

## ABSTRACT

DOI, COURTNEY CLEARY. *Through My Grandmother's Eyes: A Blended History*. (Under the direction of Elaine Orr).

This memoir documents the physical and emotional journey I experienced during a trip to Berlin, Germany in December 2001. During our eight-day trip, my grandmother shared her family history with me, revealing for the first time intense personal memories about her life in Nazi Germany and in England during World War II. My grandmother was born in Berlin in 1925, the youngest of six children. Her mother, an ambassador's daughter, was from a Protestant family. Her father, a prominent lawyer and member of the appeals court, was Jewish.

Between late-night confessionals at the hotel bar, my grandmother and I visited the two houses where she lived, the family plot at the old Jewish cemetery, and the country estate that we fought for in court. I celebrated my first Hanukah in a historical synagogue that was guarded by armed police. We saw Holocaust memorials, old synagogues and the former law offices of my great grandfather. The stories and tears exchanged on this journey forever changed our relationship and my perspective on family, faith and survival.

While there have been many books by survivors, children of survivors, and Holocaust rescuers, there are few, if any accounts, from people who were not directly involved. Being two generations removed from this tragic history allows me a perspective from which to study how it has affected my family's interactions, life choices, and patterns of behavior. In addition, my memoir examines the relationship between grandmother and granddaughter, instead of the oft-explored mother/daughter relationship.

**THROUGH MY GRANDMOTHER'S EYES: A BLENDED HISTORY**

by

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## DEDICATION

To both my grandmothers – Judith Klein and Anna Cleary – for passing on their love of books and giving me the encouragement I needed to write.

## BIOGRAPHY

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## CHAPTER 1

My first breath of German air was thick and wet and made me cough until my chest hurt. For the next week, the city would remain swathed in a cold mist. From a bus window, I watched as my grandmother and I passed grayed and dingy buildings dripping as if they were heated by giant furnaces and could not stop sweating. In the first hour, Berlin existed only in black and white as we traveled through its streets in early afternoon; it was as if every person, every building had a sad story to tell.

Grandma sat behind the bus driver in one of the last open seats, and I stood and straddled the bags as we sped toward our hotel in a shopping district of West Berlin. Her eyes darted with energy and that strange spark of familiarity, as she tried to surmise where we were and where we were going. I stood erect, grasping the cold railings, wondering if I belonged on this adventure, if I would know what to do and what to say as she showed me her lost home.

This journey was conceived about four months before, when we were sitting on the deck alone at my uncle's house in Atlanta, Georgia, and my grandmother, Judith Klein, brought up the graduation present. Grandma and her husband, Tom Klein, had wanted to send me to Israel to explore my Jewish roots, but a year had passed in which a break in my schedule and relative peace in the turbulent Middle East never coincided. I told her I didn't want to go Israel. I wanted to go to Germany with her. The journalist in me desperately wanted to know about her childhood, about our family history – one that revolved around faith and its consequences. Her father, two of her siblings and several other relatives had died in concentration

camps. The granddaughter in me had long avoided the topic, never wanting to upset the delicate balance of Grandma's emotions. But now I wanted to go. Growing up, I had spent every summer with Grandma at the beach, from age seven to fifteen, and never asked a direct question about her past. Grandma was quiet for a moment, and then mentioned she might have to go to Berlin in the winter for some legal business; maybe I could keep her company. She never said another word.

Two months later, she called. "I have to be in Berlin in three weeks. I've found two cheap tickets. Can you come?"

Within a few hours, I resigned from my part-time jobs and booked my flight. We would appear before a German Court on December 10, 2001 to petition for a country estate about fifty miles north of Berlin, which once belonged to her father's sisters, Katharina and Eva Simon, who died in Auschwitz. The plaintiffs in the case were Grandma and her three surviving siblings; all of the other relatives on her father's side, the Jewish half of her family, had perished during the war.

The estate, Katharinenhof, was sold far below its market value in 1938, when the Nazi government forbade Jewish people to own property. After the war, when the land became part of East Germany, the property was taken over by the government. Following reunification in 1989, properties were restored to their original owners. The family that acquired the estate in the forced sale and my family had battled in court over the deed to the land for more than a decade. In October 1997, the court decided in favor of our family, but the decision was contested by the other party. Now we were in Germany, and in just three days, Grandma and I would attend the final appeal.

The number nine express bus from the Tegel Airport did not offer breathtaking views of Berlin. Instead, we passed defunct U-bahn stations, drab communist style apartment buildings with balconies overrun with oversized satellite dishes, and one muddy river. Large swaths of graffiti covered bridges and walls and any other available concrete surface. I had just figured out how to brace our bags with my ankles to avoid having them bang my knees when Grandma recognized our stop.

With bags in tow, we crossed the main boulevard and trudged down a side street dotted with small specialty shops. For once, I was thankful for my grandmother's short stride and tendency to waddle along slowly in deep thought. I am eight inches taller than she, and she takes two steps for my every one. I needed the advantage that afternoon as we dragged our luggage down a cobblestone alley to the Concept Hotel.

It had been a nerve-racking trip, my first flight since the Sept. 11 hijackers—some linked to cells in Germany – had flown airplanes into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. The security line at Washington's Dulles Airport had been long, but the process seemed too simple. Belt buckles and shoes set off no detectors. After the search, we were packed into a large bus and carried to the terminals. I was shocked at how quiet and empty they were. As we boarded, officers walked up and down the jetway, as large trained dogs sniffed the passengers and their baggage.

"Living in fear and not doing things is not living at all," Grandma had said the day before our flight. She was angry about the third major alert for another round of



terrorist attacks announced two days before. As she read the paper that morning, she ran her hands through her silvery cropped hair repeatedly and stepped outside for several cigarettes – both signs of her frustration. She fumed about the Bush administration using scare tactics when there was nothing to be gained from canceled travel plans and stockpiles of duct tape and personal gas masks.

Despite the increased danger, I felt safe flying with my grandmother. She had persevered through so much: war, discrimination, two marriages, five children, and countless exotic, seemingly dangerous trips to Africa and Asia. Her life would not end on a simple journey to Europe. Neither would mine. Instead, I began to dread the past and what ghosts would emerge in the immediate future. I was determined to ask about my family, about their deaths and her life – questions long oppressed out of respect and fear.

Now that we had arrived in Germany, I did not know if I would have the strength to inquire about the past. I could barely handle the present. I was jittery and subdued as we checked in and unpacked our suitcases into matching dressers across from our identical twin beds. The closeness that traveling afforded was my only comfort. On the flight from Amsterdam to Berlin, I took a nap with my head on her shoulder. We hadn't spent this much time alone together in years, and memories of our earlier adventures kept surfacing. One year on the way to the beach, we stopped to tour Annapolis. We were driving around the base in what seemed like circles and Grandma got whistled at by a cadet. It was the craziest thing, she always says, her grin as wide as her face. She tells this story every chance she gets. We

are a good team, having tackled flooding waters and parading ants at the small red cottage on the beach.

Far removed from our beach abode, the Concept Hotel was an oasis that I was not eager to leave. The sparse clean lobby and its marble floors were comforting and familiar. Through double doors, I had spotted a circular wooden bar in an inviting lounge. But Grandma wasn't interested in resting. Claiming that we had no time to spare, she insisted that we see at least one sight that day – the house where she lived from nine weeks of age until just after her ninth birthday. We added one more layer of clothing to protect us from the damp chill, and strolled to the U-bahn station on the Kurfürstendamm.

The subways in Berlin are prompt; digital signs display each train's expected arrival and departure time. This sense of order was foreign in my life. In the seven months before the trip, I had worked as a bank teller, a beer wench at a traveling German festival (oompa band and all), a traveling tutor, an advertising writer, and a hostess at a fancy Italian restaurant. I had ignored my escalating problems with Crohn's disease, skipping countless doses of medicine and hiding the endless bouts of diarrhea and late nights with abdominal pain. As I watched the digital display count down the minutes until the next train arrived, that chaotic world receded. While we waited, I perused the advertisements scattered on bulletin boards for cultural events – at this time of year, mainly Christmas shows. I strained to understand what each colorful flier promoted, searching for visual clues, such as Santa Claus, Christmas trees and angels, and musical icons such as Tchaikovsky, Bach and Handel. On the train, Grandma and I traveled silently, sitting opposite each other, to

Thielplatz, a station in the southwest corner of Berlin. Grandma scanned the maps posted within the car, her eyes pausing on each familiar locale. I watched her, wondering when she would explain her urgency. I felt none. The city seemed hard, and after a long trip, I wanted a soft warm bed and a large plate of food. I wanted none of the cold depressing city.

But my exhaustion disappeared when we emerged from the train into a picturesque suburb. I had traveled from Kansas to Oz. There were no harsh buildings, not even a drab subway station, just a tiny platform on a residential road. Like Dorothy, I felt stranded and scared, yet in awe of my new surroundings. Stately homes, university buildings and a sprawling emerald park, in all their Technicolor glory, lined the narrow streets and pathways. “This is where you grew up,” I stated hesitantly, posing a half question. I was shocked by the area’s affluence and beauty, framed in early dusk. The houses stood tall and magnificent, stone and brick monstrosities with tall iron gates and manicured lawns. Some of the homes had been taken over by the local university whose arms reached like vines throughout the neighborhood. Out here, the smell of gasoline faded, revealing the sweet unexpected scent of an exotic greenhouse in winter.

My grandmother’s eyes glistened like crystal. She began talking, quietly, urgently, quickly. “I used to play over there with my brother. I walked this way to avoid these two gruff boys. My family was close friends with the people who lived in this house.”

And suddenly, I knew I wouldn't have to ask any questions. She would answer them all in her own way, closing the silent gap of history, finally trusting me with her life story.

We walked slowly through the steady drizzle toward her old house, the sky shedding the tears of relief that I could not yet release. We stopped at the corner of Meisenstrasse and Gelfertstrasse to take pictures. I had seen these signs many times before in the silver frame on her old oak dresser in Maryland. Now, I, too, would own a copy of my grandmother's visual marker of "home."

She moved to this house in Dahlem Dorf when she was nine weeks old. The movers were stunned by the wide-eyed attentiveness of the infant in a laundry basket. She said that things from childhood stay with you, explaining how she still keeps baskets all over her house. I wonder what else from her time in Berlin still resonates.

Two new houses, built on the original lot, obscured our view of her childhood home. The house, now divided into four flats, was an ivory color that reminded me of antique lace, and the shutters and roof were a warm brown. Despite our blocked vision, Grandma pointed at each window still in sight, leaning on the iron fence as she told me what was once there and what was no longer. As she spoke, I could envision the red clay tennis court, the garage, and the garden that once served as her playground. I believe she could see the currants, even taste those dark berries that once grew on vines in their garden. After each child had fulfilled his or her picking quota, my great grandmother would make treats. One day Grandma's older brother Harro skipped his picking duties. When confronted, he said that if they could

afford a house so big, they could afford servants to pick the fruit. “He got a quick slap across the face,” Grandma said smiling. In later years, Harro, living in Chile with his own children, would refuse to acknowledge his Jewish past.

These were the first of many stories of her childhood, seemingly unrelated, that she would divulge unprompted. Though I relished every word, it wasn’t until our adventure ended that I saw their value. She had wanted me to know who she was, not as my grandmother, but as a young girl living in Germany. From these small tales, I saw how her life was ordered and what memories remained from those thirteen short years when the Veit-Simon family was still whole.

After a few snapshots of the only house where she lived with mother and father and her five siblings, we sought shelter and warmth in the village center. We found it at Im Alter Krug (The Old Jug), a bright yellow tavern built in the 1400s, with cave-like walls, old paintings, and dark wood. “What would you like?” she asked, reading the confusion on my face. This was the first of many moments when I desperately wished I knew German.

“Hot tea,” I replied.

“Do you like Earl Grey?” she asked.

I nodded. In polished German, she ordered a pot and a creamy dessert. She is the only one in her family who still speaks fluently. “Tom doesn’t like Earl Grey,” she said, referring to her second husband, whom I’ve always known as Grandpa. “He’ll never share it with me.” She smiled and squeezed my hand. And then she began telling stories about the house, the neighborhood, her family. Her words were water and her mouth a spring that had just been tapped.

“I lived in that house until I was nine years old,” she said. “Then I moved to a house that my mother’s family owned in the Southwest corner of the city. My father’s mother and sisters came too.” The move came in 1934 when Grandma’s father, Heinrich Veit Simon, was no longer allowed to own property under Nazi rules because he was Jewish. The house on Hindenburgdamm in Lichterfelde was split up into three flats, one on each floor. Grandma and her parents lived on the first floor and Grandma’s aunts, Katharina and Eva, and Grandma’s grandmother Hedwig all moved in after Hedwig’s house in Dahlem was taken away as well. The aunts had already lost their country home in Gransee.

After a few sips of tea and long glances out the window onto the green park squares, she continued. “I think that my father knew more about the war than he let on,” she said, leaning in closer, dropping her voice. It was as if she had been contemplating this conspiracy theory for years and I was the first one that she had let in on her secret.

“What do you mean?” I asked. Grandma looked out the window. I wondered if she saw things as I did, or how they used to be. She had eaten here many times before, maybe even sat at the same table as a young girl. Did she see her past or her present?

“When my grandmother died, my uncle Helmut – Nazi party member and all – refused to shake hands with my father because he was Jewish. My mother bought him out of his share of the family house immediately afterward. She expected things would get worse. That’s where we moved from here.”

“Why didn’t you leave the country?” I asked.

“My father wouldn’t leave his mother and sisters,” she said. “He even had a job offer in 1912 at Underwood, one of the biggest law firms in New York City. My mother wanted to go even long before the Nazis. He refused.”

As she spoke, I realized that there were so many things that I didn’t know, so many questions to be answered. I couldn’t name all of my grandmother’s brothers and sisters. I didn’t understand why they wouldn’t lie about being Jewish. Life seemed more important than religion. Why didn’t my great grandparents use their resources to help all of their children escape earlier? Why did they break tradition, adhering to the religion of the prominent father instead of the mother’s Lutheran faith? Why had I never heard of her father’s place on the Kammergericht (an appeal court), of his prestigious law office next to the Brandenburg Gate, of his (and his father’s) involvement with the Board of Trustees of the Jewish seminary?

These thoughts and questions were overwhelming, and the city seemed to contradict my first impressions. Grandma had begun to unveil her family’s history, and suddenly I looked at the world differently. After tea, we took the train back into the city, stopping at Wittenbergplatz to see the KaDeWe - a huge department store with one of the largest food markets in Europe. It made Grandma rave and her eyes swim. We emerged, hungrier than ever, to find drunken men in Santa hats singing Christmas carols in the rain on Wittenbergplatz. The familiar tunes of Deck the Halls and Jingle Bells suddenly sounded absurd in the foreign lyrics. During our shopping, night had descended, and every corner of the city was lit with small Christmas lights. The lights led down the Kurfurstendamn, a main shopping strip, and in the distance I could see a Christmas tree, several stories high, constructed of strings of large white

lights, and topped with an oversized star. Everything here seemed larger than life – the buildings, the expanse of brick and pavement on the square, the scaffolding rising above the old train center that sat in the center of the intersection of four main boulevards. How would I uncover my Jewish heritage in a city overcome with Christmas lights, songs and spirits?

People now swarmed the streets, many stopping to do holiday shopping before taking the U-bahn home. Brightly-painted ceramic bears dotted the grass around the station; these animals, part of a public art initiative, would greet us everywhere we went. I felt as though I had awakened from an earlier slumber. West Berlin was classy, clean, and comforting even in darkness. The city was charming in an unassuming way. I expected a place of insurmountable hard edges, but I felt right at home. As we crossed through the plazas and over the busy boulevard toward the station, I stared at people on the streets and in the stores, studying faces as if I might actually know them. I had been told I had European features. I have German features – deep-set eyes, low cheekbones and a sharp nose. At home in North Carolina, I was self-conscious, feeling as though I never had the right clothes, haircut, or mannerisms. In Berlin, I never worried about appearances. Looking into the eyes of Berliners, I saw a reflection of myself, my family, my history. I had thought of my Grandmother as a Jew, as a Brit, but never as a German. But her mannerisms, her cooking, her appearance reflect the country she was born in, the country where all her troubles began.

When we returned to the hotel, Grandma and I settled into a crescent-shaped wooden booth in the hotel bar for drinks – a sherry for her and a tall German beer for



me. A single white candle stood in an intricate candlestick holder upon the white tablecloth.

Two nights before, we had talked about faith by candlelight in Grandma's house in Maryland. "Some days I can pray and others it seems impossible," she said, as we played cards at her dining room table.

I nodded. I had always found prayer foreign. I never believed in God, just in my family. They had taught me everything about living a "good" life. I had only observed the religions of my extended family but never participated. My only exposure to Judaism was lighting candles, breaking challah bread, sipping wine, and listening to my grandparents and other family members recite a prayer in Hebrew at Friday night dinners in the summer. None of this was a big deal, just part of the routine. No one took the time to really explain it to me, and I never asked.

My immediate family never went to any place of worship. My parents divorced when I was three years old, and I was raised by my mother, who had rebelled against her Irish Catholic upbringing, where her ten brothers served as altar boys and Sunday mass was required. I inherited that aversion to organized religion. My mom and I got our largest dose of religion during the Christmas season. Every year, we'd donate to a Catholic charity recommended by my other grandmother and watch as the angel Clarence tried to convince Jimmy Stewart that his life was worth living.

I saw my father two or three times a year for short visits. He had abandoned his Jewish heritage because of the pain it caused my great grandmother, Irmgard. I was curious about Irmgard, for my father has never loved anyone the way he loved his grandmother. I wondered about how Irmgard's beliefs changed (she converted

from a Lutheran to a Quaker during the war) when faith delivered a death sentence to her husband, two children, her mother-in-law, and her two sister-in laws. Just before we left, Grandma was showing me a picture of Irmgard as a young woman. She was dressed exquisitely in a tweed suit and an elegant hat perched atop her swept back hair. Her beauty was shocking. Grandma told me that I had Irmgard's eyes; when I was young and upset, she would always see her mother's cross blue eyes staring back at her. I've never been a given a nicer compliment.

On that first night in Germany, I felt so blessed with the prospect of a week of adventures with my grandmother that I no longer questioned the existence of a greater spirit.

## CHAPTER 2

“It’s up here on the right,” Grandma said, glancing back at me. She picked up her pace; she would see her family soon. I stopped, kneeled on the uneven stones, and took a picture. Years later, it is this image – one of her walking away from me, from this life, and into another – that remains in the back of my mind. It still amazes me that I caught the moment on film, wresting a sense of urgency, history and love into a white bordered space. I made several copies of the photo – one for my desk and one for the trip scrapbook. When I study this picture of her in the old Jewish cemetery in Berlin, I immediately feel the cold mist that kissed our cheeks. My breath becomes shallow as I struggle with the mixture of wonder and sadness. I am transported back in time just as she was.

Grandma was adamant that we visit the cemetery on our first full day to pay respect to her parents, siblings, and extended family and ask them to bless our trip. I had dreaded the long journey to the northeastern corner of the city to see granite stones that would inevitably make her cry. I wanted to see the sights meant for tourists, and the cemetery seemed like an interruption.

But Grandma was determined. Standing atop the long tunnel of stairs onto Schönhauser Allee, we emerged into a different city, a place entirely unlike the area surrounding our hotel in West Berlin, where groomed parks and fancy stores exuded a metropolitan air. East Berlin was rough and ugly, and I fell in love. A coarse concrete wall sprinkled with graffiti lined the sidewalk on one side of the street. On the other side, buildings bore cracks and scars so deep that I could feel their pain. I lagged behind, eyes scanning, brain grinding. A crane rested in a small courtyard.

To the left of the grassy square sat a pastel pink apartment building with neat white trim. To the right, a half-fallen brick building longed for its roof and upper floors. The busy tree-lined avenues of West Berlin had faded. On this side of town, the streets were empty, and the sidewalks were cracked. There was no greenery to shade this boulevard.

“This way,” Grandma said. Her steps were intent, insistent as though her entire body longed for our destination. But then she stopped where the bland beige concrete wall ended and a grand brick entrance began. Nestled within the sun-burnt arch was a beautifully crafted black iron gate. The bars were woven in an intricate design - black curving lines around sharp triangles, the Star of David. I had read books about Jews wearing stars on their clothes during the War and always viewed it as a symbol of shame, not holiness. In the diary of Anne Frank, which I read over and over again as a young girl, she says “We got sympathetic looks from people on their way to work. You could see by their faces how sorry they were ... the gaudy yellow star spoke for itself.” In the pictures I’ve seen in books and museums over the years, the star presented itself as a crude creation, made of yellow felt and outlined with jagged black lines, sewn with yarn or drawn with a felt tip or marker. The star stood out against the refined costumes of wealthy young Jews in metropolitan areas. For the first time, as I stood at the entrance to my grandmother’s past, that star represented beauty.

Through the gate’s bars, I beheld my first glimpse of heaven. Inside, slender black trees reached high into the gray clouds. At home, cemeteries consisted of smooth grass, headstones and a few token trees. Here an overgrown forest had

sprung up between the graves, a surprising sign of life in a home for the dead. There was a small box full of yarmulkes for men to wear out of respect for those who were remembered within the expansive walls. The cemetery seemed to stretch on forever – a green oasis in a city full of cement. From any one point inside, it was hard to see the four outer walls that protect more than 23,000 graves, dating back to the 1820s.

Grandma led silently, along twisting, worn brick and stone paths toward the back of the cemetery. The uneven paths made me feel off-balanced, removing me further from the everyday world. We passed rows of broken stones, overgrown with ivy and framed with bright yellow leaves. The ivy covered the tree trunks and hung from branches. It peeked between the heavy dingy slabs that were splayed across the ground every few steps. Perhaps the dark green leaves were trying to sew up and mend the wounds of the spirits who resided here.

Some gravestones were pieced together like a puzzle along the path – a few just missing one date and the cement to bind them. As we neared the center of the cemetery, I could see the path of destruction. I tried to imagine the rage they must have felt. Young, strong Nazi hoodlums – probably my age – running through this space with heavy mallets, shattering monuments to the dead. They smashed almost everything and yet they could never quite separate the tombstones down the middle. Instead, the large pieces remained, engraved in German on one side, Hebrew on the other. Two histories, two nations bound forever.

We emerged from the silent chaos onto a wide cobblestone trail along the back wall of the cemetery. The cemetery's front gate sits on the old castle road. When the king was coming, Jews couldn't visit the graves or hold services. My great,

great, great grandfather bought the plot next to the back gate (now permanently closed) so that they could visit their loved ones at any time.

I didn't realize how lucky I was until I saw our family plot. We were survivors. Someone was left behind to come back and repair the damage. Five ancient gravestones framed with ivory stood in front of the etched memorials along the back wall to my grandmother's immediate family. Grandma stood in front of her parents' plaques, murmuring the Mourner's Kaddish in Hebrew. Her voice was soothing, though I didn't yet understand the prayer's meaning or importance. Everything was old and gray, and all sounds were reduced to a whisper. She was so calm and there were no tears in her eyes. She told me later that there was nothing to cry about; she was thankful as she said the memorial prayer.

*Magnified and sanctified be the great name of God throughout the world which He hath created according to His will. May He establish His kingdom during the days of your life and during the life of all the house of Israel, speedily, yea, soon; and say ye, Amen.*

*Exalted and honored be the name of the Holy One, blessed be He, whose glory transcends, yea, is beyond all blessings and hymns, praises and consolations which are uttered in the world; and say ye, Amen.*

*May there be abundant peace from heaven, and life for us and for all  
Israel; and say ye, Amen.*

*May He who establisheth peace in the heavens, grant peace unto us  
and unto all Israel; and say ye, Amen.*

Grandma was at peace; she had grieved for these people, for her history in the past. When she recited the prayer, she rejoiced in her God. I, on the other hand, had struggled with religion throughout my life. I felt blessed to be on the trip, but I struggled with same questions my father once faced. How could a God stand by and permit such horrors?

I struggled with the places of death engraved and memorialized on the wall behind this small plot of land in the cemetery. From Grandma's own grandmother to her siblings, three generations of wrongdoing were documented in stone. Hedwig Veit Simon, my grandmother's grandmother, was born Oct. 17, 1861 in Berlin. She died in Terezin on April 1, 1943. Three of her four children – Heinrich Veit Simon, Eva Anna Simon and Katharina Therese Simon – all died at the hands of the Nazis. Heinrich, my grandmother's father, was killed just short of his sixtieth birthday on May 18, 1942 at Gestapo Headquarters in Berlin. Eva and Katharina both died in 1944 in Auschwitz. Her youngest child, Martin Veit Simon, died when he was 24 years old, just before the outbreak of World War One in 1914.

Of Heinrich's six children, four survived the war. My grandmother, the youngest, born in 1925, and her sister Ulla, the third child born in 1915, weathered

the bombing of London. Their brother Harro, the oldest, born in 1911, escaped to Chile, where he still lives. Their brother Rolf, the fourth child, born in 1916, died in a concentration camp at age 28, captured just before he and his new bride could emigrate to Palestine. Sisters Etta and Ruth were caught in April 1942 when they tried to escape on a train with Dutch workers going home on furlough. Etta, the fifth child born 1918, survived Terezin, a Nazi concentration camp in what is now the Czech Republic. Ruth, the second child, died there in August 1943 at age 29.

The distance had vanished. I began to shiver as I stared at my great aunt's name engraved in all caps on the granite plaque, replaying all the new information in my mind, wondering how I had never really known who she was before this trip. Ruth put Grandma's name on the list for a visa at the British embassy, hoping to send Grandma at age 13 to live with Ulla, and her husband, Eric, in London. This was before the United Kingdom officially authorized the immigration of German and Austrian Jewish children without regular visa requirements.

The now well-known Kindertransport began as a response to the horrors of Kristallnacht on November 9, 1938. Grandma was in the hospital recovering from an appendicitis operation in the days surrounding the Night of the Broken Glass, when hundreds of synagogues and Jewish stores were destroyed and Jews were attacked. On November 10, my great grandfather was taken by Nazi officials to Sachsenhausen, a concentration camp north of Berlin. Since he wouldn't leave his mother and sisters behind in Berlin, my great grandfather would not likely have allowed his youngest daughter, my grandmother, to be sent to England to avoid the war. Ruth arranged everything while he was gone. Ruth saved my grandmother's



life, and therefore, made mine possible. In Maryland, the night before we left on our trip, Grandma had shown me a photograph of Ruth. Her eyes were soft and serene, and her dark hair was pulled back. Her head was tilted back and her smile filled the frame. She looked like someone everyone would want to know. I wished I had been that lucky.

About a year after our trip, my uncle Ed gave me a yellowed page typed and hand-edited that described my grandmother's escape. He had found the following account, entitled "Exodus", in her old files, from a time when she wrote about her life for her local synagogue. After his first stay at a concentration camp just after the Night of Broken Glass, my great grandfather approved Grandma's getaway and saw her off before being detained again.

*December 28<sup>th</sup> was a cold and drizzly day. The week before, there had been some last minute shopping: a new navy winter coat and warm underwear to last for twenty years; some jersey knit dresses and a stout pair of shoes. Everything was packed into one small trunk. Books were left on the bookshelf, and the last doll had been given to the girl upstairs. A few photos of the family in an envelope that had been put in the bottom of the trunk, and there was a new purse with a wallet containing a birth certificate and vaccination form. Mother and Father took me to the station in Berlin to meet the other children. A six-year old stood in the cold at 8 a.m., holding on to his mother. She looked at me, and asked if I had ever done any baby-sitting. Being the proud aunt of two nieces and a nephew at the age of 13, I assured her*

*that I knew all about taking care of small children. She asked me whether I would take care of her small boy. The train left for Hamburg just after 8 and we got there about 10:30. A large bus took us to the Jewish Community Center, where we had some hot chocolate and large chunks of fresh bread and jam. Then we got back on the bus and were driven to the U.S. Lines docks in the harbor, where a truck had taken our luggage. It was about noon, and the S.S. Manhattan was supposed to leave on the tide at 2 p.m. The ship had almost finished loading, and most passengers were on board when we arrived. There we stood, forty-eight children and two adults with our luggage, and the Gestapo refused to let us on board. This was the second group of what was to become over 14,000 Jewish children under 17 who left Germany and Austria to go to England. We had no passports, no exit visas, no money, but we were supposed to have a relative in England who would be responsible for us when we arrived there. The small boy with me was supposed to go to his aunt; my sister and her family were already in London.*

My grandmother and her companions did make their journey that day. I learned more about the Kindertransport from a documentary called *Into the Arms of Strangers*, when I was researching this book. I was struck by how all of the children in the videos and pictures resembled not only my grandmother but my father as a child. The hair, the eyes, the outfits, the nose, the expression on their faces, I

identified solidly with these children. The video also showed scenes from Berlin: stations whose platforms I would stand on during my trip, the boulevard less than a mile from our hotel, the Reichstag in its former glory. My grandmother followed the same path less than a month after the first transport.

At the gravesite, Grandma put her hand on my shoulder and pointed to the two names below Ruth's— Rolf, their brother, and Sabine, his wife.

"The plaque is wrong," she said. "We kept the error so that my mother didn't have to know the truth."

I read the memorial wall. Rolf and Sabine, November 1943, Mauthausen.

"They died in Auschwitz in March 1944," she said. "Mauthausen was a work camp in Austria. I found out through some research, but I didn't want to tell my mother."

"Why did she think they were in Mauthausen?" I asked.

"When they were deported, Rolf wrote a quick postcard to my mother and threw it out the window," she said. "Someone picked it up and mailed it. That's where he thought they were going."

When Grandma first told me this story, I thought of Mauthausen as a place where a mother could find comfort, a place without gas chambers, a place where detainees were put to productive work. But years later on a website affiliated with the Museum of Jewish Heritage, I found Mauthausen described as a category three camp, which meant "Rückkehr unerwünscht" (return not desired) and "Vernichtung durch arbeit" (extermination by work)." Inmates carved out large granite slabs and carried them up steep steps in the quarry. Slabs from this quarry and pictures of the

“stairway to death” are exhibited in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C. Seeing those roughly cut pieces of granite made my stomach drop and marked a turning point in our visit to the museum. From that point on, I sped through the remaining floor of the permanent exhibit. I needed to get out. At Mauthausen, an estimated 150,000 perished from being worked to death, starved to death, frozen to death, gassed or operated on for medical experiment. But my great grandmother still found solace in Mauthausen; her son’s chances for survival there were better than at Auschwitz, where more than two million Jews died, many of whom were gassed immediately.

As I read the other the plaques on the wall, I put my arm around Grandma’s shoulder, leaning on her for support. My great great grandmother, Hedwig Veit Simon, also died at Terezin at age 82. Her name was engraved above her two daughters, Katharina and Eva, the owners of the estate we would petition for in the following days. They died at Auschwitz at ages 57 and 60.

The names were familiar. The immediacy of the connection – between my life and theirs - was foreign. I had expected Grandma to get upset. She didn’t. I did. As we walked back along another twisting path, the undulating granite stones looked like waves. The sight of each one reminded me that there were more stories like those my grandmother told. I wondered how many descendants of the people in this graveyard lived to relay their own tales. I wondered how those who did survive would have the strength or the words to remember. On that first visit, I couldn’t see the peace those walls held. I knew I had to come back; I had to linger among the graves,

to understand what I had seen, to find my own answers on how to deal with this horrid history.

As we headed back to Schonhauser Allee, I stared at the large memorial by the gate. Translated, it means: "In here, keep the silence. Out there, break it."

### CHAPTER 3

After the cemetery, Grandma suggested a proper cup of tea – the British still had a hold on her – to satisfy us until our lunch date with the family’s lawyer, Barbara Erdmann. We had an hour, and we both needed some warm comfort. So we went two stops on the U-bahn to Alexanderplatz, a shopping square in the east, a swath of concrete, larger than several football fields. Cement-lined playgrounds, bland apartment buildings and graffiti-like murals stretched out on one side. Directly in front of us, a semicircle of glass and plain buildings rose, bearing signs for trains, department stores and electronics. A small Christmas fair filled the center of the courtyard, complete with an ice skating rink, where an older lady in a big white fur hat circled around and around. Grandma bought some Marzipan, her favorite treat from her youth, while I danced to Christmas tunes on the square. The candy was delicious, little balls of almonds and sugar that dissolved on your tongue. We would gorge ourselves on it for the next week.

After a quick stroll through the carnival, we settled into a tiny round table near the back of a café on the square. The place was full even in midmorning, and no one was talking. In my first impressions, the history of East Berliners was reflected in their demeanor. They had sharp features, strange makeup, spiky hair and the gravest of faces, as though they were holding back a lifetime of welled tears. These people seemed self-absorbed in a positive way; I did not feel judged or out of place. There was no need to put on an act of self-assuredness as I did so often at home. I felt I could be thoughtful and pensive or giggly at a moment’s notice and the transformation would startle no one but myself.

As we sat in the café, Grandma and I were tense. The cemetery had been overwhelming and I was thankful when she suggested that we order something stronger. While flipping through post cards, we sipped Irish coffees with huge layers of whipped cream through straws. Now that our emotions from the cemetery had settled, I asked more about Rolf and Sabine.

“When did Rolf get married?”

“In '39 or '40,” Grandma replied. She leaned into the table a little bit.

“But he never planned to marry her. He had a girlfriend he talked about all the time. She immigrated with her parents to South America. He always thought he'd go after her.”

“Why didn't he?” I didn't understand why anyone would marry for reasons other than love.

“He wanted to survive. When Holland fell, the outlook was dim. He married Sabine because she had a visa for Palestine. I think she knew he loved someone else. But they thought they would get out of Germany together. I wish they had.”

I was silent as I pondered what I would do to avoid death.

“It happened to Ulla too,” Grandma said, taking another sip of her coffee. Ulla is the third oldest. She lives in California now. “She wanted to marry at seventeen, but my father refused to approve” she said. “They were going to move to Israel, and my father was worried about her safety and health. She stayed, married Eric Sonntag and moved to England in 1938.”

“You lived with them in England, right?” I asked. Though she lived in California, I had never met Grandma's oldest sister.

“Yes, but back to the story.” She looked annoyed. “Sixty years later, the old boyfriend put an ad in every German and Jewish publication, looking for information on the Veit Simon family. They found each other, fell back in love, got married and spent four good years together before he died.”

I scribbled this tale into my notebook. Grandma laughed. I was determined to remember everything. The more I learned, the more I understood the complexity of relationships among my relatives. Throughout the journey, I realized that my story is complex too.

On the way to the lawyer’s office, Grandma decided that she would teach me German basics – numbers, polite sayings, family members- on all of our train rides. We confused many people with our age difference and my language barrier. After I had messed up two -“zwei”- twice in a row, she smiled and waved me off.

“Children learn these things better,” she said. “You absorb more when you are young. I spent a summer in the Czechoslovakia when I was eight. I can still count to 20. I had to learn the numbers to play the games.”

Despite my age, I was determined to catch on.

“Eins, zwei, drei, ....acht, neun, zehn.”

Frau Erdmann, my grandmother’s lawyer, was a quick, wiry woman with short wavy hair and incisive blue eyes. When we entered her office, she squeezed my grandmother tightly and swept her off to another room, leaving me to use her computer. I could tell immediately how much my grandmother trusted her. The



lawyer exuded independence in her gestures and her businesslike walk in a way that reminded me of my own mother.

After a brief meeting in the office, Frau Erdmann took us to lunch at a tavern in East Berlin. Grandma and Frau Erdmann spoke for hours, preparing for the hearing on Monday and catching up on personal stories. Grandma and her three living siblings had been fighting for this land for more than eleven years. I couldn't stop thinking about the cemetery. I kept trying to write about it in my journal, but I had so much to express that I didn't know where or how to begin.

Occasionally, Grandma would stop to translate and begin talking to me in German and Frau Erdmann in English. She scrunched up her nose when she realized that we didn't understand what she was saying. Switching languages so frequently, she often got confused. Frau Erdmann and I loved it. Grandma didn't.

Since moving to the States in 1958, Grandma had spoken German only occasionally, though she said she still thought in both languages. She told me later that she had only dreamt in German once.

"I'm not even sure it was a dream," she said. "The ghost of my mother was standing with a flashlight in my face, telling me in German that the children need you. I thought it was strange because my children were grown, but I came to understand that I had other children like you and your cousin and other friends."

Her mother was right.

After a quick nap at the hotel, Grandma and I had €1.50 mini pizzas for dinner from a fast food stand outside the KaDeWe. We ate in the rain, standing close together under an umbrella, enjoying the hot food that reminded me of home.

We needed a quick meal before taking the subway back to the Eastern side of the city to Gendarmenmarkt to see a concert. Grandma had searched for tickets to a cultural event and thought we'd enjoy the Leipzig Boys Choir along with four soloists who sang Bach's *Magnificent*. I knew nothing about classical music despite the time I had spent with my cultured grandparents, who had season tickets to the symphony and to both the Metropolitan Opera in Washington, D.C. and the Baltimore Opera Company when I was growing up.

I didn't care about whether or not I'd enjoy the music when I saw the square. Gendarmenmarkt consists of a sweeping open stone plaza decorated with a monument and a forty-foot Christmas tree. The columned Konzerthaus, restored in 1984, presides over the square, just across the border into East Berlin. German and French Cathedrals guard the sides of the plaza with their imposing domed towers. All three of the buildings were damaged during World War II and left in disrepair by the Communist party. The French Cathedral was rebuilt in 1977; the German Cathedral reopened in 1996. The square and the surrounding area showcased the blended history of Berlin. Just two blocks north lay Bebelplatz where the Nazis held a mass burning of books by Jewish authors on May 10, 1933. The Berlin Wall, along which so many East German lost their lives, once stood a few blocks south of the square. Every landmark reflected the decades of conflict over religion – not only between Nazis and Jews, but between Christian East Germans and Communists.

That history was lost on me when we first arrived at dusk. The lights on the Christmas tree were glowing, and a movie called *Figaro* was being filmed in front of the square's monument. We watched the actors replay the scene time and time again, finding their marks on the ground, walking away from each other after a tense pleading scene.

The drama continued within the Konzerthaus. The walls were made of white marble, a stark contrast to the gold and burgundy columns that stood attention on all sides of the room. Sixteen gold and crystal chandeliers and an oversized wreath dangled from the ceiling like Christmas ornaments, while the ceiling itself was covered in gold-bordered squares, each with a different painting. I felt small and unsophisticated in such decadent surroundings.

We had gotten last minute tickets on the second of two tiers of balconies directly behind the Leipzig Boys Choir. The bright lights meant for the performers, shone on us as well, roasting us throughout the two-hour show. I didn't mind the heat; the view was magnificent. I was much more interested in studying the audience than the performers. These people, this world was so different from mine in North Carolina. I wondered who sat before me. Were there German Jews whose families had a similar legacy to mine? Were there other Americans relishing a pre-holiday adventure? There must have been people who were once members of the Nazi party. I wondered what the sea of faces before me had seen; I daydreamed about the secrets they kept.

These musings were a good distraction from the way my body felt. Crohn's disease and traveling did not go well together. The type and amount of food I ate

here was so different from that at home. As Grandma slept that afternoon, I had been doubled over in our hotel room's bathroom with diarrhea and had taken my second dose of Imodium on the train in hopes of making it to the restroom in the Konzerthaus. I hadn't told Grandma how I felt; she had enough to worry about. So I sat squirming, watching the audience watch the musicians, praying for intermission to come soon.

I don't remember much about the music inside the theatre. I do remember being greeted by a rag-tag brass band wearing black skullcaps as we emerged. The lights on the tree outside seemed to sparkle as the men played the Bach prelude in Fugue. A flock of blackbirds flew overhead, and Grandma took my arm as we walked. I have never felt so lucky. Suddenly, we were not watching a movie being filmed, we were part of our own epic story.

## CHAPTER 4

After the concert, we stayed in the hotel bar past midnight, drinking red wine and playing cards – Gin and Spades. I cannot remember a single visit with Grandma that didn't include a deck of cards or a backgammon board. Game time was always our time, and I loved it.

During our summers together at the beach, there was always a pack of cards on the table and the backgammon board and Scrabble box resided in an adjacent bookshelf. My grandmother spent at least two hours a day playing games with her guests: Gin Rummy for the youngsters, Spades or Hearts with less familiar groups, Scrabble for the older set. Backgammon was reserved for family.

Grandma didn't want to teach me to play backgammon that first summer. She thought it was too difficult for a seven year old. She didn't think, however, that Chess was too hard at six or Gin Rummy at four or five. I had mastered those games and I wanted to know how to play with the brown and white pieces in the leather case on the bookshelf. I loved the way the backgammon board smelled of sea air from years at the beach and how the pieces felt substantial and always cooled off your fingers. But the main impetus to learn was to become part of the storytelling crowd.

Grandma was the reigning champion of backgammon in our family. My cousin and uncles would spend many nights weaving tales about her "witch-like" ability to roll double sixes at the end of every game, just when they thought they had finally beaten her. She apparently had the magic touch.

Everything seems magical when you are seven. But some of my favorite memories are sitting on her lap or on her opponent's lap and just watching them roll,

move, and banter. From my perch, I learned: how to handle a roll of six and one or five and three or six and five or three and one. It seemed easy once you memorized the half dozen automatic moves in the game that prevent blots and help build up spots of safety.

After a few weeks of watching, I was ready to play. Grandma disagreed. "You need to watch a little longer," she insisted. So for the rest of the summer, I abandoned my books and dolls and sat with the adults every night as they played their game. I didn't learn much more about backgammon. I did discover volumes about our family. Adults tended to say more when their minds were occupied with the roll of the dice. While they played, they would refer to brief bits of family history and the sources of damaged relationships. I learned to read between the lines and piece together the morsels of information. It was on these summer nights that I first found out about my family's losses during the Holocaust, my great, great uncle the Nazi, and my Aunt Daisy's defection from the family.

It was the near the end of that first summer at the beach, a weekend in early August, that I got my chance. I remember my Uncle Ed was in town for my grandfather's birthday and Grandma had just defeated him when she let me play. We were sitting at the picnic table on the screened porch of the red cottage on South Fourth Street in South Bethany, Delaware. With darkness gathering, someone had turned on the porch light just before we started playing. Everything in my memory of that night has a bluish tint like the daytime sky, the navy of a starlit night, or the blue green of the ocean.

I lost that first game, as would be expected. Grandma never *lets* anyone win. You have to earn everything with her. She doesn't believe in coddling children. In fact, she insists on perfection when it comes to backgammon. It is a game of strategy, a series of very calculated moves. She'd let me make mistakes. But before she took her turn, she'd show me what I should have done, what the safe move would be. At first, I didn't care. As a young child, I wanted to take the risks to knock her out, even if it meant losing the game moments later. I wanted to go down fighting. She wanted me to calculate the odds, to do what was best to ensure that you survive until the end. As a German Jew, she understood the importance of survival.

As she watched over me for the next eight summers, she tried to encourage risk *and* provide safety for a girl fifty-four years her junior. Against my mother's wishes, she taught me at age seven to dive through powerful, curling waves, to swim in the ocean no matter how rough it was, to venture out with her to see the dolphins on their daily passage. On the other hand, the moment wrinkles appeared on my fingers, she'd point, say "pruny" and "out." While my friends rode waves on floppy rafts, I'd sit by my grandmother sucking on lemon drops and watching the world go by.

As the years progressed, our relationship required a delicate balance. We are both strong-willed and stubborn; we like things our own way. I loved the beach and yet I dreaded my time there. In my first summers, I was extremely homesick. I missed watching television, picking out my own clothes and, most of all, living with my mother. I wanted to talk to her every night as I was so used to doing. Instead,

Grandma and I drove to a pay phone once a week for a short call home. I lived for those conversations in that tiny phone booth because I thought my mother, unlike my grandmother, really listened to what I said. In my last summers, we butted heads over the new kids I met on the beach. I wanted to stay out later to roam the beach looking for cute boys. Grandma wanted me to be inside the cottage after dark, to hang out only with the kids of the regulars, kids who I had met in my first summer and who I would keep in touch with through high school. She steadfastly believed that trouble brewed when the sky darkened. I remember slamming doors and sitting on the back deck, wishing to go back to North Carolina. I often called my mom to secretly complain when Grandma took her daily afternoon nap and the snoring had reached a crescendo.

At dusk, I would storm into the house and suggest a game of backgammon. It was my passive aggressive way to challenge her rules. When we played, I could tease and pout and complain about the unfairness of a roll. I could say the things between the lines that I could never say otherwise: that I wanted to go home, that I was tired of not being trusted, that I knew more than she could imagine, that I had outgrown her perception of “her perfect little granddaughter.”

The tension of the game encouraged these secret thoughts, just as it had welcomed the worries and troubles of the adults I had once watched. In some ways, moving those brown and white pieces across the board constituted our own secret language. We took turns quickly, knowing immediately after the roll what we would do next. Each move was a sign of our ever-changing moods. If we were calm, we'd be patient and play a safe, quick game. If we were upset, we'd be daring, going after



one another with reckless abandon. Outsiders, friends of mine would just stare in awe as we bantered with words and with dice.

Now traveling with my grandmother, we were also using a secret language formed by our shared experiences. We were in the middle of a hand of Spades when Grandma stopped to thank me. She said it felt good to know that there was someone else who would never forget. I guess when memory is all that is left of a community, forgetting is like dying again and again. It doesn't matter if you remember bad times, she taught me, it just matters that you remember. Grandma unloaded tidbits as the game continued. "My father died in the custody of the Gestapo. They said it was a heart attack. Everyone knew better. My mother was raped by the Russians when they "liberated" Berlin. My grandmother, my father's mother Hedwig, taught me to play backgammon when she lived with us before the war."

As the realities of my grandmother's history began to sink in, I realized that the previous tension in our relationship was inevitable. When we embarked on this trip, it had dissipated because finally in her eyes I was no longer a child. I wondered how she had managed to put up with me, the "typical American" non-Jewish teenager. I can't count how many times I've heard the saying "When I was your age ..." coming out of the mouths of the older generation. It was not something my grandmother ever said, but something she had to have thought about. When I was thirteen, a hormonal wreck just entering high school, I stayed with her for eight

weeks. The things that tore me apart were restricted phone privileges, not being able to drink the amount of soda I wanted to, and not being able to walk on the beach at night with my friends. By the time she was thirteen, my grandmother had already seen her father dragged away and she was put on a train, and then a boat alone to England. She didn't know if war would break out, where her father was, if she'd ever see again the family that she was leaving behind. In London, Grandma was forced to abandon family again in September 1939 when Britain entered the war. Children were shipped out of the city to families in the countryside to escape the bombing. When Grandma was sixteen, she was worried about making it to a bomb shelter in time. When I was sixteen, I was worried about getting my drivers' license and taking the SATs.

At the age when I was starting college, testing my freedom, falling in love for the first time, Grandma had discovered she was pregnant with my father. She was marrying a man she wasn't sure she loved because it was the right thing to do. Her mother wasn't there. Her father was dead and she was unsure of the fate of her sisters, Etta and Ruth. When I got married at twenty-six, my entire family, including my grandmother, was present. At that age, Grandma was going through a divorce, becoming a single mother, figuring out how to return to school, trying to make her own way.

I wonder both what bad and good memories my adolescence brought her. I know I have my favorite moments, my Grandma moments, those frozen bits of time where we sat wrapped in towels, our hair dripping, playing cards or backgammon as the sun went down.

## CHAPTER 5

We were both drunk by the end of the night. “I dare you to steal two chips,” she said, pointing to a half eaten basket on an empty table. We had been waiting for hours for the bartender to bring us snacks. He never did. I couldn’t pass up a dare. So I made a quick grab for the food, and we stumbled, laughing all the way to the room.

We were still giggling when we crawled into our adjacent twin beds and turned off the lights. The fifty-four years between us vanished, and we were schoolgirls at a sleepover talking about boys. She told me how she met my Grandpa Tom. She was going to meet her friend Susan Futrell, a fellow student at the London School of Economics. Tom had invited Susan along for tea, but Susan insisted on waiting five more minutes for Grandma, who was already late. Four minutes later, Grandma arrived, and the three of them went together.

“I knew the first day that if he ever asked, I’d marry him,” she said. “It took a year and a half.” Irmgard confirmed my grandmother’s instincts shortly thereafter. The first time Irmgard saw him she said that he looked just like Grandma’s father when they got engaged. Grandma was surprised because she only knew her father as a man in his forties and had not seen many pictures of him as a young man. She knew after Irmgard’s comment that she had found the right man.

I smiled. I had only heard her talk about Tom in the scope of day-to-day activities. Everything seemed to be on a larger scale now, as I pieced together her life, learning more each day about how most of her fortunes and losses happened by chance. All of her high school records were destroyed in the bombing of London

during World War II. She had to take her entrance exams all over. She had originally won an Oxford scholarship in German, but she didn't want to move with three kids. On her second try, she was accepted into the London School of Economics where she met Tom.

"I hope I find someone I love that much," I said.

"You will," she said. "It just takes a while ... I was set up with this great guy once. He went on to be a math professor at Oxford, but I just couldn't stand the thought of kissing him. So I didn't."

I laughed. We talked for a long time that night about marriage and relationships. I didn't write anything down, but I do remember one piece of advice.

"You don't just marry the man," she said. "You marry his family. You have to love them too."

I had never thought of marriage in this way. When you join lives, you join families. When Grandma's parents married, her mother took on her father's religion and the fate that came with it. She loved his mother and sisters and made sacrifices for them. Love between two people affects so many other lives. When I married, my husband would be gaining a Jewish family. I'd never thought of that. I hadn't even thought of myself as Jewish.

As we ate breakfast in the hotel the next morning, we watched a stuffy old couple. They didn't talk once throughout breakfast, despite the sunny room, delicious soft boiled eggs, fresh bread, sausages and cheese. Grandma leaned over to whisper, "Doesn't that woman always seem to be chewing?"

It was hard not to laugh. I asked how people kept their marriages in good shape, kept from becoming the couple who has nothing left to say.

“No one will shut me up,” she said. “And when Tom gets a far off look in his eyes, I just ask what he is thinking about and he will go on for hours.”

Now that I am married myself, I use this advice often and there is never a quiet nor dull moment. In fact, I find myself going back to a lot of advice Grandma gave me on this trip. “Try not to hurt the people who love you.” “You have to look beyond the surface of people. Then you find out how wonderful they really are.” And “Weird things happen in life, but you have to hang onto them because they are good. They are the things of the heart.” I wrote down so many of her sentences and it wasn’t until later that I truly understood them. It was as if, for that one week, every word that came out of her mouth had meaning.

## CHAPTER 6

On Saturday morning, we made the long journey north to Gransee to find the house and land that we would fight for in court on Monday. We hadn't taken the S-Bahn before and the station was in the opposite direction from the U-bahn, just a few blocks from our hotel on Savignyplatz. I loved traveling above ground, stealing glimpses of the tourist sights we had not yet visited. The Tiergarten, the Reichstag, the Victory Column: all first stops for normal visitors abroad. The sights flashed through my window as if I was seeing Berlin through the lens of a Viewfinder.

We switched trains at Fredrichstrasse to change direction from east to north. The S-bahn was supposed to end in Oranienburg where we would take a commuter train to Gransee. However, the tracks were being repaired and we were forced to get off two stops early at Borgsdorf, an adorable town with a small station, a tavern, a Christmas tree stand and a tiny line of shops. We were herded onto a bus and taken through the country to the Oranienburg station. I hated the lack of predictable time tables and multiple modes of transportation away from the city. I had been nervous since Grandma announced it would take at least an hour and a half to arrive in Gransee. I would not have access to any bathrooms as the stations nor did the trains provide them. That morning, I ate only plain bread and butter and took a precautionary Imodium in order to protect myself from an embarrassing accident. In the U.S., I avoided these situations by always offering to drive, researching ahead of time where rest areas were, and what public buildings such as museums or community centers would be open nearby. I liked to be in control. In Germany, I had no options other than to have faith that my body would cooperate.

The only thing that distracted me from my physical state was staring at the trees and forests outside my ever changing window. I kept remembering stories I had read about Jews disappearing into the woods to escape the Nazis. Here, where some of those horrors must have occurred, there were no wide tree trunks or long branches to hide behind. No brush blanketed the ground. The trees were tall and old and skinny, and I felt I could see through them for miles. I wondered how emaciated and desperate one would have to be to find cover within those trees. Suddenly, my discomfort seemed trivial.

On the train to Gransee, we passed endless green fields with grazing livestock. Out here, huge evergreens began to fill in the thin forests. The landscape seemed to alternate constantly between lush farm land on rolling hills and dark forests. On the hilltops in the distance, we could see rows of windmills generating electricity for nearby villages. These huge metal machines seemed to gracefully dance on the air. The train was idyllic and the movement and sounds lulled me back into peace.

That calm vanished though when we descended from the train into a deserted station. There was no ticket office, just a crumbling building, covered in graffiti, removed from any town center. I wondered how we would ever find the estate. I felt like we were two children lost from their parents, panicking about how we would ever find our way home. I wondered if Grandma felt this way when she arrived in London. Did she worry she'd never return to Germany, that she'd never return home? My heart was beating quickly and I tried to squelch the irrational thoughts that kept

charging into my mind. The only thing I knew for sure was that Grandma couldn't walk far and there were no cabs, no working phones, nothing to assist us. We began wandering down cobblestone streets between communist-era government housing projects. Big concrete monstrosities with no character or grace dominated the scene. Children ran and screamed and hid, playing what seemed to be an on-land version of Marco Polo. We were in a foreign world – so removed from Berlin, from any comfort zone. Grandma was confused. I was worried; there were definitely no public bathrooms within sight. We backtracked several times until we found a middle-aged woman with big glasses and a green jacket. She and Grandma began talking in German, gesturing and laughing. Soon we had a ride to the estate. Apparently, in her college days, Grandma spent a large amount of time hitchhiking across England. Her skills were invaluable on this gray and misty day. More and more, I was realizing that Grandma still was a survivor. In the car with our new friend, we passed vineyards, little squatter's fields with old huts, a modern gas station, and a school. We went over a hill past some nicer houses, an old hospital and large green fields.

I was surprised when I saw the house. It had been grand once with its formal gates and long cobblestone drive. But its decay was immediately evident. The stone gates were covered in graffiti, and the stone was so worn and faded that one could barely read the estate's name, Katherinenhof, etched into the stone. Barren vines grew haphazardly across its façade, and water and soot stains maligned the stone walls and red tiled roof. The vines had been cleared from the front entrance, though the original oak door was surrounded by leafy green and wiry brown branches. The door retained its elegance with intricate detailing – swirls and arches above the



entrance and curves and depth creating an apparent window sill half way up the door itself.

Since the two possible owners – our family and Ludwig von Walthershausen – had been battling over the deed to the property since 1989, the government had kept ownership of the estate. The main house had been divided into apartments for those on welfare. While I explored, Grandma was befriended by Norbert Titz, who lived with his wife and six children in the lower right side of the house. He walked around the property, showing her the repairs needed and telling her his family's heart wrenching story.

I walked down the cobblestone drive to take pictures. The house was on higher land than I had realized. And as I headed down to the gate, I was greeted with an expansive view of farmland and trees and a huge gray sky. The cobblestones were pink and gray and charcoal-colored and everything was quiet. By the time I returned, Grandma and the Titzes seemed like old friends and we were being escorted inside for a tour and afternoon tea.

As we rounded the corner of the house, she pointed at the hilly woods behind the estate. "There was a stable for a horse and a cow back there," she said. "I learned to ride on that horse, and I had to make butter from the milk from the cow." She smiled and I watched her body relax.

Now I was seeing her life before the war, before the Holocaust. She told me how her aunts kept chickens behind the stable and how they refused to lay their eggs in the chicken house at night. "As children, we used to hunt for eggs in these woods." She motioned back toward the leaf covered hills. She said that she

preferred searching in the woods for eggs to fetching them from the chicken house. “Those chickens, they’d get mad at you,” she said.

Later, she told me that they only cooked the chickens when they got too old to lay eggs. She remembered her mother and her aunts simmering the old birds for hours in a creamy lemon butter sauce to mask the tough meat.

At the back door, though I didn’t know it at the time, she stopped and stared at two large terra cotta tondos, speaking quickly in German to Norbert, asking questions without allowing answers. The tondos, which I saw months later in photographs, reminded me of a Cameo pendant my grandmother once gave me. The tondo to the left of the door featured a man’s face in profile that was raised from the dark blue glazed background. On the other side of the door was the medallion with a woman’s face and shoulders. Both the man and the woman wore hats, and on both, multi-colored fruits, flowers and leaves encircled the outside of the dark backgrounds. I don’t remember seeing the pair during our visit, but the enameled sculptures in relief, each about three feet in diameter, would become more important than the house in the days following our trip to Gransee. Grandma had recognized their value; she would not reveal her secret to me until later.

Inside, imagination was necessary to clear the contents of a family of eight from the rooms and install the grand furnishings of two upper class Jewish women in the 1920s. In the living room, rows of windows looked out on the fields that brought swaths of light across the original parquet floors. Grandma remembered the unusual parquet vividly because it was made of small squares and put together in a unique pattern. She wanted so badly to see the old grand cherry staircases, which were

now walled off. The bottom right portion of the house, which the Titzes lived in, featured only a few rooms that were part of the original structure. The kitchen and the children's bedrooms were attached to the house after the war and featured slanting floors and leaky roofs.

During the tour of the house, we learned that four of the six children slept in one of these rooms with two sets of bunk beds and piles of old dolls. Grandma complained about the poor condition of the house. She kept shaking her head and muttering about the children suffering from damp air, about the leaks, about the division of the house. The children chatted with Grandma and gave me odd looks. I don't think that they had ever met a person who didn't speak German. I wanted to ask their names, to talk to them about their dolls, to say hello and pleased to meet you. I had never been so embarrassed that my German consists of "Guten Tag" and "Danke shoen."

Mr. Titz made us coffee and treated us to Stollen, traditional German Christmas cake. The tiny kitchen featured a skinny stove and half a fridge, and the table was covered with a bright flowered plastic table cloth to please the children. I felt as though I was in a movie as we sat in the house we would petition for in court on Monday, chatting about our very different lives in thick German accents and broken English, lounging in a dark room with only dim sunlight to illuminate our faces. We had planned on taking a few quick pictures and turning around, never believing that entering the estate was a possibility. Instead, a quirky man was treating us to afternoon tea in a house that had clouded my dreams for more than a

month. It seemed as though everywhere we went, obstacles magically disappeared and we were treated like royalty in a land that once bred so much hatred.

Grandma translated information about the Titzs' lives as she talked. She explained that the children had to go to school until they were sixteen, but the government refused to teach English because the town had little industry. Mr. Titz was worried that his children would have no training for today's world. The family had lived on social welfare and unemployment since Mr. Titz had a stroke eight years ago and was paralyzed from the waist down. His wife nursed him back to health and eventually, despite the doctor's negative outlook, he learned to walk and drive again. His speech was the last thing to return to him, and as he told his story, he stuttered uncontrollably at times.

Mr. Titz insisted on driving us back to Borgsdorf so that we wouldn't have to wait for trains or transfer with the bus. As we left, his daughters timidly handed me a little wooden white duck for our journey. About five minutes into the drive, I looked back over the fields and caught a glimpse of the estate on Meseberger Weg. With distance, it regained its grandeur and that is how I will always remember it.

I, too, was gaining perspective – not from distance, but from close examination. I could now recognize how this history defined Grandma's present-day actions. And how those habits and this German Jewish heritage were passed down to me during those summers when she was my sole caretaker.

## CHAPTER 7

The glass wall, like ice, stretched across the square, the length of two dozen people, standing shoulder to shoulder. It was taller than I was, about thirteen feet high in real life, like a skyscraper in my dreams. Legal names were etched first and maiden names followed – recognition that more than one family had lost something. Then birthdates were documented and finally the home addresses, where these people were taken from – screaming and shaking or with brave faces and silent tears. Instead of hiding history, burning deportation lists, this community memorialized those it had lost by creating a reflecting tombstone to honor former Jewish residents and to remind all Germans of the consequences of veering down the wrong path, of killing innocent people, of making the largest mistakes humans can make.

We visited this monument near the Rauthaus Steiglitz stop off the S-bahn on the first day of Hanukkah in December 2001. It was a Sunday afternoon and the daily market was bustling. I had expected the somber silence I had encountered at the previous Jewish memorials we visited. Instead, people hustled, coats swished, heels clicked, bags rustled, merchants bargained, children cried. Grandma and I navigated the chaos passing stalls of jewelry, clothes, books, leather goods and Christmas greenery. We still couldn't find the memorial and continued on past food vendors, vegetable stalls, shoes, flowers, even underwear until we found an opening between stalls. And there, between tent-covered stalls and tables covered with crates of books, we were confronted with the mirrored testimonial to the horrific past. Grandma scanned the wall, avoiding her own reflection, until she found their names:

Simon, Hedwig Marie. Geb Stettiner, 17.10.61, Lichterfelde, Hindenburgdamm 11

Simon, Eva Anna. 13.9.84, Lichterfelde, Hindenburgdamm 11

Simon, Katharina, 25.11.87, Lichterfelde, Hindenburgdamm 11

These women etched into history were the matriarchs of her youth, her grandmother and two aunts, her summer caretakers, women she had once known so well. I had only known of them for a short time; they were not yet even figments of my imagination, although their land was the impetus for this trip. As I stood there, I should have considered their age when they were rounded up that day. October 3, 1942. Katharina and Eva were in their fifties; Hedwig was in her eighties. How would they have reacted? Did Hedwig walk out of the house with a cane? How long would they last in a work camp? What harm could they have done outside of one? But I didn't ask these questions. I was too caught up in the present time, in the movement of the square, in my nervous anticipation of visiting the synagogue. So I glanced, stared for a few seconds, snapped a few pictures and ventured further, circling the monument, peaking at the flea market. Meanwhile, Grandma was transfixed.

She saw Eva, an artist who painted in Rome. In Grandma's basement over the fireplace hangs a picture of Hedwig, painted by Eva in liquid silver. And she envisioned Katharina, who managed the estate's apple and pear orchard and raised cows and chickens all by herself until she reached fifty. Grandma remembered drinking fresh milk and then making fresh butter. She hated the duty because she had to pay attention; no reading was allowed when churning. Once a week, the eggs

were taken to the local station in the cart drawn by an ancient horse; Grandma followed that same path when she found her way back to the estate on her first trip after the war. Katharina had made money off the land; that much was certain. In 1926, she opened a savings account in Switzerland. Many decades later the Swiss banks returned the money to her heirs, Grandma and her three living siblings. They each received \$2,000.

When these women were taken on that fall day in 1942, only my great grandmother, my grandmother's mother, Irmgard, remained. In one year, Irmgard had weathered the death of her husband and the capture and deportation of two of her daughters to Terezin. I imagine that she clung to these matriarchs; her own mother was already dead and now Katharina, Eva, and Hedwig were disappearing from her life too. At least these women had one another. At the end of the day, Irmgard was alone, without her six children, without her husband. She had lost touch with her brother, a high ranking Nazi official who became Attorney General of Czechoslovakia after it was annexed; her sister, lovingly referred to as the "Garlic Aunt" by Grandma, lived in the flat upstairs. Her fate had been determined by her German, not Jewish, heritage. She was of pure German blood, daughter of an ambassador to Indonesia, born Irmgard Margarete Emma Gabriel on Dec 16, 1889 in that country's capital, Batavia, now known as Jakarta. Because of her ethnic background, she was taken along with those she loved.

In her recorded memories, my great aunt Etta tries to imagine what it was like for her mother, Irmgard: "who risked her life every day to end the war by hiding people and getting together food to collect with Polchau. And then still knowing that

her brother, her only brother, played such a horrible role. And losing her husband and two children ... I think of all of us, none of us have had to go through (that much) 'cause we all had shared a fate. When you were in prison, you shared a fate. In the camp we shared a fate. But my mother shared nothing. And was always alone and has to carry all that (burden) alone.”

Looking back on that day in the square, I see Grandma as the solitary one carrying the burden. I didn't quite understand what my growing role as family historian meant. I knew Grandma wanted me to write everything down, to be the receptacle for her many buried memories. But on that day, I was lost in the traffic of a Sunday afternoon at the market. It is hard to be struck with emotion in noise. In the silence of the synagogue's courtyard, the countryside, the cemetery, an empty square at night, I was moved to tears. But in a bustle with new images and sounds pulling in all directions, I could not process the enormity of the names and dates. Like the hordes of oblivious market goers who never looked our way, I too was not yet connected.

As I prepared to visit the synagogue that evening and face my own fears, I felt I could not handle facing any more realities. My weakness was not a good excuse, though. The world seems to be preoccupied as well. In January 2005, the U.N. held its first special session on the Holocaust in which U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan noted how, in the sixty years since Auschwitz was liberated by the Red Army, the members had repeatedly failed to prevent genocide in other countries, such as Rwanda and Yugoslavia. At the same session, Elie Wiesel announced his fears that the lessons of the Holocaust had already been lost. He might have been right. At the



foot of the memorial lay piles of dry and withered flowers and greenery that looked as if they had been there for years, as if in the busy marketplace few remembered those who were gone, as if everything in the past suddenly did not exist.

From the monument, we took a taxi to the house of Rainer and Brigitte, the couple who oversaw the clean-up of the cemetery plot. They were friends of Grandma's older sister Ulla, whom she met in while living in Israel. During the ride to their house, my knees shook. I was anxious about attending services at the synagogue that night, and because they would be our hosts, I was even more nervous about meeting them.

After a brief introduction, we sat down in their formal dining room for dinner. Brigitte brought out course after course of authentic German fare: tomato soup, veal roast, mushroom gravy, green beans, and potato dumplings. We drank mineral water and pungent red wine, while the three of them chatted incessantly in German. I picked up a few words, understanding mostly when my grandmother was relaying the adventures of our trip thus far. Brigitte stole my heart with her broken English and strong hugs. She was a sturdy woman with blond hair, who was quick to smile and glanced at me often with big inviting eyes. She was a mother's type of mother – instinctually filling me in or putting a hand on my shoulder throughout the afternoon to make me feel more welcome. Rainer was more distant, more serious, a wiry man of many layers. He had gray hair and wore wire-rimmed glasses. He was sweet but hesitant toward me, especially after I confessed that I had never been to a

synagogue. The two of them had converted to Orthodox Judaism and were very serious about religion. I think he hoped only that I would not do anything to embarrass them during the service. After all, I was his guest.

It didn't take long for me to commit my first error. As they poured the coffee, I asked for cream. Both Rainer and Brigitte froze. My grandmother had to explain that Kosher law does not allow meat and dairy products to be eaten together. And though we had already cleared the veal from the table, Kosher law requires that a significant amount of time pass between eating meat and dairy products. I apologized and said sugar would be fine. No wonder Rainer was worried.

As soon as the meal was finished, Grandma began spinning stories of her childhood. She spoke first in German across the table to Brigitte and Rainer and then facing me in English. It was as if she was trying to make up for the absence of memory surrounding the monument in Rauthaus Steiglitz. Family secrets emerged.

I learned that Grandma used to ride her bike to school every day. One day, as she was passing the post office, the SS men began marching up the street. She stopped suddenly, and her fear must have been evident. Two women, their arms full of bags from the market, pushed her behind them so that she wouldn't have to salute and honor Hitler. She kept shaking her head, wondering how complete strangers could have been so kind.

She told us about how one of her friend's families hid gold within their daughter's hollowed out silver bangles. This way, when they left the country, they would not be stripped of all their wealth and possessions. As they went through customs, no one thought to look at the weighty bracelets on a child's tiny wrists. In

between stories, she said, “You’ve got to hear this one” or “Can you believe it?” or “Did you write that one down?” She was purging her memory, unloading the stories, this time not just on me but on Rainer and Brigitte too. I was starting to realize how important the transference of this history onto others was to my grandmother. At first, I was frightened by the weight of these stories. After four days in Berlin, I found myself embracing every tidbit, wanting to know even the scariest details; I had fully accepted my role as scribe and storyteller for the generations to come.

She explained to them how her mother Irmgard’s father died young and Grandma’s future paternal grandfather, a law school acquaintance, was appointed guardian of her mother. He refused to approve her marriage, even though the groom would be his own son. He knew that marrying a Jew could be dangerous for her and didn’t want to let down his old friends. When Irmgard turned twenty-one and became a legal adult, the two married despite my great grandfather’s wishes.

On Kristallnacht, Grandma’s father, Heinrich, was arrested and detained at Sachsenhausen, a concentration camp, just north of Berlin. He came home six weeks later in shambles. Some of those he was imprisoned with could not handle the torture and never came home. After Grandma left, he tried to arrange for Ruth and Etta to escape too. He secured them a place on a train for Dutch workers going home and armed them with French Francs. When the two girls were caught and detained, the Gestapo came back for Heinrich. It was the last time he was seen alive.

With her children in camps or abroad and her husband murdered, Irmgard was left alone in Berlin during the war. Using the insurance money from her

husband's death, she bought food stamps. She had two Jewish girls with fake papers attending to her at the time. On their days off, they would deliver the food stamps to families hiding other Jews.

I committed these stories, like pearls on a string, to my memory and to paper. As the days went on, the weight around my neck became almost unbearable. While these tales were shocking to me, Grandma became lighter with every word. It must have been a relief to remember the ones she lost after tucking their memories away for so long.

As the sky darkened, we lit the first Hanukkah candle on the menorah in the corner of the room. The three of them recited the traditional prayers in Hebrew.

Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheinu melekh ha-olam, asher kid-shanu b'mitzvotav  
v'tzivanu l'hadlik ner shel Hannukah.

Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheinu melekh ha-olam,  
she-asah nissim la'avoteinu ba-yamin ha-hem u-va-z'man ha-zeh.

Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheiu melekh ha-olam,  
She-heheyanu v'kiy'manu v'higi-anu la-z'man ha-zeh.

My grandmother began to cry as she translated them to me, telling me over and over how lucky she was.

Praised are You Adonai our God, who rules the universe,  
instilling in us the holiness of mitzvot

by commanding us to light the lights of Hanukkah.

Praised are You Adonai our God, who rules the universe,  
accomplishing miracles for our ancestors  
from ancient days until our time.

Praised are You Adonai our God, who rules the universe,  
Granting us life, sustaining us, and enabling us to reach this day.

It is the last prayer, only said on the first night of Hanukkah, that seems to affect her so much. She still struggles with the fact that she survived while her brother and sister died. The past still rests with her and many times during our trip, she would recite, "I know I am lucky, but that doesn't make it easy." I know she wonders why she is able to reach each new Hanukkah when others perished so young.

As the flames began to burn, we gathered our belongings, piled into the car, and drove to the synagogue to properly celebrate the first night of this holiday.

## CHAPTER 8

There was a light in the window. We had left the car parked along a wooded park, crossed a small canal, and turned the corner. We could see the warm hue from two or three blocks away, though the rest of the building remained in shadow. As we got closer, the glow sharpened into the shape of a menorah; it was the first night of Hanukkah and my first trip to a synagogue. We had seen many Jewish centers and landmarks since we arrived in Berlin, but they were shiny and new, many boxy and composed of glass and stone. This synagogue was old, one of the few to survive the Night of the Broken Glass on November 9, 1938, when Nazis destroyed hundreds of synagogues and Jewish stores. The main synagogue was destroyed that night, but this small white rectangular building, the children's sanctuary, miraculously survived. In the years that followed, the Nazis killed countless adult Jews, destroying them as they did their house of worship. Despite the horrors, a remarkable number of children, like my grandmother, escaped Germany or survived the camps. It was their childlike hope that kept them alive through those tough times, and I felt as though that spirit was what protected the building for all these years.

But on December 9, 2001, when we came to worship, more protection was needed. Five armed German police stood guard outside the wrought iron gate to insure no one would disturb our holiday. I had thought that the tragedy of Sept. 11 had reached far across the ocean, instilling fear in Jews across the world because of the actions of al Qaeda. The children's synagogue was only a few blocks from the Arab section of Berlin and all precautions, including searching the worshipers, had to be taken. I had been so absorbed in the losses of my grandmother's generation that

I had temporarily lost sight of my own generation's cultural loss of innocence just three months before. Being searched by the guards brought the events of Sept. 11 back to the forefront of my mind. Still the uncertainty in the U.S. and the world in general seemed less daunting now that I had a better understanding of how my own family withstood past horrors. I would later learn that all Jewish sites had been guarded since the massacre of Israeli athletes by a Palestinian terrorist group at the Munich Olympics in 1972. The threat of violence was not a recent phenomenon, despite my naïve assumptions.

By the time they finished checking my coat, my palms were sweating. Walking through the gate, I felt like I had crossed more than one new threshold. For years, I had resisted visiting a synagogue with my grandparents. In my mind, Judaism seemed dangerous and I always avoided close association. Though I was proud of my grandmother and her history, I had always been quick to point out that my father had abandoned his faith and my mother was a lapsed Catholic. Stepping into the wooded courtyard, I was returning to my Jewish heritage in a physical way. Ironically, I was taking this big step, going outside of the Christian faith, on a Sunday, the Christian, not the Jewish holy day.

Inside, we were greeted by the German, Russian, and Polish Orthodox Jews who worshipped in the small building. The open spirit that I sensed outside was palpable inside as the members greeted one another with hugs and kisses, then immediately welcomed my grandmother in German and tried out their best English on me. Rainer and Brigitte seemed to know everyone.

After the introductions, we took our seats on the female side of the aisle. The last time that I had seen men and women voluntarily separate themselves to opposite sides of the room was at my middle school dance. When Grandma warned me about this custom, I thought I would find the experience degrading and divisive. Instead, it seemed to unify the community more. The women whispered in the pews as we waited for the service to start. The men motioned and nodded to one another as they jockeyed for their seats. The tension inevitable in a mixed audience -- whether of siblings, friends or spouses -- disappeared. From our hard wooden seat, I gazed at the high gray ceilings above marked with a faded white Star of David. The sanctuary was plain and simple, not ornate like the Episcopal and Catholic churches I had attended in the past. As I surveyed my new surroundings, I noticed an electronic menorah on a high window sill. I was shocked that it was not candlelight that drew me in off the dark streets.

The service books were written in German, Russian, Yiddish and Hebrew, but my grandmother and Brigitte kept me informed with a running commentary in whispers. Though I couldn't understand a word he said, the rabbi's voice was soothing as he spoke before a velvet covered altar that bore another star. The rabbi led beautiful chants -- full of melody yet heavy with importance. Everyone followed along in their own tone, pace, language. I loved hearing the blending of voices and traditions instead of a mass recitation of the same prayer. In my experiences in Catholic and Episcopal churches, I had always felt I didn't belong; my awkwardness was exacerbated by the scripted responses in the service that I never did follow. In those services, I felt that everyone was looking at me -- the obvious sinner --



because I was conspicuously silent as they chanted their rehearsed responses, their proclamations of faith. At the synagogue, people were speaking different languages; some following along in the prayer book loudly, others mouthing the words, their praise quieter than a whisper. No one looked around, surveying their brethren as they did in the churches I had attended. They were absorbed in their beliefs, in the service, in their own reading of the sacred text. By just being silent, by feeling moved in my heart, by bowing my head and watching Grandma's fingers trace over the Hebrew words, I finally fit in.

This individual freedom within the service captured my imagination. It impressed upon me a sense that the Jewish faith was about self-reliance, about taking ownership of your own beliefs. I am not even a casual student of religion, much less a religious scholar. But from my viewpoint, it seemed that for these believers it was up to the individual to live a good, just and holy life, to devote that life to a greater cause, and then at the end be rewarded. The Christian faith proceeds in the same way except for the tenet that Christ is the savior; without his sacrifice, we would have no chance at salvation. We could live a life defined by religious tenets but it wouldn't matter. It is not so much our own deeds but his that save us from ourselves in the end. I think that's why I had always gravitated toward Christianity; that guarantee for salvation seemed too good to pass up. I have always respected and envied devout Christians because they have a sense of peace and truly believe that everything happens for a reason and no matter what, one will end up in a better place when this life ends. But in order to get there, more time is spent asking for forgiveness for our sins than praising God's good works.

At the synagogue, the service was consumed by praise for God, for Israel, for wise people who had shown us the way; it was a celebration of God's kindness, goodness, love. Its joyous tone contrasted sharply with the serious repenting nature of Catholic mass; in the synagogue, sin was not at center stage. I found out later that Jews address sin one day each year on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. The rest of the year they focus on living a full and just life in God's name. Even though the Old Testament is full of stories of war, nasty battles and the denigration of women, Grandma found a positive message within the Biblical text. In her eyes, it teaches you that there is a higher form of life. "That's what it is all about," she said, "good and doing good."

During the ceremony, an elderly man with white wisps of hair and a dark wooden cane stood to interrupt and then began rambling in Yiddish. He stood stooped in the aisle perpendicular to ours. Brigitte told us he was the synagogue elder and an Auschwitz survivor; he could speak when he pleased. Most of the congregation, Brigitte whispered, didn't understand what he was saying. "Just smile and pretend to listen," she instructed. The man's eyes scanned the audience, but he never registered that no one was listening.

The calm I felt during the service surprised me. For once, my body was still; the jittery knees and fidgety hands never appeared. I always had an irrational fear of churches and temples, never understanding whether it was the service content or the elaborate ceremony or the long silences that caused sheer panic when my behind met a wooden pew. Once I was diagnosed with Crohn's disease, my family and friends always contributed this aversion to my worry that there would be no

bathrooms. In recent years, visits to a religious place sparked a focus on my need for a bathroom and how embarrassing it would be to get up during service. I'd stake out how long was left in the service, following closely along in a prayer book, noting all the closest exits, planning my escape route if necessary. But I can remember tense shoulders and a swirling stomach in places of worship long before my diagnosis.

When I was four years old, I started asking my mother about God and the Bible. To quench my curiosity, my mother decided to take me to Mass with my great grandmother, Mammy, at St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Columbia, South Carolina. My mother is one of twelve and her parents and many of her siblings, their children, even their grandchildren attended this church. Mammy had to sit in the front row because she was too weak to stand in line for communion. As we were waiting for the service to begin, I tugged on both my mother and Mammy's sleeves and asked loudly, "When's the show going to start?" The priest's booming voice scared me. The figure in the robes loomed above me on the stairs. I thought I must have done something wrong. About halfway through Mass, I decided that church was not for me, exclaiming loudly enough for the priest and a few rows of patrons to hear: "I don't like this show." I wanted to go home and to Mammy's embarrassment spent the rest of the service fidgeting and whining. Since then my fate had been sealed, I've never been able to sit through a service comfortably. Being religious requires patience; even more than that, it requires faith.

Just before Mammy died, I spent a weekend sitting at her bedside, reading out of her worn Catholic prayer book, *Key of Heaven*, while the women of the family

discussed what would happen when the end came. She was propped up on pillows and covered with a white quilt that she had embroidered herself. In my memories, the colors of the stitched flowers have disappeared and everything is antiseptic white. As the light dimmed outside the tightly shut blinds in Mammy's bedroom, I read the Lord's Prayer and the Hail Mary and the Apostle's Creed over and over again until they were burned into my eight-year-old brain. These prayers were labeled in red capital letters "Prayers Every Good Christian Should Know" and I wondered if I could go to hell for not knowing them, not understanding their full meaning. Throughout my life, whenever I have gotten scared— before my plane takes off, when someone is sick, when I want something so badly – I repeat those three prayers over and over in my head. At first, I thought the prayers would be my salvation. As I entered my teenage years, I wondered if I would be punished for praying only when I needed reassurance.

For most of my childhood, I avoided places of worship completely except for a few family weddings and two funerals. This aversion was sparked by a best friend in sixth grade. She lived in a white split level house that her family owned; she had two parents, a brother, and a dog; they went to the Baptist church every Sunday. I thought they had the perfect life. I only spent the night at her house once on a Saturday, and the next day I went to Sunday School with her in the morning. Though I never told her this, I spent the next week crying. In the small classroom, sitting awkwardly without a Bible of my own to read, my hands moved incessantly. I didn't know the biblical stories that they discussed. I didn't know how to pronounce the names in the passage we read. The one thing I did learn that day was I was

going to hell because I was not saved. There was a lot of side talk about being saved and committing to the church; looking back, I don't think the discussion was aimed specifically at me but I felt that way. That night, I asked all sorts of questions of my mother about religion and begged her to hurry to the bookstore to buy me a Bible of my own. I hoped that I could save myself without the hellfire of a Baptist schoolroom.

When I entered an all girls' Episcopal school in tenth grade, the weekly chapel requirement was a huge adjustment. One afternoon a week, the entire student body of St. Mary's School crammed into dark pews in the historic white chapel on campus. I watched in awe as my peers followed along in the blue service books effortlessly: reciting prayers, kneeling and standing on cue, recognizing the melody of every hymn. It was even worse than Sunday school. My awkwardness was compounded by my constant need for a bathroom. Though not diagnosed for two more years, my battle with Crohn's disease began that first year at Saint Mary's. I spent every minute of every service wondering what to do if I had to excuse myself: what would happen if I waited too long, what if I got stuck against the wall in a pew, what if I couldn't make it to the bathroom? I can't remember truly listening to one sermon. At fifteen, chapel time was when I most feared embarrassment. Once those heavy wooden doors were shut, I believed there was no escape.

In the synagogue in Berlin, I did not feel trapped. I was too busy absorbing the foreign words and the layers of emotions swirling around the room. The service had an ephemeral quality; it seemed to end before it even began. Moments after the rabbi finished, the entire congregation, about fifty people, was shepherded into an

adjacent room, a quarter of the size of the chapel, for a communal meal. There were four tables: one head table where the rabbi and the elders sat under a torah shrine and three long banquet tables perpendicular to the head table. We found our seats near the end of the middle table and stood as the rabbi said a prayer over the wine and challah bread. As we stood for the prayer, it was hard not to brush our backs against the people standing behind us along the adjacent table. I felt as though we were in a subway car at rush hour and finally the claustrophobic feeling of the churches I had attended in the past began to descend upon me. The walls were even crowded; only a few blank spaces existed between the dark heavy tapestries that hung on the wall. The space was so rich with smells and sounds and bodies. Before the service, the members must have labored on this feast: small bowls of beets, potato salad, salmon, herring, bread, cakes, donuts, fruit, and vodka.

The vodka must have been introduced by the large Russian population in the congregation as Grandma swore that this was not a normal Jewish custom. But on each of the tables sat two chilled fifths of forty-proof vodka. As we began our meal, I noticed the shot glasses next to each plate. They remained empty while one of the elders gave a brief history of Hanukkah; I didn't understand. Then the old man who had mumbled during the service began to sing. He continued with melodic Yiddish tales and jokes until his face became flushed and his breath disappeared. At the end of every sing-song chorus or punch line, the congregation raised a shot of vodka in cheers and threw it down their throats like it was water. They also drank the clear burning liquid after every prayer and every traditional serving of herring. My fingertips were cold and wet from holding the shot glass so tightly the first two times,

but my grip had loosened by the third shot. The icy vodka was quickly becoming a good antidote to my apprehension. After four shots, Grandma whispered in my ear. “Maybe we should just pretend to take the shot from now on,” she said giggling. I agreed; my mind was already swirling from the alcohol and the intoxicating commotion of the songs and the people.

As the merriment of the tales vanished, a small girl, prodded by her father, took center stage. She had long brown hair and deep brown eyes, and her smile, though sincere, was small and closed. Looking as though she had just emerged from a Vermeer painting, she played several haunting tunes on her violin. Her shoulders, arms, the long elegant violin bow swayed with a ballerina’s grace as she moved through the melodies. She concentrated hard, staring only at the sheet music displayed in her mother’s hands, oblivious to the glazed awe of her audience. Only on the final note did she relax and smile widely, heartened by our applause. At the very end of the meal, the elders distributed laminated sheets of songs or maybe they were only prayers and the congregation as a whole had the skill of a master cantor. Unable to read them myself, I felt as though I was being serenaded, initiated into this warm and cozy world.

## CHAPTER 9

It was sleeting and snowing the morning we left for Potsdam to attend the appeal. Grandma was a wreck. At breakfast, she barely ate a thing, but forced me to eat more and more and more bread and cheese. I could hardly move by the time we left the hotel lobby and were greeted with foreboding skies. Grandma had spent much more time getting ready this morning. She wanted to look like a proper Veit Simon girl, adhering to the strict details of appearance that must have been forced upon her as a child – a long skirt, stockings, a nice top, and no hair out of place. She was so proud of her name, of her family and especially her father. I don't know if I had ever seen her as nervous. For someone who claimed that she has only truly been frightened once, when she was on bomb patrol in London, she was making quite a fuss.

We traveled by train and then by taxi. On the journey, I couldn't follow the strains of Grandma's conversation. She would fret about the tondos she had seen on Saturday at the estate. She couldn't believe I hadn't taken a picture of them. It didn't occur to me because the back of the house was the center of action and never without people. I didn't want to embarrass the Titz children by taking a photo. She knew they had to be Della Robbia's or at least good copies. She'd seen similar ones in Italy, the Art Institute in Chicago, and the National Gallery. What if they were looted? All she knew is that they had to be put on the house between 1938 and 1945. Her aunts did not have them. They'd be worth so much money. The price they would bring could really help out Ulla, Etta, and Harro. What if they were a copy? She kept resting her forehead in the palm of her hand, looking downwards, shaking



her head from side to side in disbelief as she leaned up against the window of the S-bahn car.

When she looked out the window and saw the snow pick up, she wondered aloud if all the necessary officials would be at the courtroom. I had expected a grand room, a traditional American appeals court with a large space between the claimants and the judge, who would be perched above us all. We arrived at a courtroom that was small and in a modern building. Five men, three in judges' robes sandwiched by plain-clothed officers on either end, sat along a table in the front of the room. We sat facing them, just a few feet away in a row of chairs. There was no table from which our lawyers could plead the case. A small door marked the entrance on the left side of the room and the right wall consisted of a row of windows that revealed an ominous sky, the color and texture of a slate slab, and prickly bare branches. We were joined by my grandmother's lawyer, Frau Erdmann, and her English-speaking legal assistant, Sabine. The defendant didn't even bother to show up; instead, he sent his son along with his lawyer and the two sat on the other side of the narrow aisle next to the cold glass. There was commotion at first because the defendant forgot to give his son power of attorney, a fact that was looked down upon by the judges. My grandmother explained this in quick scribbles passed quickly back and forth as though we were school girls hiding tidbits from our teacher.

As they began to read out the details of the case, Grandma held my hand tightly, squeezing it every now and then to emphasize the good and the bad. As the clerk delivered the summary, I wondered what those five men must have thought of my grandmother grasping the hand of an American woman, more than five decades

younger, to help settle her nerves. I didn't understand much of what the German clerk said, but I did know the meaning of a few words: father, mother, Gestapo, aunts, Auschwitz, Terezin, Jewish, Nazi, restitution. I couldn't believe these historic words pertained to me, to my family on this serious stage. Previously, I had only heard these words in schoolrooms, museums and on grave documentaries that flashed onto the screen horrific black and white pictures of happy healthy Jews before the war and emaciated men and women after. Once the clerk began fleshing out this history, the men at the head table blushed, looked down, flipped through papers; they did not look Grandma and me in the eye as they did when they first entered the room

The estate, which both sides claimed, once belonged to my grandmother's aunts, Katharina and Eva Anna Simon. I did not learn until much later that both were handicapped; they had been rendered deaf from a bout with the mumps or measles and communicated with each other in their own special language. They lived on the estate in the country, which was bought and maintained by their father. When he died, their brother, my grandmother's father, Heinrich Veit Simon, took care of the house for the two aging sisters. On May 30, 1938, the estate was relinquished in a forced sale by the Nazis, who banned Jews from owning such property. In fact, the law prohibiting Jews from owning land was passed by the Nazi party in Sept. 29, 1933; they had been lucky to stay so long. The two women moved in with their mother, brother and his children in Berlin until they were deported to Terezin four years later. They would die in Auschwitz.

Since we had seen the house on Saturday, the proceedings had more meaning for me. When the court officials spoke of property, I could envision the charming country estate and its sweeping views. Despite the disrepair, Grandma was hoping that they could sell the land and the house for a decent sum, enough to help out Harro, Ulla, and Etta with their ever-mounting medical bills. When the court official spoke of Katharina and Eva, I saw their names etched first in the granite of the family plot and then into the mirrored wall in Rauthaus Steglitz. I heard my grandmother tell me how they taught her to ride a horse through their orchard. I felt intimately connected to the case.

The hearing went by quickly. At the end, the judges surprised us by saying they would have a decision by 4 p.m. Grandma and her lawyer were prepared to wait weeks for an answer. With the judges' earlier annoyance, Frau Erdmann was hopeful. They decided to celebrate prematurely with lunch at Ceciliaenhoff. It is a beautiful castle, set among large manicured fields and glistening lakes, where the Potsdam conference took place after the war between Truman, Stalin and Churchill. The English manor style palace featured massive dining rooms and mahogany walls. At lunch, I enjoyed the fine wine, but looked on as Grandma, Frau Erdmann, and Sabine sampled exquisite food. Grandma's nerves this morning had taken a toll on my own stomach. As I looked out the long windows and up to the high ceiling, I wondered which leaders had sat where I was now sitting, if in this room they had talked about the abolishment of Nazi beliefs, if they had outlined the division of power over the country while looking at the same green field. I could not escape history.

After our long lunch, Grandma and I joined the lawyer and her assistant on their journey back to Berlin. It was interesting to compare the trip by train and by car. Neither was fast (more than an hour) and both offered not so pleasant views. In the car, however, we did get to see some of the beautiful waterways that Potsdam is best known for. By the time we reached Berlin, rush hour had begun and just when we were all beginning to get antsy and uncomfortable the phone rang. We had won the final appeal. The ten year fight ended in one day.

Grandma and Frau Erdmann were screaming “Ja! Ja!” Grandma started blabbering in German with the largest smile I had seen since we arrived. Every fourth word was miracle, *ein Wunder*. It was as if years of worries had lifted off of her shoulders. She couldn’t wait to get back to the lawyer’s office. She would call her husband and siblings right away. Once again, her favorite question was “Who would believe it?”

I didn’t know. Who would believe the adventures we had had on our trip thus far? Hitchhiking, befriending the family who lived in Katharinenhof, getting drunk with Russian Jews in a synagogue, watching the filming of a movie, winning the court case, and meeting so many wonderful people. These moments left me with a sense of peace and a feeling that justice had been done. While Grandma’s relatives suffered enormously in Germany, she was treated with respect and gratitude everywhere we went. We were receiving what those that had gone before us deserved.

## CHAPTER 10

On our fifth full day in Berlin, we finally went sightseeing. Most of our business was finished and it was time to see the city. We went first to the Brandenburg Tor. It is the giant gate to the city, near the Reichstag, that was once enclosed by the Berlin Wall. When we were there, the city was renovating the famous landmark so our view was limited by scaffolding and banners. But our focus was on the buildings just to west of this famous landmark. My great grandfather's law office was at one time less than twenty yards from the gate. Standing under the gate, I could easily gaze up at the window in his old office. Grandma seemed to hold her chin a little higher, as she explained that conducting business at Six Parizer Platz meant that one had arrived. It was the best address in the city. The current building is a replica of the original as both the gate and everything in this close of proximity to the Reichstag was bombed heavily during World War Two. By the time she finished her spiel her cheeks were red and wet from a few stray tears. Despite the estate, her childhood home in Dahlem, despite everything else I had seen and heard, I had not until that moment fully grasped how prominent our family had been until that moment. The realization was heartbreaking; if they had lived at the top of society and the professional world, then Hitler's demeaning laws sent them on a long and hard fall through the ranks of society and away from the creature comforts of life. Being Jewish made them a target, and they had very much to lose.

Between the office and the gate stood the Max Liebermann house, where the Jewish artist used to live and paint. The building now houses an exhibit of his work. He was related to us by marriage (his niece married my great grandfather's cousin)

and some of his oil paintings of family members hang in my grandmother's house. Upon our return, I discovered that his masterpieces were the same paintings that haunted me as a little girl. They are solemn portraits and in the dark the whites of my relatives' eyes glowed eerily, forcing me to retreat under the covers, until my fear dissipated into sleep.

In the exhibit, I was captivated by the pictures and articles from Liebermann's funeral. His grave is only a few yards from my family plot in the cemetery on Schonhauser Allee. He died before the war began and the documents gave me a glimpse of what the cemetery looked like before it was destroyed. Grandma couldn't stop talking about his self-portrait. We once owned his only other self portrait; it was a wedding present when his niece married into the family. She thought the one in the museum was much more interesting because he had included a painter's palette in his hand.

My favorite painting was "Das Atelier des Künstlers", (The Studio of the Artists), which depicted the studio once housed in these very rooms where Liebermann's paintings were now displayed. The grand studio must have been situated on the top floor. There were large curving windows that that began where a normal ceiling would end and stretched higher, creating an arched skylight across the whole room. On every open wall space hung a painting, and the floors were covered with Turkish rugs. Antique chairs and one couch lined the wall so people could watch the master working at his canvas, which was perched on the hardwood floors just between the two rugs. The character of the room – the oversized painting, the antique furniture, the airy light that streamed in from the large windows -

reminded me of my grandparents' home in Silver Spring, Maryland. Grandma stopped in front of the canvas and pointed to the row of chairs. "My grandfather, maybe even my father sat there with his feet on the plush carpet." Her comment reinforced my revelation of what a "good German Jewish family" we had been. As we continued walking through the exhibit, she would point to people in the paintings and comment about who was friends' with her own parents.

Our next stop was the New Synagogue on Oranienburger Strasse. It had a striking façade that had been restored to its original appearance after the synagogue was destroyed during Kristallnacht. There was embellishment on every surface from gold glazed bricks to delicately carved wood arches to heavy metal doors engraved with Stars of David and elaborate flowers. On top of the building sat a glimmering gold dome that will forever grace the Berlin skyline. It can be seen from many points across the city, reminding all who glimpse its spires of what had once been lost. Despite the building's extravagant beauty, when we exited the cab, the first thing I noticed was the armed guards. Dressed in green uniforms and black berets, they paced in front of the barricaded entrance with large machine guns swung over their shoulders or hanging against their chests. Inside, we were greeted with more security personnel and airport scanners.

After the scanners, we were emptied into the original domed and marble entranceway. Some of the pieces of the original wall decorations were recovered and put into their former places, but the missing parts had not been recreated. The walls were bare instead. The synagogue museum was a building that displayed and memorialized fragments of what had been. In other parts of the exhibit, the museum

preserved burned shreds of the torah curtains, pieces of a holy basin, shards of the original stained glass, chunks of the Torah ark. Again, all of these fragments were placed back into their original places surrounded by blankness. While those pieces were beautiful and interesting in and of themselves, it was what was missing that I found so moving and breathtaking. Seeing how things were smashed and burned brought life to an evil and hatred I never wanted to imagine. But the display of that anger created a quiet, sad splendor. The cemetery had taught me there could be peace in something that so upset you.

At the back of the museum, there is a glass wall and a expansive open space where the main sanctuary in the synagogue once stood. It is now a vast unreachable nothingness, marked only by metal pipes where the torah ark used to stand. At its prime, the synagogue, the first of the reform synagogues, held more than three thousand worshippers. On either side of the huge glass window hung before and after photographs. The most striking before picture was of a young Einstein conducting an orchestra in front of a full congregation. The after pictures featured grave destruction, burned and defaced rubble.

I still can't understand the pain and discrimination people were willing to endure in order to keep their faith. What religion is worth it? I know in the end there was really not much of a choice. In 1935, the Nazi party passed the Nuremburg Laws, which stripped Jews of their citizenship and banned them from marrying Aryans. A byproduct of the laws was an official definition of Jewishness. A person who was one-eighth Jewish, having only one Jewish grandparent, was still ripe for persecution during the Holocaust. It did not matter if that person was not a practicing



Jew, if that person was a baptized Christian. In fact, in Terezin, where Etta, Ruth, Hedwig, Eva and Katharina were sent, there were underground synagogues *and* churches within the camp system. Many of the people deported to the camps were not practicing Jews. Not only did they lose everything, they were thrown into a culture their parents had abandoned, a set of beliefs that were foreign to them yet the reason for their demise. In Berlin, I finally understood that others saw Judaism as an ethnicity, while I had always seen it as a religious choice. With this perspective, I would not have been able to escape my heritage either. I would have been deported to a camp because of my grandparents. This lack of control is frightening and I cannot imagine how others in my position must have felt back then. Now far removed from any real threat of anti-Semitism, I was still shaken by my new, but permanent, awakening that despite my daily actions and beliefs, I too was a Jew.

In the context of the synagogue, once again, I found beauty in the Star of David. It was still a key paradox for me, an enticing emblem of shame, a pendant on a gold chain that announces that one is so different from the rest of the world. I was slowly seeing the pride it can elicit, connotations such as love, happiness, community, sanctity. As intrigued and captivated as I am by this religion, I still didn't know how I could ever truly embrace it. Scenes ran through my head, none with a happy ending. How would I explain my metamorphoses to friends, to family, to my mother? Would pure pride eventually arrive in my heart and my mind?

## CHAPTER 11

Yet another surprise awaited me on Tuesday night. We were going to have dinner with the son of Irmgard's lawyer and his wife, who both lived in the third floor flat in the same building where Grandma lived before she was sent to London. It was the last place her family was together. I expected something plain and simple. This was supposedly a step down from the house in Dahlem, which was owned by her father Heinrich. The property we were to visit, in Lichterfelde at Hindenburgdamn 11, was inherited by Irmgard from her parents. They moved shortly after the law forbidding Jews to own land was passed in Sept. 29, 1933.

Even in the dark drizzle, I could see that the house was spectacular – three floors of high ceilings, long windows, intricate moldings, and old memories. The building was flanked on both sides by gardens. Grandma had lived on the first floor, but the third floor flat where Ditha and Andreas lived had the same floor plan.

As soon as we walked through their door, the memories flooded Grandma's consciousness. Watching her wander from room to room was fascinating. "This is where my father's study was. The piano was here. The office was there. This is where I slept and there was a door that led to my parent's bedroom here." It was clear from her misty eyes and wide smile that suddenly she was living back in a time before the horrors. Off the kitchen was a two room flat where her aunt, her mother's sister, used to live. She giggled and told us how she would make her garlic and cream cheese rolls. They would sit upstairs in a little nook and eat them. Afterward, she'd run to the store to get peppermints to cover her breath. Her mother could never be fooled and would yell, "You've been upstairs again, haven't you?"

Ditha and Andreas were gracious hosts, encouraging my grandmother at every turn. They were the sweetest people I had ever met, so intelligent, so in love, so welcoming and down to earth; in my memories, they will join all the other angels that graced our trip. After a tour of the house, we headed out for dinner at the Paris Bar. It was a quirky restaurant, overflowing with people and food and laughter.

Our table might have been laughing the longest and loudest. Ditha entertained us with Yiddish Jokes; an unusual repertoire for your average Quaker from Vienna. She kept going back and forth between German and English. I have looked everywhere for the story of the Jewish Ropewalker, but cannot recover the joke. I wish I could do it justice. The tale of the cowardly slack rope walker went on for most of dinner, getting bigger and bigger.

Since the trip, I have really begun to appreciate the Jewish sense of humor. It is a humor of sarcasm, of extravagance, of self-deprecation. I recently heard a joke about a Jewish mother. Her son had been dating three women – Rebecca, Sarah, and Ruth - and couldn't decide which one to marry. She told him to bring them all to dinner and she would help him decide. After the meal was over and the women had left, the mother tells the son he should propose to Sarah. The son asks, "Why should I marry Sarah?" The mother replies, "I couldn't stand her." When I participated in a local reading of Jewish authors, one man performed a monologue about Rabbi Lowe and the Golem of Prague. The voices and characters he created with his tone and mannerisms were unforgettable.

Unfortunately, I didn't inherit the Jewish sense of humor. In fact, I couldn't correctly deliver a punch line if my life depended on it. I think the hardest part of

embracing this history is the acceptance of the Jewish traits I do have, whether they are real or perceived. The stereotypical Jewish traits are the things I've always hated most about myself. My dark hair, my larger than average nose, the shadows that appear under my eyes at a moment's notice, my tendency to be the bookworm, the dork. Because I had moved often from city to city, school to school and seriously lacked physical coordination, I was always the odd girl out, the last person picked in gym class. I was the one who often sat alone in the corner. I always wanted to be in the cool and confident crowd, the girl who set the trends. I didn't want to be different; I wanted to blend in. As I have grown up, I've learned to embrace my uniqueness; in fact, I think that it will help me succeed as a writer.

But the hardest thing to accept is my "Jewish disease," my intestinal horrors which have plagued me for the past decade. When I was researching this book, I learned that Crohn's disease is predominant in Ashkenazi Jews, or Jews from Germany, Poland, Austria, and Eastern Europe. My digestive tract is the one part of my body that I truly hate. When I first diagnosed, the doctors didn't understand how I came to suffer from this disease. They don't truly understand its origins, but usually it runs in the family. It could have been a problem for one of those long lost relatives whose stories I heard that week with Grandma. I would not wish this disease on anyone, especially those who already have to endure physical trauma. The Jewish culture, I was learning, was not only one of survival, but of thriving in the face of adversity too. Over the past week, I had been surprised by how well I had traveled. Maybe it was the growing awareness of my heritage that gave me a new strength and ease in coping with Crohn's disease.

## CHAPTER 12

My grandmother was exhausted by the end of our trip. In the photograph of dinner on our last night, the skin under her eyes looks as though it had been smudged with charcoal. Her eyes are blank and distant. Her shoulders are caved in and tensely drawn up to her ears. The excitement of the first days had turned to relief after the court case, but by our last night the weight of memory had returned. It seemed as though she couldn't tolerate being in this city. She couldn't bear to remember any longer.

Earlier in the day, she had walked two blocks to the local Jewish center to look at deportation files. She wanted to do some research. She never said why or for whom. While she faced the ghosts arising from dusty books, I faced my own haunts across the city in the cemetery. I had known from the first day that I would have to go back.

I made the journey on the train alone, transversing two worlds, West and East, present and past, on my way to the U-bahn stop at Senefelder Platz. I followed the same path to the cemetery we had taken days before, but everything seemed spookier this time. The decaying buildings, the empty streets left me unsettled. Once I was inside the cemetery's gates, I felt safe but still shaken.

I went straight back to the family plot. I had things I wanted to say this time. I had been in shock at the last visit. Since then, I had learned so much information about the people behind the names engraved on the granite wall near the back gate. I stood in front of the plaque for Heinrich Veit Simon, my great grandfather, born August 1, 1883 in Berlin, died May 18, 1942 in Berlin. I thanked him for giving

Grandma a proper childhood, for making happy memories with her in Berlin, for instilling in her values of education and faith, for being a wonderful spirit in her life to this day. To the right of his plaque, white words on black granite, was Irmgard Veit Simon's identical memorial. She was born December 16, 1889 in Batavia, now Indonesia, where her father was German Consul General for the Dutch East Indies. She died May 10, 1971 in the United States. To Irmgard, my great grandmother, I said thank you for touching my own father's heart; he had lived with her when Grandma left for the United States to marry Tom. I also thanked her for being brave and helping those who couldn't help themselves, especially during the war. Next, I thanked Ruth again for saving my grandmother's life, and then I thanked Rolf for always making her smile. I have an amazing history to build upon and the proof lies here in the small plot in a walled cemetery in East Berlin.

After I had taken care of my own personal business, I explored the rest of the cemetery. Grandma had wanted me to take pictures of Max Liebermann's grave. It was a little gated area, with a plaque, the length of a coffin set into the ground. Along the corners sat a line of multicolored pebbles. Jews don't place flowers at gravesites. Instead, they leave stones on the gravesite as "a symbolic act that indicates someone has come to visit and the deceased has not been forgotten," according to the Jewish Virtual Library, a Division of the American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise. I took a picture and added my own stone out of respect. This cemetery housed many of the Jewish elite who died between 1827 and 1976. The grounds were officially closed in 1880 but families like my own continued to bury their dead in existing plots through 1940. Afterward, only memorial plaques could be added.

As I walked around further, I saw even more damage, especially along the outer walls which held more than 700 family graves in 1880. As nicely as our plot had been restored, many more had been neglected. In fact on the north wall of the cemetery, there were plots that were completely destroyed. The etchings on the wall had been scratched out. In front of the defamed wall sat stacks of geometric stones. Some of the leaning towers of fragments reached the height of my shoulders. They were frightening stacks that highlighted just how lucky we were.

On this visit, it was easier to enter the spell of the graveyard. There is quiet within its wall, punctuated only by the sound of small birds and the wind blowing through bare but brittle branches. Peace can exist after horrors. The colors were so rich: green moss growing along the edges of a million shades of gray stone, the bright yellowish-orange leaves preserved by the chilly moist air, the dark brown tree trunks solidly standing in a place where so much had fallen, and the light brown sand that appeared between the cobble-stoned paths. In the center areas of the cemetery, small gates marked the boundaries of family plots. The style of the gates varied in height, in intricacy of design, in material. I loved the hodgepodge, the personality of each family's marker of remembrance. It reminded me of the blending of voices and languages I had heard in the synagogue a few nights earlier.

Here, I felt at peace with myself and my heritage. I had been a very fearful person, always alert to the people and things around me, never wanting to be alone in secluded places. The cemetery provided me with an inner strength because it had endured so much and remained standing. The energy within its walls was reaffirming; there was little sadness here. I loved the way the ivy, tall trees, and living

things – myself included – thrived in the place originally reserved for the dead.  
Walking among these spirits, I knew I would be welcomed into the Jewish culture  
that I had discovered.



## CHAPTER 13

By the time we landed at Dulles Airport and I made the five-hour drive home after a night at my grandparents' house, I was overwhelmed and emotionally exhausted. I could not believe how much my perspective on the world had changed. My relationship with my grandmother had been completely transformed into a true friendship, something unthinkable just a few years before. There was no longer room for the simple small talk between a granddaughter and grandmother. We had covered topics from abortion to relationships to psychotherapy to dreams and now we could not go back. I wanted so much to tell everyone I knew about everything I had experienced, but I could never find the right words. I wanted to better understand the history behind the Holocaust, behind the demise of my happy family.

It was only a few days after I returned to North Carolina that I went to the old Cameron Village Library. I looked up the section on World War II and the Holocaust. I sat down on the floor and began flipping through books. I felt as if a brick had landed on my head, on my heart, on my lungs. I was dizzy with emotion. In those books were thousands of faces: happy children before the war, emaciated adults afterward. There were pictures of destroyed cities and homes, burnt synagogues, an epic played out on a world stage before I had ever even existed. These images were frightening. I can still remember the shock I felt. I had new eyes. When I saw pictures of Auschwitz and Terezin, I saw the faces of Ruth, Etta, Hedwig, Katharina, Eva, Heinrich, and countless others. I finally registered what they must have been through. These people, these places ran through my blood. They were connected to me in a way I was only beginning to imagine.

There, in the public library, in between two rows of bookcases, I sat on the floor and cried. It was the first time I had wept since our first trip to the cemetery almost two weeks before. I was there for what seemed like hours, in reality maybe 20 minutes. I ignored the stares of other library patrons and just sat there knees pulled to my chest, truly mourning the losses I did not know I had endured until a week before.

When I walked back out into the night, I buried the story within me. I would write and speak about my experiences occasionally, sharing scenes like the cemetery that I could not ever forget. But I put this project, this work of remembrance, my grandmother's sole request, to the side. I couldn't bear to face the realities. It has taken me four years and a master's degree to transcribe and elaborate on the eighty pages I originally recorded in a simple black and white composition book after late nights sitting at the bar in the Concept Hotel. Now, those handwritten pages are dirty; their corners are rough. And these memories are no longer a burden. They are true and lasting gifts, from my grandmother to me, to you.

## EPILOGUE

In the past four years, the family business in Germany has continued to get complicated. The tondos at Gransee were removed from the back of the estate. They have not been found on any lists of art looted during the war. Two experts have looked at them, and they are authentic ones from the age of the Medici's in Italy. There is now discussion of a private auction to sell the pieces. For the time being, they are locked in the basement of our lawyer's office in the middle of what was East Berlin.

We are still trying to sell the estate, and Grandma and I, along with some extended family, went back to Germany in June 2005 to handle some business. When we went back to the small country town of Gransee, we were treated like royalty. Instead of going straight to the house, we were driven to the town hall, where the mayor and several other city officials greeted us with a formal reception and history of the town. Afterwards, we drove out to the estate and were met by photographers vying to snap pictures of my grandmother and reporters who wanted to hear all of her memories of this now empty relic on the edge of town. Local school children put on a play - just for us- about Jewish children who lost their parents in the camps and immigrated to Mexico. It seemed surreal to have our every move documented by the press and to be treated as honored guests in this small town, but the day left Grandma with tears in her eyes and pride swelling in her heart. I wished only that Eva and Katharina were looking down from heaven to see how well the town they once fed with their farmland wanted to remember them.

On the same trip, we visited Terezin where Ruth died. During our tour, we stopped at the crematorium, a stark place of icy gray stone and black iron; it smelled of antiseptics and death. There, I stood with Grandma, holding onto her tightly, as she said the Mourner's Kaddish, mumbling that she didn't care if there was a minyan or not. She spoke quietly as the building's bone-chilling atmosphere seemed to forbid any noise above a whisper. Her foreign words seemed to linger in the air as I stared at the flickering candles displayed on the ledges of the ovens that burned so many innocent bodies. I couldn't believe that the remains of my relative had passed through these ovens and her ashes had been thrown into the nearby river. I felt honored that I had the rare opportunity to experience a concentration camp with someone so closely tied to its haunting past.

When Grandma and I embarked on our first adventure years ago, I never imagined how much I would learn in this process. I was eager for knowledge in those cold mesmerizing days in Berlin, though I soon became overwhelmed by the facts. Slowly as time passed and I became more removed from the raw emotion of the trip, I began to research this period in history, uncovering the large gaps in my understanding of this time in history. I was connected to these events through the experiences of my family; I should have known more. Before I had wondered why people didn't renounce their religion to save their lives, now I know they couldn't just deny their faith, their identity. In Nazi Germany, being Jewish was an issue of race, not religion; underground churches existed along with synagogues in the ghettos and camps. No one with a trace of Jewish blood, not even the most devout Christian, could escape the Final Solution. I had thought before that concentration

camps began after the war started, once the Final Solution was in place. I now know the first concentration camp opened in 1933, five years before Grandma even left the country. Why did the rest of the world take no action?

My education – far from complete – has made me question the way governments work. Why wasn't anything done to prevent the Holocaust? Why haven't subsequent acts of genocide been deterred? In 2004, newspapers chronicled the United Nations first seminar devoted solely to Anti-Semitism. In my naiveté, I had thought that we – human beings - were past this issue; I was mistaken.

Internet searches have produced countless references to recent incidents, statistical reports, and even public awareness campaigns on Anti-Semitism. The Christian Science Monitor detailed the “voluntary ghettoization” of a Jewish community north of Paris. With tensions between Jews and Muslims at their peak because of Middle-East turmoil, the article noted that most Jews stayed within the crowded district to avoid harassment. How could the world still be in denial about violence due to religious beliefs and blatant racism?

The Holocaust didn't happen that long ago, yet many people seem to have closed the door on this chapter in history. We heard from the survivors. We studied their children. New lives were started. Governments have been rebuilt. Safeguards created. “The past belongs in the past,” I have been told though I know better.

In *Writing a Book that Makes a Difference*, Philip Gerard argues that consequences are what made a story or a historical event matter. In the case of the Holocaust, these costs, Gerard says, are so huge they are still unknown. As he

explains, “History has taken a sharp and dangerous turn, and it will require decades, half a century or more, to pick up the pieces and things can never be the same. The waves race turbulently into the future, rocking everything in their path.” I am a third generation Holocaust survivor. I have been caught in this wake, even though I was not raised a Jew. This history scattered my family across continents and sent so many ancestors to an early death. This heritage and these journeys –both the physical one with my grandmother and the spiritual and intellectual one I undertook in writing these pages – have altered my perspective of the world, of my family, and of myself.

I have learned that life is too short to waste time on things I am not passionate about. I realized in Berlin that the practical path I had chosen before I left – graduate school in planning or public administration – was not right for me. I rescinded my acceptances, resumed my hodgepodge of jobs, and started writing. Less than a year later and just as my grandmother had promised in our late night talks, I met the man I would marry – someone who was attached to his family and their unique history as I was to my own. Shortly after we met, my Crohn’s disease became unruly and I consistently lost weight and energy. To get well, I had to recognize my limitations due to illness and redefine myself. I realized that I could not control what I had inherited. It has been an important lesson not only for approaching illness, but for sifting through my family’s stories too. At many points in the process of writing, I have been overwhelmed by the facts. I would procrastinate for months because the task at hand was too depressing. As this journey came to

an end, I had to reframe this work as an opportunity to inspire remembrance, not to document horrors.

During the trip, I witnessed first hand how good can come of a tragedy. I wished all the torturous acts suffered by Jews in Europe never happened, but I have been moved by the strength and conviction of my family and other survivors. Because Grandma wanted to pass on her stories and expose me to her religion, I was able to see another side of her and we developed a much deeper relationship – a true friendship.

When we returned from the trip, I was determined to follow in her footsteps, to convert to Judaism. But in the four years since our journey, I have only been back to a synagogue twice: once for my uncle's funeral and the last time to read an excerpt from this memoir. At the funeral, I witnessed how religion – especially Orthodox Judaism – can be divisive. An all-consuming version of faith, it, in part, sparked the painful separation of my grandparents from their son, Richard. They hadn't seen or spoken to him in years when they were notified of his death. My second visit to a synagogue highlighted how this faith could bring people together. I was invited to read at a celebration of Jewish authors, and the strong community and sense of humor were enchanting. People of all faiths seemed to be represented at the gathering.

Religion, like history or heritage, is something that defines you, and I don't yet know who I am. I am a work in progress, and my faith-seeking journey will continue.

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