recite the prayers for the dead. He pulled his glasses from his breast pocket, laid his jacket over the stone beside his father's and slipped his glasses on his nose. He glanced down at the monument.

I saw him stiffen and then stagger. "My God! Do you see that? Look at that stone...look under where my father's name and date of birth and death are carved! Someone's painted my sister's, mother's and two of my brothers' names in black... and...oh, my God! My name is on the stone, too!"

I jumped to his side as I saw him topple forward. Sweat was running down his face and his skin was paste-white in colour. He put his head down on top of the stone and began to sob like a child. I kept my hand on his shoulder and waited. Suddenly it seemed as if the sunshine had turned grey and the birds were no longer chirping. A breeze blew through the section we were in, stirring the leaves on the trees and ruffling the grass. I shivered and goose flesh appeared on my bare forearms. Time seemed to stop. I don't know how long it was before Amdursky finally straightened up. His face was chalk-white and there were beads of sweat on his forehead and

upper lip. I was afraid he was having a heart attack. I put my arm around him.

"But it can't be! It can't be!" he kept repeating. "I'm alive...look at me. I'm not dead. I'm Aaron. Why is my name on that stone? And how come it's so well-tended--even better than some of the others here?"

And then I remembered.

"A few years ago," I said, " a man came from Sweden to visit this grave and he returned the next day with a small can of black paint and a brush and painted the names of those who had died in the Holocaust on the stone. Of course, I gave him permission. Why not? I knew about the Holocaust. I was a young child during the war. That's something you don't forget. I take good care of all my graves, but this one even more. The man gave me one hundred American dollars to look after it, plant flowers and repair any crumbling of the stone."

Amdursky was still shaking. I sat him down on an adjoining base of a monument. He was staring at the painted inscriptions as if mesmerized. "I have to know who the man was. I must know who painted the names. What did he look like? What did he say his name was? Maybe he was a cousin. Why didn't he paint the rest of the family's names on the tombstone? My other brothers' names aren't there. My God! Do you suppose they're alive?"

He jumped up and began pacing up and down the narrow path, ten feet up and ten feet down. I realized he was working himself into a state of anxiety and I was worried.

"Come back with me to the office," I told him. "I don't like the way you look. We'll look up the files and I'll give you the information. You need a good stiff drink. You're too pale." I wanted to get him back so I'd be near a telephone in case something happened to him. He wouldn't go until he had said the prayer for the dead over the grave. Then he began walking slowly back beside me. As we walked he told me something about his life. He was sixty-six years old and was a semi-retired merchant. He had managed to flee from Poland and reached England during the early years of the war. There he had joined the Polish Free Forces under British command. He'd been posted to Palestine.

"That was a horrible experience for me," he admitted. "How would you feel if you were ordered to prevent Jewish survivors from the camps from entering the Promised Land, when you're one of them? After the war I settled in England. I never came back to my birthplace...until now."

When we got back to the house at the gates, I sat him in a chair and gave him a shot of vodka. I didn't want him dying on me. I went into the files and found the name and address of the visitor who had painted the names. He lived somewhere near Goteborg, Sweden, and his name was Judah Am-

dursky.

Aaron almost choked on his vodka. "It's my brother! He's alive! I thought he was dead! Oh, my God!" He put the glass down and made for the door.

"Wait a minute. Don't rush. Where are you going? I asked.

"I'm running to the nearest Post Office to send a telegram to Sweden," he said looking back over his shoulder.

"Don't run or you'll have a heart attack," I warned him. "The nearest Post Office is three miles away." I would have gone with him, but I wasn't allowed to leave the premises unless I had a replacement. "Let me know what happens," I shouted after him.

* * *

Aaron Amdursky returned to the cemetery late the next day. He was carrying a paper bag. His telegram hadn't arrived until that morning, and he had waited in his hotel room until almost five p.m. when the phone call came from Goteborg.

"It was my brother Judah," Aaron said. "We both started crying. 'Aaron,' he asked,'where have you been? I thought you were dead. I haven't seen you in forty-six years.' I think we spent more time crying than talking. I was afraid the excitement would kill him. He's seventy years old, you

know. When we calmed down a little, he told me my other brother David was alive and lived near him. Both of them managed to survive the war, one in Buchenwald concentration camp and the other in Maidenek. Two other brothers, a sister and my mother died in the 1943 Warsaw-Ghetto uprising.

"And in a few weeks or so, after I get back, my brothers are flying to London to visit. David is seventy-five and Judah will have to look after him. You don't know how wonderful it is to find family after so many years without anyone."

"I'm so very happy for you, Mr. Amdursky. I can't believe that such a wonderful thing happened in my cemetery."

"Thank you. But first, before I go, I have something in my bag." Amdursky smiled. He reached in and pulled out a large bottle of vodka. "That is for you with my thanks for the best guided tour of my life. And this is for the tombstone."

With a flourish he pulled out a can of paint remover, a brush and a rag. "We have some unfinished business. Let's go right now and remove my name from that stone."

The Golden Cross

For more than four years since I left the priesthood in 1982, I have been waiting for a nameless man to find me. I know he is looking for me because of Brother Anselme who has finally gone to join his God or his Devil--I do not know which. I hope Brother Anselme has finally found in death the peace that eluded him in life. He carried a cross for over sixty years to his own personal Calvary, and in death he bequeathed it to me. Now I am being hunted by someone searching for information to unlock the doors to his past. This man knows that Brother Anselme is the key. No, I'm not crazy and I can prove it. In my possession I have a manuscript written by Brother Anselme--a manuscript he must have begun when he joined the seminary in 1947 after leaving the army. I have been instructed to read it on Brother Anselme's death. But I am getting ahead of the story. I must be clear about the details so I will know what to do when the time comes.

* * *

In 1976, when I was twenty-six years old, I was admitted into the seminary of the Brothers of the Holy Cross,

located near Quebec City. Brother Anselme, a teacher, had already been on the staff there for almost thirty years. He was kind, understanding and an exceptional educator--something I needed, for I experienced periods of self-doubt when I felt uncertain whether I could remain in the priesthood. I did not feel that my heart and soul were worthy enough. I also had a stubbornness that made me question, even defy, certain rules and commands. Brother Anselme tried many times to help me with my inner struggle, and a close bond sprang up between us. In 1976 he was already seventy-seven years old, and I saw in him a wise old man--the grandfather I had never known. But I sensed that he drank from some bitter well of anguish. Often when he led the seminarians at services in chapel, I felt that his contrition and pleas for divine forgiveness sprang from a sense of unworthiness and guilt flowing from a deep despair. His pleas had an intensity I did not hear from the other Brothers. Many times I noticed tears trickling down his wrinkled cheeks before he bowed his head even lower to conceal them. I knew he must have sinned, and once I asked him: "But aren't we all sinners? Why should some feel the weight of their sins more than others? How many years must one plead for forgiveness and do penance before the sin is absolved?"

If I expected an explanation, I was wrong. Instead came a cryptic answer which left me even more curious than be-

fore.

"Our Lord said, 'Go ye and sin no more', but I, in my weakness and irresolution, went out and sinned again. And I could not forgive myself for that. I had compounded the first sin."

"But surely," I argued, "forgiveness lies with God, not with oneself." And Brother Anselme turned his world-weary old eyes on me with such sadness, and confessed: "I dared to place myself where the head of My Master lay on the cross. Therein lay the third and greatest sin. Presumption is a cardinal sin."

I did not understand any of this, and he would not explain further. I know now he realized his days were coming to an end. One day he summoned me and gave me a bulky sealed manuscript.

"I am passing this to you as a sacred trust so it isn't destroyed when I die," he said. "It is my confession and hopefully my vindication in the eyes of God. If anything happens to me, you are to open the package, read the manuscript and keep it, until someone comes to inquire about me. Then you are to surrender the manuscript to this person, who is searching for the truth. I have left a letter with the head of our Order to be given to this man when he returns after my death."

"But how will I know this nameless person?"

"He will come with a cross."

"Do you mean to say that he's a priest, or is he a layman?" All this was very perplexing.

"He could be either. I do not know," was his answer. "But you will know the cross when you see it, for it is described in my story. Promise me, promise me on your life that you will do as I ask."

I gave him my word, although I had strong misgivings about the propriety of his actions. Later, I realized we had both done something contrary to the rules of the Order and perhaps that was one of the things that made me decide to leave. I had not yet learned to become totally subservient, and I knew this weakness in me made me unsuitable for seminary life.

A week later Brother Anselme had a stroke. He was paralysed and could not speak. Only his eyes showed that he understood me and still felt emotion. The day came when he was taken from the seminary to a hospice for elderly and sick priests, where he was tended until the day he died. Brother Anselme had left instructions that I was to be informed of his death, and I decided it was time to read the manuscript so I could better understand what had fueled his anguish. I would have to be prepared so I could deal with the man who was searching for me and the truth.

The manuscript, wrapped in brown paper and taped with

adhesive, has been sitting in a desk drawer for more than five years. I have removed it and torn the paper away. Propped against my writing stand is a letter from the seminary informing me that my long-awaited visitor has collected the letter left for him by Brother Anselme. My name and address are in that letter. I can delay no longer for the visit is imminent. The manuscript is in a spring-back folder. Inside there are pages and pages of fine, but extremely neat handwriting, double-spaced on ruled foolscap. I must finish it today. The late-afternoon sun shining through my window gives me sufficient light for the task. My curiosity is matched by a strange sense of dread caused, perhaps, by my invasion of a very private life and what I shall have to say when I am confronted by the man.

* * *

Before taking Orders and adopting the name by which I am known in religion--Brother Anselme--my name was Georges Bertrand. On my father's side I am descended from an old and honourable French-Canadian family dating back to the early settlements of the seventeenth century. In the late 1890s my father married a woman whose family was English, and although it was a love-match she was not acceptable to his family, nor he to hers. Born in 1899, I was the second child

of this union. An older sister died in infancy and after me there were three other children in rapid succession.

As a child I was curious, even precocious, possessing a marked affectionate nature. Once I overheard my mother say to a neighbour: "He will have much heartache. He loves too quickly and too easily. His loves and his life will bring him much grief."

When I was fifteen, World War I broke out. I joined the Canadian Army at sixteen, lying about my age. I was tall, able and fairly intelligent, and no one challenged the legality of my enlistment. I was posted to the Vandoos, the 22nd Regiment, which as part of the Fifth Brigade was sent to France for active service at the front.

At the age of seventeen, I was at the Battle of the Somme and went through the horrors of that bloody assault. Wave after wave of attacking Allied soldiers was pinned down on the enemy barbed-wire entanglements and mown down by German machine-gun fire. The British losses alone on that first day of the Somme offensive were over 60,000 men. Like many who survived, I was able to recall in vivid detail the course of that battle years after I had recovered from the experience. Perhaps it would have been better to forget the anguish and agony I suffered in the mud and squalor of trench warfare, watching my companions dying all around me.

In August, 1916 I took a sniper's bullet in my left

shoulder and was sent first to a field hospital for treatment and then to Paris to convalesce. After months of inactivity, I returned to duty with my unit in time to take part in the Battle of Vimy Ridge in April, 1917. It was here I suffered a breakdown that rendered me useless for the rest of the war. Again I was sent to Paris, and hospitalized in a centre treating shell-shocked troops.

Although I recovered slowly, I became useful to the staff and patients at the hospital, for I could speak both French and English. I became a translator and a sort of intermediary between the French doctors and nurses and British and English-speaking Canadians. It was in this capacity of translator that I met and subsequently fell in love with a volunteer assistant-nurse who was trying to communicate with a wounded Canadian from Ontario. Mireille Dubois, my first love, was only seventeen.

When she turned her violet-blue eyes to mine as I stood at a soldier's bedside, explaining what he had asked for, I knew I was lost. Her long black lashes gave an appearance of depth to her eyes. She had an oval-shaped face, high cheekbones, and her eyes tilted slightly at the corners, giving her a Eurasian look. She was the most beautiful thing I had seen in the entire dirty and nightmarish war. I stood there, my mouth open, staring at her like an idiot. She smiled and bent down to tend to the soldier. Her hair was pushed up un-

der those shapeless caps nurse's aides wore on the wards, but I could see coal black tendrils escaping down her neck and around her forehead. Foolishly I wondered what would happen if I pulled her cap off, when suddenly it caught in the pulley hook attached to the soldier's traction device. As she straightened a cascade of wavy black hair swept down around her shoulders. She was exquisite. I gasped and found my tongue. "Leave it down."

"Oh, non, monsieur, c'est défendu. It is forbidden." She snatched the cap from the hook, glancing around swiftly to see if the incident had been observed by a head nurse. Then she deftly twisted her thick hair into a knot and slipped the cap over her head.

From that moment on I could think of nothing else but her. It was a year before I was sufficiently recovered and daring enough to consider a serious relationship with Mireille. I was sensitive enough to realize that what I felt could be misconstrued by Mireille as a flirtation. It was very common for patients to fall in love with their nurses and convince themselves it was the real thing. I thought about it a great deal and still came to the same conclusion. I loved her with an intensity that even I could not believe, much less understand.

When I asked her to marry me in mid-1918, I bought her an engagement gift--a beautifully crafted, little gold cru-

cifix. It had a small diamond at the top, and where Christ's hands and feet had been pierced and nailed to the cross were three small rubies symbolizing His blood. For Mireille, this was a gift of great value and meaning, for she came from a religious Catholic family.

When I gave her the gift, I admit with shame that I described the gems on the cross, personalizing the diamond as myself, the ruby at the base as Mireille and the other stones on the arms of the cross as the children we would have one day. Later when I was older, I realized I had committed a terrible blasphemy, calling down the wrath of God on my head.

I went from folly to vice, and again to another and greater folly and vice.

When my emotional and mental state improved, the doctors permitted me to leave the hospital for a day at a time, and later for several days. Mireille took me home to meet her family and to get their approval. I am sure I made a good impression. I was tall, fairly-good-looking and very careful to watch my manners. What convinced them, however, was my command of French. I doubt they would have accepted me had I been British. The family began making plans for the wedding as soon as I was discharged from the army. Mireille and I became lovers. It was our first experience, and it affected us very deeply. If it was possible to love one an-

other even more, then such was the case. We had no eyes for anyone or anything but each other.

By September, 1918, the Allied armies began to push the German forces eastward in France. The tide was beginning to turn against the invaders. In an effort to recoup their losses on land and bring Britain to her knees, Germany stepped up her U-boat offensive. So successful was the U-boat blockade from January to April, 1918, that one out of every four British ships leaving port went to the bottom of the sea.

The British Navy countered this dangerous development by intensifying its sea patrols, especially in the English Channel, where vital communication lines with the Continent were under threat. The Dover Patrol laid down a barrage of mines and then attacked and cleaned out the U-boat base at Zeebrugge.

In spring of 1918, the authorities ordered a routine evacuation of sick and wounded Canadian and British military personnel. When the commands were issued I was frantic. I didn't want to go. First I raged against military callousness in separating us. Then we tried to arrange a quick wedding, but it was impossible. We tried everything, including an insane plan to smuggle Mireille onto the troop ship. We swore eternal love, promising one another to write and to wait for one another. As soon as the war was over, we would

be re-united and joined in marriage.

But our plans were thwarted. En route between Boulogne and Dover, the hospital ship I was on struck a mine. Had I been immobilized like many of the wounded on the ship, I might not have survived. But I was ambulatory and thus able to make my way to the main deck where I did the best I could to get as many of the wounded into boats or lashed to life rafts. As the ship was settling, I scrambled down a rope dangling over the side. I was almost down when something hit me from above and that was the last I remembered.

When I finally regained consciousness in a hospital in London, my recovery was agonizingly slow and painful. My memory was impaired, and it was a long time before I could piece together my confused impressions of what had preceeded my blackout. I had to rely on the statements of others who had been there and seen what had happened. A patient in the same ward as I was in told me he had grabbed me by the hair, when I tumbled unconscious into the water and kept me afloat until I was hauled over the gunwale into the boat. A rescue ship picked up most of the survivors and took them to London.

Slowly my memory began to return. I was plagued by thoughts of a beautiful girl, but I was unsure who she was and where I had known her. It was months before I realized that I had loved her, that her name was Mireille and I had

left her behind in Paris. From a drowsy, lethargic convalescent, I suddenly turned into an agitated and frenzied man trying to find my lost love. I wrote letters to her at her parents' home. There was no answer. I wrote to the hospital where she had worked, but she had left in April, 1918 and they had no word of her. I wrote to friends but the letters were returned. In the aftermath of the war I found no means of tracing one casualty among so many thousands of missing. My mind could not accept the loss. I swung violently between depression and hysteria, the psychological damage impossible to assess. I wanted to die, but I couldn't. I tried to end my life but was restrained by the medical staff. When I appeared to improve, I suddenly fell victim to bursts of hysterical and irrational behaviour.

It was over a year later that I was repatriated to Canada. I had convinced myself that Mireille was dead. Only that way could I assuage my guilt for leaving her. I was a man with no emotions, as if I had spent them all in that emotional cyclone of anguish I had endured as a result of her loss. I became withdrawn--a silent and morose man unable to reach out to anyone. What probably saved me was the routine obedience to discipline and order my army duties had instilled in me. It was this that made me choose the Army as a career. I remained in the service.

My behaviour under fire as well as my bravery on the

sinking ship earned me several decorations and a promotion to Corporal. I applied for an officer's commission, was accepted and spent the next twenty years moving up in the ranks, posted as an instructor to different Army camps across Canada. I never married, although I was involved in several relationships in the late twenties and thirties. Perhaps my melancholy, ably concealed, discouraged any kind of permanent arrangement. I didn't want to love again. It had been too painful.

In September, 1939, when World War II erupted, I was forty years old and had reached the rank of major. Posted to the Canadian First Division, I landed in Britain in December of that year and was given command of a Battalion as Lieutenant-Colonel. I and my troops sat in England waiting as the Canadian build-up of troops continued--all of them straining for offensive action against the Germans.

In 1942 came the disaster at Dieppe. Canadian losses totalled over three thousand in two days--more than half of them prisoners of war. I was one of those captured, a plum falling into the hands of the enemy. I sat out the next year and a half in a prison camp, chafing at internment, while my mind concocted and rejected dozens of plans to escape and rejoin the war effort against the Nazis.

In early summer of 1944, two other Canadians and I escaped from a prison camp in eastern France. One of the men

was recaptured and shot, but Major Maurice and I managed to make contact with the Resistance. They supplied us with forged papers and moved us from place to place steadily westward until we were smuggled through the shifting front lines. My command of French got me out of several dangerous situations. I rejoined the Canadian troops in July, 1944 just after they had captured Caen, then moved on with the unit to take Falaise.

On August 24, 1944 the French Second Armoured Division rolled into Paris, followed the next day by a triumphant General De Gaulle. The German garrison surrendered, after openly disobeying Hitler's order to burn the capital.

On August 26, Allied forces poured across the Seine River at four points between Paris and the Atlantic. I was with the first wave. My arrival in Paris revived painful memories.

Some months later when I had a few hours away from my military duties, I decided to revisit the places I remembered from World War I. I asked my jeep driver to wait while I walked through the streets looking for the hospital and other buildings. Twenty-six years had passed, but some of the buildings still stood, older and more weatherbeaten than the last time I had seen them. The house where Mireille had lived with her parents had been turned into a warehouse. I felt a wave of disappointment sweep over me. I was getting

tired and thirsty and found a small café about two blocks from the warehouse where I could sit quietly for a little while and have a drink, anything as long as it was wet. I walked in and sat down at a small table covered with a checkered cloth, near the window.

A young woman came to serve me. She handed me a menu and without even looking at her, I requested a coffee and a cognac. I glanced up when she returned.

I froze. For an instant I thought my heart had stopped beating. I tried to speak, and a whisper emerged from my mouth. She noticed my confusion and asked if I was ill. By then I managed to regain a small shred of composure and nodded. Again I stared at her. It couldn't be Mireille, but this girl was the image of my lost love. Her dark hair fell to her shoulders like Mireille's, and those long, dark lashes fringing her blue-violet eyes were Mireille's. Her skin was pale, and those high cheek-bones gave her an almost Eurasian look. Mireille's oval face had had the same bone structure. She couldn't have been more than twenty-three, perhaps a little more. It was hard to tell, I thought, as I appraised her while she stood there waiting for me to say something. Finally I nodded, and she went to the back of the café while she watched me surreptitiously.

I felt like a fool. I was no longer a young man, and my heart was thumping and skipping beats in my chest. It's

a sign from above, I thought. I have been given a second chance, another Mireille. I must know more about her.

When she returned to ask if I wished another coffee, I looked to see if she wore any rings. Then I deliberately began questioning her.

"Do you own the café?"

"No, monsieur, I only work here."

"Are you a native Parisienne or from another city, or perhaps from the country?"

She was puzzled by my interest. I could see that look in her eyes, but my Canadian uniform and badges of rank must have reassured her. For her, I was one of the Liberators and my French was impeccable although it had a different accent from what she was used to hearing.

"Yes, I was born in Paris just before the end of the First World War. My father was a soldier who died during the war, and my mother died in childbirth. My grandparents raised me, but they died in Paris in 1943 when the city was starving. My fiancé was killed in the north of France in 1940, resisting the Nazi invaders. I am all alone."

My heart went out to her. I must be insane, I thought. I have never felt this way since I was a teen-ager in love with Mireille. I introduced myself to her and mentioned that I had been in Paris as a soldier in 1917 and had been repatriated to Canada after the war. She told me her name was

Claudine Aubert.

When I left, I slipped a sizeable tip under my cup. I knew I was coming back. Twice more that week I turned up at the café and each time I arrived with gifts--things she had not seen since 1939--stockings, tinned food, chocolate--and lipstick I had begged from some associates in the Women's Army Corps.

She appeared enchanted with me. She must have seen me as a kind, generous, even fascinating man. I suppose my experience and general knowledge surprised her, as did my rank. I would catch her looking at me quizzically at times as if she were wondering what I saw in her. She kept apologizing that she was just a poor orphan who had managed to finish <u>école secondaire</u> and had worked in a bookstore in Paris before the invasion. It appeared to bother her more than it did me. She had read a great deal, and had told me she had been involved in Resistance activities. Once she said she was a nobody compared to me and I had to convince her that that kind of self-disparagement was wrong.

Slowly I noticed a change in her. She became more confident and the hero worship developed into something deeper. After a month had passed, I knew that she was returning my feeling for her. I knew what I wanted. I had waited long enough. One of my colleagues had seen me with Claudine and made a snide remark about cradle-snatching. Another col-

league asked me what my intentions were?

"Strictly honourable," I answered. "I intend to marry her."

And so I finally confessed my feelings to Claudine, and we became engaged. As soon as I could make the necessary arrangements, I planned to marry her. She would be at my side when I returned to Quebec. I took a four-day leave and we went off to the country to be alone together. The consummation of our love was the most extraordinary experience for me. I would never have believed that I could feel that way again. I loved her even more.

We made arrangements for a simple wedding ceremony at a local church. I had asked one of my fellow officers to act as best man. We were waiting for Claudine at the entrance, talking about our plans for the future. When I saw her coming across the square, my heart began to beat like a bird fluttering its wings.

She wore a small hat with a veil and a simple two-piece cream suit which outlined her youthful figure like a caress. As she walked toward me, I put out my arm to escort her up the stairs and through the massive church doors. As I glanced from her face to her neck, I stopped in shock. I couldn't move. My mouth opened and I stared at her unable to utter a word. She became alarmed.

"What is the matter, Georges?" she asked.

I managed a croak. "That, that cross around your neck. How...where did you get it?"

She put her hand to her neck and fingered the crucifix. The diamond at the top and the three rubies winked in the summer sunlight. "It was my mother's. My father gave it to her when they became engaged. When she died, my grandparents kept it and gave it to me when I turned twenty-one. Why do you ask?"

For me this was the supreme blow. I was at the church to take Claudine as my wife, and the realization she was my daughter was more than I could bear. What was worse was that I had already made love to her--an act intolerable by any code. I was damned by religion and by law. I reeled backward as reality struck me like a fist. My best man grabbed me to keep me from falling. I clutched my chest as pain knifed through my heart. My fellow officer must have thought I was having a heart attack. As if in a fog I heard him order Claudine to run quickly into the church and cancel the marriage arrangements while he hailed a taxi to take me to the military hospital. Events were hazy but I was rushed through a battery of tests while I sat like a stone, unfeeling and removed from life.

I remember very little of this period except for what I was told later when I recovered. The doctor said I had slipped into a depression so deep that he feared for my

life. When I tried to commit suicide, the doctor and others he consulted, arranged for my transfer to a mental-health clinic. Although the resources available to military psychiatrists were limited, the doctors tried some drugs on me and attempted to get me to talk about my anguish. They failed. I had withdrawn somewhere inside of myself and locked the door to memory. They lacked the key to open it.

I discovered later that Claudine had tried to see me a number of times, but I had refused. Once when I was at my lowest shortly after the suicide attempt, the doctor thought her visit might help me and allowed the nurse to admit her to my room. What she saw was an emotionally demolished man, his arms in a strait-jacket, laying on a bed in a bare room. Her pain and shock sent her reeling through the door.

Six months later I was shipped back to Canada for medical help and a year later entered the priesthood. I knew I could no longer remain a part of the outside world. The letter I received from Lapierre, who had been my best man, confirmed what I had decided to do. He wrote that Claudine had come to see him. Again and again she had asked herself what she had done to precipitate this tragedy. Lapierre and she searched for some kind of answer to the mystery and finally both came to the conclusion that it had something to do with the cross. She remembered my shock of recognition the day I met her, and she wondered about that as well. She refused to

wear it and put it away. In his note, Lapierre wrote that he had advised Claudine to forget me. He was right. I had to be forgotten and what better way than in a religious Order.

Slowly, oh so slowly I pulled my shattered soul together in the sanctuary of the Order. The Father Superior spoke with me at great length but was able to cull only the barest of details from me--that I had loved and lost twice in my life and had committed great sins in the eyes of the Lord. It took years of prayers and personal sacrifice before I finally realized that the very act of living was the punishment for what I had done. I was determined to punish myself, but I would not compound the sin by killing myself.

However, there was more in store for me. It was as if God had placed me in the role of Job. I was meant to suffer. Under the weight of that small golden cross, I dragged my way painfully through the years to old age, my thoughts my crown of thorns.

In 1979, when I was eighty, a letter arrived at the seminary from France. A man by the name of Martin Georges Deserre had been making enquiries about a certain Lieutenant-Colonel Georges Bertrand. Finally, after several years of fruitless search, he had been able to discover that I had entered the priesthood. It was almost a year before Deserre located the seminary where I had hidden myself from the world. Deserre did not know that Bertrand had ceased to

exist and there was only Brother Anselme, who had renounced the world outside the walls of his refuge.

I didn't know why this man was looking for me, but Father Superior said the man wrote he was in possession of a cross with three rubies and a diamond which his mother had given him on her deathbed three years previously. She had told him the cross would lead him to someone who knew the truth about his father and grandfather. Deserre wanted desperately to get in touch with the man who had joined the Order in 1947 under the name of Georges Bertrand. In his letter Deserre explained that his mother had told him he had been adopted and that Georges Bertrand might have some information about his real father.

Now Deserre was searching for the truth.

I asked the Father Superior to answer the letter in such a negative way as to discourage any follow-up. A year later, however, Martin Deserre turned up in person at the seminary. He showed the cross to the Father Superior and swore on it that he would be back--that he would not rest until he had tracked me down and discovered the truth.

He was sent away without any information.

I am most sorry for what I have done to this young man, but I was unable to face him. How could I tell him that he was both my son and grandson, and that I had fathered him through intimacy with his mother, my own daughter? It was

too horrible to contemplate. And that was why I could not see him.

I know that he will persist in tracking me down, and failing that he will find some other way to fill the gaping hole in his past. He is not easily discouraged. That is why I must pass this manuscript on, so that if he perseveres and one day finds you, my dear friend and son in God, you will help him to understand. Ask him to forgive a sinner who knew not what he did. I cannot see him or speak with him, but I beg you to help him in his acceptance of my sin, which surely is not his. In my own way I have been crucified like our Divine Lord. Deserre will come, that I know, for I have given the Father Superior instructions to send him to you. You will know the man by the cross with the diamond and rubies.

My life is over, and I close this manuscript with something I read, written by another, Bertrand Russell, who suffered great anguish, though not as much as I have had to bear.

> "Through the long years I sought peace,
> I found ecstacy; I found anguish;
> I found madness; I found loneliness;
> I found the solitary pain that gnaws the heart,
> But peace I did not find."

Farewell, my dear friend. I entrust this into your keeping. May God bless you.

* * *

When I had finished the last page, I sat for a long time in the fading light, holding the manuscript in my hands. Then I broke down and cried for Georges Bertrand and Brother Anselme whose only sin was loving too much. As penance he forced himself to live, only to be punished once more, in his old age, with the consequences of that early love. How can I explain this to Martin Deserre? I dread the thought of his visit. I do not know how I shall be able to speak with this young man. I know he is looking for me and probably will be here any day now. Perhaps I should destroy the manuscript...perhaps I should deny the truth to spare him....

What will I do? What will I say when I am face to face with him?

The Brooklyn Subway

Ferenc Jonas, a photographer, lived in a Long Island suburb and commuted each day to his studio in New York City. Year after year, he had followed the same route, going from his home to his office on Fifth Avenue. Jonas, a man of logic, methodical in his approach to his work and life in general, was not the type to act on impulse. Nearly fifty, Jonas had thick white hair, brown eyes and boundless enthusiasm and energy, qualities that seemed to complement his organized mind and analytical way of dealing with problems. A native of Hungary, transplanted to the New World in the wave of immigration during the late 1920s, Jonas had managed to retain his language and that very tangible sense of fellowship most Hungarians have for their countrymen.

On the morning of January 10, 1948, Jonas took the 9:10 a.m. Long Island Railroad train to Woodside, his usual connection point, where he was to catch a subway train to New York. En route, he suddenly decided to visit Lotci Kertesz, a Hungarian friend, who lived in Brooklyn and who was ill.

"I don't know why I decided to visit him that morning," Jonas told a friend weeks later. "I could have done it after the office closed. But I kept thinking he was alone and miserable and could stand a little companionship and cheering

up."

Therefore, at Ozone Park, Jonas changed to the subway for Brooklyn and went to his friend's house; he stayed there until midafternoon. They chatted and played a game of chess. Kertesz was considerably more cheerful when it was time for Jonas to leave. Jonas walked to the station and took the Manhattan subway to his office.

"The car was crowded," he related later, "and there was no chance of getting a seat. I had resigned myself to standing when, just as I entered, a man who had been sitting by the door jumped up and rushed out, leaving me his empty seat. I slipped into it before anyone else could take it."

Jonas had lived in New York for many years and was not in the habit of beginning conversations with strangers. However, because of his professional fascination with faces, a necessary and vital part of his photographic training, Jonas glanced about him, trying to analyze the features of his fellow passengers. His attention was caught by the face of the man on his left. He appeared to be in his late thirties, and his eyes had a sad, hurt expression. He was reading a Hungarian-language newspaper. Something prompted Jonas to turn to him and ask in Hungarian, "I hope you don't mind if I glance at your paper."

The man seemed surprised to be addressed in his native language but answered politely, "You may read it now if you

wish. I can read it later when I have time."

During the half-hour ride to town Jonas began a conversation.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"I am called Nagy."

"Where did you live in Hungary?"

"The East."

"What city are you from?"

"Debrecen."

"And your profession?"

"I was a law student when the war started."

"Were you able to finish your education?"

"No. I was conscripted into a labour battalion and sent to the Ukraine. First I was at the mercy of the Nazis and then in the hands of the Russians."

"How did it happen?"

"When the Germans and Russians were no longer allies, I was captured by the Russians and put to work burying the dead Germans killed in the fighting on Russian soil."

Nagy described his experience while Jonas listened intently. Nagy had starved and almost frozen in the severe Russian winters, and all that had kept him going was the thought he might one day see his family alive. He never gave up hope. After the war, he covered hundreds of miles on foot, sleeping in fields and ditches, hiding in barns when

he could find them. burrowing into the straw to stay warm. When he reached Debrecen, he looked like a walking skeleton, his clothes in tatters, barely recognizable to those who had known him.

Jonas knew Debrecen well and asked about the damage the city had sustained during the war. "Were the machinery and furniture factories hit? How many people were killed during the war? I had some friends there, but when the war broke out, I lost touch with them. But please, continue with your story. What happened when you reached Debrecen?"

"I went to the apartment my parents, brother and sister had occupied, and I found strangers living there. Then I went upstairs to the flat my wife and I had lived in. Again strangers. No one had ever heard of any of us. It was as if we had never existed, never been born. The ache in my heart was overwhelming. In a state of deep depression, I slowly walked down the stairs into the street. I struggled to keep from weeping, but I could feel hot tears sliding down my cheeks. I brushed them aside with my sleeve. I'm all alone, I thought. None were spared. Better I had died with them."

As he stumbled down the street, a boy ran after him calling: "Nagy Bacsi, Nagy Bacsi" (uncle Nagy). The boy was the son of some former neighbours. Nagy accompanied the boy to his home and talked to his parents. Their faces reflected his pain as they told him his entire family was dead.

"The Nazis took your wife and children to Auschwitz."

Auschwitz had been one of the worst concentration camps. Nagy thought of the gas chambers and gave up all hope of ever seeing anyone of his family again. A few days later, too heartbroken to stay in Hungary, Nagy began walking westward, sneaking across one border after another, until he reached Paris. There he went to the American embassy to arrange emigration to the United States. The wait seemed interminable, but finally after two years, his papers were ready, arrangements finalized and he left for America. He arrived in October, 1947, just three months before his meeting with Jonas.

Jonas listened carefully, nodding his head at intervals. He kept thinking how familiar the story sounded. Suddenly he realized why. At the home of friends, he had recently met a young woman who had also come from Debrecen. She had been sent to Auschwitz and from there transferred to work in a German munitions factory. All her relatives had been killed in the gas chambers. Liberated by the Americans, she was brought to the United States in the first boatload of displaced persons in 1946. Her story had moved Jonas so much he had written down her address and phone number, intending to invite her to meet his family. He wanted to do something to help alleviate the pain and emptiness and allow her to pull together the splintered remnants of her life.

Jonas thought perhaps he could introduce the two, but was struck by a sudden thought. When his train reached the station, Jonas didn't get off. He remained sitting where he was and asked in what he hoped was a casual voice, "Is your first name Miklos?"

Nagy turned ashen. "Yes! How did you know?"

Jonas fumbled in his address book. "Was your wife's name Mariska?"

Nagy looked as if he were going to faint. "Yes! Yes!" His hands were trembling.

"Let's get off the train," Jonas said.

He took Nagy by the arm at the next station and led him to a phone booth. Nagy stood there like a man in a trance, beads of perspiration dotting his forehead while Jonas searched for the number in his address book. It seemed an age before he found a coin and dialed the number. The phone rang and rang. He was about to hang up when the woman, Mariska, finally answered the phone. Later Jonas learned her room was beside the telephone, but she never answered it because she had so few friends, and the calls were always for someone else. This time, however, no one was at home, and after letting it ring for a long time, she had answered it.

When Jonas heard her voice, he identified himself and asked her to describe her husband. She seemed surprised at

the question but gave him a description.

"Where did you live in Debrecen?"

She gave him the address.

Asking her to hold the line, Jonas turned to Nagy and asked, "Did you and your wife live on Kossuth Lajos Street?"

"Yes!" exclaimed Nagy. He was as white as a sheet and trembling.

"Try to be calm. Something miraculous is about to happen to you. Here, take the phone and talk to your wife!"

Nagy nodded his head in mute bewilderment, his eyes bright with tears. He took the receiver, listened a moment to his wife's voice, then cried suddenly, "This is Miklos! This is Miklos!" He began to stammer hysterically.

Nagy, realizing the man could not speak from emotion and excitement, took the receiver from his shaking hands. He began to speak to Mariska, who by this time sounded hysterical. "Stay where you are. I am sending your husband to you. He will be there in a few minutes."

Nagy was crying like a baby and saying over and over again, "It's my wife. I go to my wife!"

At first Jonas thought he should accompany Nagy in case the man fainted from the excitement. But then he decided that this was a moment into which no stranger should intrude. He hailed a taxi and put Nagy into it. Then he directed the driver to take Nagy to Mariska's address, paid

the fare and said goodbye.

Miklos Nagy's reunion with his wife was so emotional that afterward neither one could recall anything that had happened.

"I remember only that when I left the phone I walked to the mirror in a dream state to see if my hair had turned grey," she said later. "The next thing I knew, a taxi stopped in front of the house, and it was my husband running toward me. I cannot remember the details...all I know is that I was happy for the first time in many years. Even now it is difficult to believe it happened."

Both had suffered so much.

"I have almost lost the capability not to be afraid. Each time my husband leaves the house, I say to myself, "Will anything happen to take him from me again?"

Miklos, however, was confident that nothing could ever happen again. They had both been through the worst. It could only get better. "Providence brought us together. It was meant to be. Together we will start a new life in a new land and try to forget the horrors of the past."

Bingen On The Rhine

"I saw the blue Rhine sweep along--I heard, or seemed to hear,
The German songs we used to sing, in chorus sweet and clear;
And down the pleasant river, and up the slanting hill
That echoing chorus sounded, through the evening calm and still;

The Hon. Mrs. Norton
(1808-1877)

You are too young, my dear, to know about the madness that came over a nation and swept continental Europe like a broom from hell from 1939 to 1945. I am old now, and as much as I have tried to bury the past and forget the memories, I have not succeeded. It has been said that with old age comes forgetfulness, but don't you believe it. Unless you are senile, the declining years sharpen the memories of childhood and youth. If those early years have been good, the mind struggles harder to recapture that happy period. More and more I find myself slipping back, remembering my homeland, my Bingen on the Rhine. I may die here in Australia, where I fled to escape the nightmare, but before I do I think I would like someone to know about my life. I want someone to understand, because in all the years I tried to rebuild a shattered existence, I could never speak of it to anyone--not to my children, not to my grandchildren, and

certainly not to my second husband, who had his own demons to exorcise.

I was born in the little medieval town of Bingen in Germany just before the First World War. Somehow our family managed to survive the war, and formed a closely-knit unit along with a myriad of cousins, nieces and nephews. Growing up in Bingen was like being a part of a history book. The town square was my favourite place. Old buildings surrounded it on four sides--a church, the Guildhalls, the City Hall--and not too far distant the castle and famous Mouse Tower on an island in the river.

Those were such happy times, playing with my brothers, sister and cousins in the square, and running around the fountain. We always knew how to contact each other. We had a signal, a special whistle we made by placing the tongue against the teeth a certain way, like this. When anyone in the family heard that sound, he or she would come running.

For me, that square in the middle of town was a refuge. I could sit on a bench outside the church for hours and watch the afternoon sun shine on the stained glass windows. The colours gave me a sense of peace. But not my cousin Joseph. There was nothing that could quieten him down. He was just my age and my favourite among the whole family. A mischievous imp, he was always running around the fountain. Many times he would take off his shoes and socks and jump

into the water. Once he fell in fully clothed. The policeman in the square was always yelling at him or chasing him. He was so beautiful, my Joseph, with his black hair and snapping dark eyes dancing with mischief. My aunt was incredibly frugal and had made him a sweater from scraps of wool. It hung almost to his knees because she wanted him to grow into it. The sweater was the family joke because Joseph looked like a walking rainbow. He hated it and kept trying to lose it, but somehow one of us always delivered it to the house. Yes, of all the cousins I loved him best.

Forgive an old woman a few tears. They are all gone now, all of them--no one left but a couple of sisters and a brother Albert in Belgium. I hadn't seen him since 1942. If it hadn't been for my sister Anna emigrating to Australia, I might have ended up in Canada. I had a brother-in-law there. It's strange how things happen--none of us could foresee or control what was coming. The one memory I clung to all those years was of the square--the fountain, the church windows, the games in the cobbled streets--and Joseph.

Last year my children insisted I revisit all the places I had lived--a sort of sentimental journey to Bingen, Belgium, France and Switzerland. I almost refused to go. I was afraid. My memories were too overpowering, and I'm not young. I fought the memories for so many years, trying not to give in to depression while I tried to find some measure

of peace through hard work. But there was no escape. I allowed my daughter Helen and son-in-law Harold to talk me into going back, and what happened in Bingen made me realize how wrong I had been. I should have returned years before and faced my nightmares in all the places from which I had fled.

Let me go back to the beginning. I left Bingen in my late teens to visit an older sister Carole in Antwerp, where I met my husband-to-be. We married and settled down in Belgium where Edith was born. We were so happy. We ran a restaurant and had plenty of work, but little did we know how short this period of happiness would be. We heard rumours of strange things happening in Germany and suddenly, after 1934, Belgium was flooded with exiles from Germany. A few years later there were even more people fleeing Austria with stories of an "Anschluss"--annexation by Germany. Our restaurant in Antwerp was a magnet for those fugitives who gathered there to eat and talk fearfully about what was going to happen in Europe. When war was declared in September, 1939, the exiles became refugees, relying on relief funds to survive. Belgium refused to give them work permits, and if any of them tried to get a job, he was jailed for a few days and then deported to his country of origin.

In mid-April, 1940, my husband Herbert and brother Robert were conscripted into the army. Herbert joined the

Czech forces in exile in Belgium and Robert was assigned to a Polish unit. The disaster came without warning on May 10, 1940. German Panzer divisions swept into Belgium, Holland and Luxemburg, and almost overnight occupied the three countries. Shortly after, the Occupation Authorities commanded everyone who had emigrated to Belgium from 1933 on to report to German police headquarters. To avoid deportation, a cousin Ruthie, Edith and I took a train to France to reach the Unoccupied Zone. German forces were already in control at the border, turning everyone back. They offered transportation to those who wished to return, but we knew it was just propaganda to show the world how well they treated refugees. We'd seen the dive bombers and fighters attacking people frantically jamming the roads, trying to escape. Later we heard where the people who had applied for repatriation had ended up.

On our return to Antwerp, Ruthie sewed dresses, while I went from house to house trying to sell them. Meanwhile the Germans were busily gathering up people and forcing them into camps. Ruthie was ordered to go and I accompanied her to the train station on a bitterly cold Saturday morning in winter. If I live to be a hundred, I will never forget that scene--men women and children all carrying as much as they could, saying their goodbyes. It was heartbreaking to watch. I was allowed to visit Ruthie once in her camp and that was

the last time I saw her.

With no word from my brother and husband, fear replaced anxiety. I had been searching for them frantically without a clue to their whereabouts. Suddenly I received word from my sister Carole that Herbert was somewhere south of Lyon, and that she had met Robert in Lyon. With so many members of my family in France, I knew I had to join them. I went first to Brussels to say goodbye to my sister Diane and her family, and then tried to board a train at the station. The place was jammed with people trying to get out of Belgium. We had no papers and went from train to train trying to get on. Six-year-old Edith kept asking, "When will we see Papa again?" And I broke down and cried. Somehow I managed to sneak onto a train, transferring in Paris to another, heading for Lyons.

When I arrived by taxi at my sister Carole's place, I discovered there was no bell on the door. I used our special whistle--the family signal. She ran down to open the door and we fell into each other's arms crying hysterically.

Carole sent word to Herbert that I had arrived and he came to get Edith and me. We moved to Marseille where we found a room and Herbert commuted back and forth to visit from the French Army workers' camp where he worked as a cook.

Shortly after I discovered I was pregnant, the camp where Herbert worked was shut down, and the soldiers were

demobilized and sent to farms under German orders to produce food for the Occupation Forces. The farm was a few kilometres outside Marseille, close enough for him to come home at night. We couldn't survive on the wages he earned--one month's work bought half a kilo of butter--so I began bartering for food with farmers. I even managed to send some to my sister in Lyon.

When my baby Helen was born in June, 1942, I didn't have a rag to dress her in. The midwife who delivered her gave me all her hand-me-downs from her two-year-old child. Herbert made her a little bath and a bed out of wood.

Born during the darkest period of the war, Helen was a miracle of survival. We were living in fear, that all-pervading fear, that surrounded us, walked with us, and peered over our shoulders everywhere we went. Yet although we were living right in the eye of that monstrous hurricane sweeping over Europe, there were good things, too. At least we were together, Herbert and I and the children--sharing, loving and caring for one another.

In late fall of 1944 there was a frenzied knocking at my door. I opened it to find the farmer's twelve-year-old son, poorly clad for October temperatures, shivering on my doorstep.

"Madame, my father sent me to tell you that your husband has been taken away by the Germans."

I was holding little Helen in my arms. I felt faint and grabbed the door frame to keep from falling.

"When? Where did they take him?"

"Over an hour ago, madame. Half a dozen soldiers came in a German transport truck and forced him into it with guns in his back. I ran all the way to tell you. I'm sorry, I do not know where they have taken him."

I didn't think to thank him or invite him in. I reached out and squeezed his shoulder and tried to hide the tears rolling down my cheeks. The boy knew. He bent his head and turned away to return to his father's farm.

I tried to discover where Herbert had been taken, but all I was told was someone in the village had reported him to the Germans. I never saw him again.

I didn't even have time to grieve. Later in the day there was another knock. I opened it to find two French policemen both with sad looks on their faces.

"We are sorry, Madame, but we were asked by your husband to give you these two hundred francs. He asked us to make sure you would get them and told us to tell you that he was being sent to a detention camp."

I could feel my heart drop. "Which one? Do you know where?"

"No madame," said the policeman who had handed the money to me. "We are very sorry. Madame, perhaps it would be

wise to leave."

I thanked them. They couldn't wait to get away.

The following day while on a food-scrounging trip so we could eat, I had a bad fall off my bicycle. When I regained consciousness, I was in a small hospital with a broken nose and injured eye. The day after I was released and returned home two other policemen appeared at my door.

"Madame, you are ordered to pack enough clothes and food for two days and come with us."

They looked at my bandaged face and started whispering to one another. And then one of them said:"Madame, you may not be well enough to travel. We will come back for you in two days. Please prepare what you need."

The bicycle accident saved my life. I knew what would happen and where I would be taken. I grabbed the children and whatever money I had managed to save, and ran. In my panic, I didn't even notice I was wearing slippers.

I didn't know where to run. I couldn't go to my sister in Lyon because the Allied air raids had intensified, and the British and American planes were overhead day and night. I went instead to Grenoble where another sister was hiding, and she advised me to try to escape to Switzerland.

"Only pregnant women, women with little children and married couples are permitted to enter," she said. "I know someone who will go with you as your husband. It will be

safer traveling with a man."

Unfortunately he wanted me to live with him and everything that implied, so I sent him packing. Somehow I found a person who had the address of a parish priest, a Resistance leader in a village east of the Dijon area. He had helped many people cross the border. I knew the Germans were watching the trains going to the border. They had torn up the last half-mile of track on the line into Switzerland. To avoid being arrested, I took a slow freight that went all around the eastern part of France, stopping at every village. Twice I got off at the wrong place because I had the wrong directions and couldn't speak French properly. Finally I got off the train in a village and went into a bistro for a coffee, debating whether I should take a chance and confide in the owner. I had no other choice.

"Yes," he said looking at me and the children with sympathy. "I know the place and the priest. In about twenty minutes, a trailer truck loaded with wood is stopping here and then continuing on. It will pass the village you seek. I will ask the driver to give you and the children a lift. I know him well."

And that was how we arrived at the priest's home, where a woman led us into a kitchen. There were a few other people there seated at a table, talking in low voices. My girls and I were given something to eat, while one of the men sat with

us and promised to talk with the priest. Finally he stood up and left, returning ten minutes later with the priest.

"This is how we shall do it," the Father said. "This man will guide you, but we shall send a teen-ager with you to make it appear less suspicious if you are stopped by a patrol."

Fear and anxiety were taking their toll. I suddenly burst into tears and couldn't stop crying. The two hovered over me, trying to calm me down. When I did, I paid the guide half the agreed-upon price, and I put some francs into the church poor box.

It was All Saints' Day, the beginning of November, when we left the house. While the guide went on ahead to reconnoiter, the teen-ager put Edith on her bicycle and I carried Helen, who cried all the way. Finally she fell asleep out of sheer exhaustion. Above us flew a flock of birds like an omen pointing the way. They're like the birds flying over the square in Bingen, I thought. Everything around me appeared to fade as I suddenly felt myself back in the square. I could see the fountain, the benches, hear the band concerts playing the German songs we used to sing. And there was Joseph and his funny sweater. I laughed at the thought and then became angry with myself for allowing my mind to wander. My daughters and I were in danger, and my head was in the past.

Suddenly we heard footsteps and dogs barking, and standing directly in front of us on the path were German patrol soldiers with guns. Helen woke up and cried, "Papa! Papa!"

"Wo ist dein Papa, mädchen?" asked one of the soldiers.

Helen couldn't talk, but Edith understood. If she had answered in German, we would have been lost.

"Ou allez-vous?" the soldier asked, switching to French.

"Nous allons à St. Joseph," answered the teen-ager. I was frightened because I would not have known what to say, but hearing Joseph's name stunned me. I had just been thinking of him. It had to be an omen. My heart was beating wildly. What if the soldiers stopped us? One of the men nodded, waving us on with his gun, and they moved past us down the track.

I was trembling. The smuggler had gone ahead to cut the wires in the border fence. The girl gave me careful directions. "Au revoir, madame, et bonne chance," she whispered, and left. I caught up with the smuggler and gave him the rest of the money. He cut the wire, then vanished into the underbrush. Behind us we heard dogs barking. Bullets started cracking overhead, some of them dangerously close. We're finished, I thought. We'll never make it! But I mustn't give up--I must keep going. Think of the children!

I ran down a low bank into a little stream. Directly above me on the other side, I saw two men in green uniforms

with guns. It's all over! We're dead! I thought, tears running down my face. I burst into sobs. I didn't know which way to run, upstream, downstream or back the way I had come. One of the soldiers started shooting. He's going to kill us right here! But the bullets were way over my head and I suddenly realized he was firing warning shots in the air. It dawned on me the men must be a Swiss border patrol. One of them ran down the bank, stretched out his arms and pulled us to safety. Had they appeared a few minutes before or after, we would not have made it. The German patrol would have shot us.

When I calmed down, I asked, "Where are you taking us?"

"To the hotel in the village. Don't be afraid. We have to make it look as if you're under arrest in case there are spies around."

We spent the night there and were taken by bus to Geneva the following morning. At a bus-stop, a woman wearing a white fur coat got on. She looked at us and started to cry. I know we must have looked in terrible shape, but I thought, who should cry, she or I? When she took out a twenty-franc piece to give Edith, I couldn't utter a word to thank her.

We were taken to a refugee camp. Any money we had on us was taken by our Swiss benefactors. We would have to pay our way to survive. The Swiss rule of life was "Nothing for

nothing". We were given a place to sleep on straw. But at least we were alive.

For seven months I worked very hard. Several times the children and I battled bouts of illness that left us weak and listless. Finally the war ended in May, 1945. Refugees began returning to their countries. I had been separated from my children in Switzerland so I could work. Placed with foster-parents, they had been slowly weaned away from me because I was only permitted to see them once every three months. The first thing I did was get my girls and with the little money I received from my husband's military pension from the Czech consulate, I left Switzerland. First I returned to the village near the border to thank the priest who had helped me escape. I discovered he had been arrested and shot with most of the villagers for helping refugees cross the border.

For the next two years I searched for family survivors in Belgium, France and Germany. My parents, a sister and brother, a brother-in-law, my cousins, nieces and nephews, Ruthie and my husband were all gone. When my sister Anna sent us visas to emigrate to Australia, we packed up and left--penniless immigrants looking for a new life in a new country, far away from the war. It wasn't easy to adjust and integrate. I married a man who had survived the war, but his wife and children had died in a death camp. We had much

in common.

But that's not the whole story. Have a little more patience with an old woman, my dear.

* * *

It was thirty-one years later that I finally returned to Europe. At Frankfort-on-Main my children and I took a taxi to the river where we boarded a riverboat for Bingen on the Rhine. As the boat pulled away from the dock, the strains of Die Lorelie came over the loudspeakers. Tears filled my eyes as I began to hum the German folk tune I had sung so many times as a child in Bingen. Gulls wheeled and swooped down from the sky, following the wake of the riverboat. Standing at the rail with dozens of tourists, I scanned the riverbanks looking for familiar scenes. The Rhine swept us along past cultivated, green fields looking like a crazy patchwork quilt. Up on the hills the old schlossen, the medieval castles, perched like watchdogs guarding the Rhine. The closer we sailed to the city of my birth, the more I battled with my anxiety. When I caught sight of Mouse Island, I pointed it out to my children. "We're almost there." I tightened my grip on the railing so they wouldn't see how much my hands were shaking.

Once the riverboat docked and the luggage unloaded, we

found a taxi to take us to our hotel. As soon as our luggage had been placed in our rooms, we walked down to where my family and I had spent our childhood and youth. The house where I had lived was still there--older and more dilapidated--but the sight of it made my heart beat faster. While my daughter and son-in-law waited behind me, I hesitated for a moment...and then knocked. Strangers answered the door, but although they tried to be helpful, they had never heard of the family name.

I led the way to the town square. For so many years that square was the link with my past, my link with sanity. I would think about the fun we had running around there--flying kites, playing tag, tearing up and down the side streets chasing balls bouncing ahead of us. I felt as if I was in a trance, standing there removed from my body, looking with eyes of age on the memories of a stranger's childhood. I pointed out the landmarks to my children as if I were a tour guide.

It was mid-afternoon when we reached the square. The sun filtering through the trees gave an almost luminescent glaze to the mullioned windows of the fine old Guildhalls. I stood there unable to speak, my eyes moving from side to side, taking in the changes--not too many, fortunately.

"Look over there," I pointed to the fountain. "We used to play games of tag around it. See that bench? That's

where I would stand and whistle our family signal and over there from that direction my cousins, brothers and sisters would come running."

I don't know what made me do it, but suddenly I pursed my lips and whistled, just to show my children how it had been. The shrill, eerie sound echoed throughout the square. Heads turned and Helen and Harold looked embarrassed. They probably thought I was making a spectacle of myself.

Ten yards away, an elderly man seated on a park bench reading, dropped his newspaper. A look of amazement appeared on his face. He jumped up and ran toward us. I thought he was a maniac. He ran straight up to me, grabbed me and covered my face with kisses. I stepped back in fear and put my hands up to ward him off. Then I looked at him.

He was agitated. "Miriam, it <u>is</u> you, it <u>is</u>! Don't be afraid of me. Don't you remember me? I thought you had died in the camps. Miriam, it's me, Joseph, your cousin Joseph!"

I closed my eyes for a moment. I felt faint. Tears were trickling down my cheeks. Instinctively I reached out and put my hands on his shoulders. "Joseph...I thought you were all dead...all these years, I didn't know."

Both of us crying, we stood there hugging each other tightly. I looked at my children, and they were in tears, too. Joseph and I put our arms around both of them. It was a good ten minutes before we composed ourselves enough to sit

down on a bench and talk about the lost years. All around me, curious people were staring, trying to figure out why we were behaving so strangely. Finally the lengthening shadows made us realize we had been there for hours listening to each other and catching up on two life stories that must have spanned close to sixty years of separation.

The lamplights winked on, casting a mellow glow on the square. We stood up and linking arms in the dusk, walked across the cobblestones toward the small street which would lead us back to our hotel. I turned back once to catch a last glimpse of what had been a memory suddenly transformed into the realization of a lost dream.

Then I forced myself to turn my back on the scene and continue up the winding cobblestone street until the glow of the square vanished behind a curve in the road.