

Shoes: Collection of Writings By Zelda Alexander

Volume 1: Lara's Story

Foreword

Foreword to the Collection of Occasional Pieces by the late Zelda Alexander (formerly Isaacson)

Zelda wrote the pieces contained in this collection separately over an extended period of time. As their number grew, the idea of producing a single coherent collection based on the interwoven connections of time, place and family gradually emerged and she began to discuss the possibilities with our friend, literary agent John Parker. Unfortunately progress was suddenly cut short because Zelda died unexpectedly after a short stay in hospital on 6 October 2014.

The fact that this collection is available at all is due to the John's timely action in making it his business to locate and print off the then current version of the texts at a time when immediate family and I were occupied by the aftermath of Zelda's death with all the processes that involved.

Debra Davies, Zelda's daughter, and I, took the view that the writings should be made accessible to family members and friends as much for quality of composition as for personal interest. We have both proofread the text to eliminate obvious errors whilst aiming to preserve the original spirit and tone. We had the difficult job of aiming for consistency whilst trying to preserve the spirit of the original. Some duplication unavoidably remains and we hope allowance will be made for that. John has our gratitude and we solely are responsible for any defects in the result circulated.

Zelda wrote poetry occasionally so we have also decided to include a couple of poems, *All the Children* and *Charney Fever*. We hope that they will complement the prose pieces by conveying some impression of her empathy and versatile literary skill.

Zelda revered her father, Isher Alexander, who in later life had taken up Jewish studies to the extent of becoming a teacher of Talmud. Some of his students kept up contact with her from time to time following his death. She saw Isher's afterlife as consisting in the reputation for kindness and ethical behaviour that informed his mode of being in the world. We hope that these writings perform a similar function as part of Zelda's own legacy.

Philip Michaelson, July 2022

Chapter 1: SHOES

“What are you doing, Mommy” asked Lara. Her mother and Aunt Riva were sitting at the dining room table with piles of old newspapers, balls of string and strong brown paper on one side, and shoes and clothing on the other.

“We’ve had a letter from your Aunt Jessie” said Mother. “She’s back in Libau, living in one room of our old house. She’s very poor and she needs shoes and warm clothes.” And then in a quieter voice, as if to herself, she added, “It’s a miracle that she survived.”

Laura remembered the ships coming through during the war – naval ships as well as merchant ships, as the British Royal Navy had an important base in Simonstown, just 20 miles down the peninsula from the city of Cape Town. During the war, no one was allowed into Simonstown because of security, but people could visit the Cape Town docks. Lara had watched merchant ships being loaded with food and other goods, and her parents told her that these ships were bound for Europe to help the war effort. “They’re short of food because of the war” explained her mother, “and short of many other things too.”

The war had ended about a year before when Lara was six. Everyone had gone out on the streets of Cape Town to celebrate. Hitler was dead and the Nazis had surrendered. Lara didn’t understand what this meant or who Hitler was, but she saw that everyone was happy, so Hitler must have been a bad man. The whole of Cape Town was having a party – waving flags, blowing up balloons, cheering and singing. She knew that South Africa was part of the British Commonwealth and had helped with the war effort in many ways, so people felt very involved even though they had been quite safe in Cape Town.

So the end of the war mattered a lot to everyone. But Lara’s parents’ celebration was very low key and very short-lived. As soon as the war ended, her parents started having serious conversations with their brothers and sisters, and with other friends who had also emigrated from Latvia to South Africa. Mostly, these conversations were in Yiddish and she picked up words like *milchoma* and *geshtorben* which she knew meant *war* and *died* but she couldn’t understand everything. Sometimes they spoke in Russian which Lara didn’t understand at all. When she heard her parents

speaking Russian, she knew they were talking about very serious things which they didn't want her or her brother Ben to hear.

Lara looked at the big heap of clothes and shoes on the table. They couldn't afford much money for clothes themselves so sending things to Aunt Jessie must be very important. She offered to help, and together they packaged up shoes, warm sweaters and coats, stockings and gloves. After the parcels had been securely tied up and labelled, they went to the Post Office to send them off. While they waited in the queue, she asked why they were sending so much to Jessie.

"We're sending more than she will need for herself" explained Aunt Riva. "In her letter she said she needs warm clothes and shoes, but she also said she had very little money to buy food, and that food is scarce and expensive. We're sending extra – especially extra pairs of shoes - so she can sell some things to get money for food. It's too difficult to send food."

"Why shoes?" asked Lara.

"In that climate shoes matter a lot," said her mother. "It's not like here where you can wear sandals or go barefoot most of the time. It's very cold in the winter, there's lots of snow and ice, and then when that melts the roads get very wet and muddy. If you've got good, strong shoes you can go out, queue up for scarce food, be with a friend and share a fire for warmth. If you're stuck indoors because your shoes are falling apart, life is much, much more difficult."

"Yes", added Aunt Riva. "People can always wrap themselves in an old blanket or shawl to keep warm, but you have to have shoes. So we think Jessie will be able to get more money for a good pair of shoes than for anything else."

Lara found all this very strange. She couldn't imagine a place where people were really cold and often hungry. She couldn't imagine snow and ice. A picture of her lost homeland was beginning to take shape, and it was a cold, dark picture with many empty spaces – like old maps with 'Here be Dragons' inscribed in places where no-one knew what was really there.

Chapter 2: THE BLACK BOOK

The Black Book sat on the living-room shelf, fat, squat and menacing. Lara looked at it out of the corner of her eye. Mommy and Daddy had told her not to read it. “You’re not old enough for it”, Mommy had said. “Don’t try to read it yet.”

Lara was twelve and a very good reader. She often spent hours sitting on the entrance hall carpet, reading articles in the Encyclopaedias which lived on the lowest shelf. Sometimes she looked things up for her school projects, but often she just opened one at random.

“Eskimos live in the far North where it is very cold. They build houses made of snow and ice, which are called igloos. Inside the igloo it is warm and comfortable with lots of furs...”

Lara could hardly imagine ice and snow. She had never seen snow, except as a faint sprinkle of white on the distant mountain tops when Daddy drove them inland for their holidays. And the only ice she’d seen were the little blocks from the freezer compartment which Mommy put in drinks to cool them down. She couldn’t imagine how anyone could live in a house of ice - wouldn’t it melt in the summer? - and how could it possibly be warm inside?

There was a photograph of a group of Eskimos, bundled up in furs, next to one of their rounded ice houses. One of the grown-ups was holding a small furry bundle with just eyes and nose peeking out. Lara looked at the Eskimo baby and then at her own bare, freckled legs and arms. She tried to imagine what it would be like to have to have so many furs to keep warm.

In Cape Town, in the middle of winter, it sometimes got cold enough to need a jumper or a coat and gloves. Once in a while a little snow fell on the top of Table Mountain and then there were headlines in the Cape Times: “SNOW ON TABLE MOUNTAIN! - first fall in three (or maybe five) years” and long articles about the exceptional meteorological conditions that had brought this about.

Most of the year Lara wore thin, sleeveless dresses and sandals, trying to find ways to keep cool. The hot African sun burned her and made her feel ill. The dim entrance hall which the sun didn’t penetrate was usually cool. That was one reason it was a favourite place.

But the Black Book wasn’t on the entrance hall shelf. It was in the sitting room, visible, demanding to be opened. Lara was alone at home. Daddy was away, as he often was, travelling up-country

selling towels and tablecloths and curtaining to the shop-keepers in the small towns of the Western Cape. Mommy and Ben were both out and wouldn't be back for some while.

Lara sat down in the chair by the bookcase. She took the Black Book off the shelf and put it on her lap. It felt heavy and her hands were shaking as she opened the front cover. Mommy never forbade her to read any book. Lara had read lots of grown-up books, even ones like *The Fountainhead* which had passionate and violent scenes. She didn't always understand everything she read, but no-one said she shouldn't try. There's something about the Black Book that's different, she thought. When Daddy looks at it, his face gets grey and long, like it did when the Nationalists won the General Election.

The 1948 General Election in South Africa, three years before, was etched into Lara's memory. She and Ben and their parents had sat around the wireless in their living room listening as the results were announced seat by seat. As each victory for the Afrikaner's Nationalist Party was called, her parents sank a little more into themselves, and their faces got longer and greyer.

"Isn't it enough that they've slaughtered millions in Europe?" Daddy muttered. "Now we'll have fascists in charge in South Africa as well." Mommy didn't say anything but her head sank down even further onto her chest. Mommy and Daddy couldn't even vote in the elections – they had not yet been able to get South African nationality. Lara knew they were afraid at the thought of what the Nationalists might do when they had power - not just to Jews, but even more to the Natives and Coloureds, the black people of South Africa.

Lara's parents were socialists and Aunt Ray, Daddy's sister, was an activist and trade union organiser. She was working very hard to try to get decent wages and conditions for black workers in the food and canning industry. Lara loved and admired Aunt Ray, and had learned quite a lot about how deprived so many people in South Africa were and how much her parents and family wanted things to be fairer. Her parents didn't try to protect her from the realities of the world. They talked about politics and poverty, and about their own lives and the country they had left.

Daddy had shown her the scars on his calves where he had got frostbite as a young man. "Our village had run out of salt"² he explained, "and someone had to get supplies. We needed salt to preserve food so that it would last through the winter until the new crops came. I was young and strong, and I went with just a donkey and sled. It was a long way across country in very cold

weather, with snow and ice on the ground, and I got frostbite. These scars will never heal. But I got back with salt for everyone in the village, and we survived another winter.”

Lara looked down at the Black Book on her lap. She felt nervous, as if she were holding something which might jump at her and bite her. Her fingers were trembling as she turned over the first page. There was a preface. It began:

“This book is a collection of documentary material on the systematic work of destruction by which the German Government murdered a great proportion of the Jewish people.”

She became conscious of her heart beating very quickly and then felt herself going cold and shivery, in spite the heat of the day. I wonder whether Ben’s read it, she thought. With shaking hands she closed the book, put it carefully back on the shelf and sat very still for a while. She got up and wandered around the flat. Then she went into her own room and looked at some of her favourite books on the shelf - *Alice in Wonderland*, *Swallows and Amazons* and a book about the solar system.

After a while she went back to the chair by the sitting room bookcase, took the Black Book off the shelf and turned to the preface again. It continued:

“Responsibility for the truth of the facts set forth is borne by the Jewish organisations that have joined to create the present work and present it to the public. The purpose of this publication is manifest. It is to convince the reader that an international organization for safeguarding the sanctity of life can effectively fulfil its purpose only if it does not limit itself to protecting countries against military attack but also extends its protection to national minorities within the individual countries. For in the last reckoning it is the individual who must be protected against annihilation and inhuman treatment...”

*Albert Einstein.*¹

The preface continued for several more pages but Lara did not read to the end. She looked to see who had written it, closed the book and sat with it heavy on her lap. She did not understand

¹ Albert Einstein “Unpublished Preface to a Blackbook” 1945, in “Out of My Later Years” Thames and Hudson, 1950. More than one Black Book was either prepared for publication or actually published in the years after the Second World War. The copy which Lara’s father had obtained after the war did not survive further migration, and Lara has not been able to trace this particular volume. Einstein wrote his unpublished preface for a Black Book which did not see the light of day. The best known Black Book still available was edited by Ilya Ehrenburg and Vasily Grossman.

everything she had read, but she knew that the Germans had killed many people, especially Jews, in the war. She also understood that the people who had died were just ordinary people, not soldiers, and that many of them were children or the elderly. She thought that was what Einstein was talking about.

Her parents seldom spoke about the war; just occasionally she heard the sort of muttered comment Daddy had made when the Nationalists came into power. But Lara knew that her mother and father were very sad and angry about what had happened. German was Lara's mother's *Muttersprache*, her mother tongue. But she never used it, despite her love of German literature and poetry. She sometimes spoke longingly of her beloved Goethe, Schiller and Heine, and even had German translations of some of Shakespeare's plays, packed away in a box in the cellar. But the German language and German goods were taboo because of what had happened in the war.

After the war ended, and it became possible to find out a little of what was going on in Latvia, a letter came from Jessie, her mother's sister-in-law. Jessie was the only member of her mother's family still alive after the war.

"My mother died when I was just a little girl, about six or seven years old", Lara's mother had told her. "First my big sister Leonora looked after me - that's why I called you Lara, to remember her - and, when I got a bit older, I was sent to live with my eldest brother and his family. His wife, Jessie, was a very beautiful woman, but she wasn't kind to me. She treated me like a nursemaid for her two children, David and Dolly. They were younger than me, but not very much younger. I loved them, and I was happy to play with them or read to them, but I didn't want to be their nursemaid. I wanted to play the piano, read and study."

Lara's mother, along with a brother and two sisters, had left Latvia and come to live in South Africa about ten years before the war started. She had met Lara's father, who also came from Latvia, at a Jewish Socialist group to which they both belonged in Capetown.

Ben was born in 1935 and Lara just a few months before the war started. Little by little, as she and Ben got older, they learned about their parents' and their families' lives in Latvia. Lara knew that her mother was often sad, because she had grown up without her own mother, because so many people back home had been killed, and because life was very difficult for them in the early years in South Africa.

Lara's mother often talked about how poor they had been when Ben was a baby, with barely enough money for food. "I used to buy soup bones with a little meat on them, and cook them with cheap vegetables, dried peas and barley. Your father got soup with the meat, Ben got soup with vegetables, and I gnawed the bones" she told Lara. "Things became easier after you were born" her mother added with a smile. "You brought us luck!" By now, Lara and her family were living in a flat close to the sea in Cape Town. Her mother loved being near the sea, and they often went to the beach. But their lives were very restricted. They still had very little money but worse than that was the fact that both her parents were people of no nationality. When Latvia had lost its independence during the war they became stateless people who had lost their citizenship of their home country, and their Latvian passports and travel papers had become useless. Lara's mother had three brothers who lived in New York, but she could not visit them. She would not have been allowed into the United States and would probably also not have been allowed to return to South Africa. So a journey to meet her brothers, one of whom had left home before she was born, was impossible, even if they had been able to raise the money for the fare.

I wish Mommy wasn't so sad, thought Lara. It's lovely when she plays cheerful music on the piano, and bakes those delicious milk-breads for breakfast on Sunday. Waking up on Sunday mornings to the smell of the fresh baking and the sound of the piano was the best bit of the week - when Mommy was feeling well enough to do those things. But Lara knew it was hard for her mother to be happy when so many people had suffered terribly, and many others were still suffering, lots of them close by in the locations and townships of Cape Town.

When, after the war, Mommy and her sister Aunt Riva, had collected second-hand clothes and made up big parcels of clothing and shoes to send to Jessie, Lara had tried to imagine what Jessie's life could be like in Libau, the town in Latvia where her mother had grown up. "She's living in one room", said her mother. "The Bolsheviks have allocated the rest of her house to other people. She was such a proud woman and kept her home perfectly. It must be so hard for her to have strangers living in her house. But at least she survived. David and Dolly didn't."

Lara had read a novel about life in Russia after the revolution when big houses belonging to rich people had been taken away from them and divided up, sometimes for four or five families. Whole families had to live in one room. She thought it was fair that people should share what they had, but all the same she'd have hated to have to give up her own bedroom in their flat, and sleep in the

same room as Mommy and Daddy and Ben. It would be horrible. She knew that black people lived in very crowded conditions, and often didn't even have running water or electricity in their little shanty houses. She decided that she couldn't be a proper communist, like Aunt Ray. If you were a proper communist, you would have to share everything. Mind you, Aunt Ray also had a comfortable house, with bedrooms for her three children and a study for Uncle Jack who was a Professor at the University. But they were doing important work for the struggle and really needed the space for books and papers and writing.

Lara looked at the Black Book again. Why am I so nervous about reading it? she wondered. Is it because Mommy and Daddy said I shouldn't? She didn't like disobeying them. They didn't often tell her not to do things. Lara's parents trusted her and gave her a lot of freedom. They didn't always ask exactly where she was going, or how long she'd be out. They knew she was sensible and wouldn't do dangerous things, so she was able to travel all over Cape Town by herself. She went to the Public Library in the Gardens and spent many happy hours there. Her parents didn't question her about what she had read, although she knew they'd be interested if she wanted to tell them.

She took the train to the Observatory and asked about the chance of getting to look through the telescopes. She so wanted to be an astronomer when she grew up and study the stars and galaxies. In the Public Library she looked for books about the cosmos but could only understand the simplest ones, those describing our solar system and the visible stars and galaxies. Occasionally at a late picnic on the beach or at camp she would gaze up at the night sky and try to identify the constellations she could see. The Southern Cross was usually easy to spot.

She went to the beaches all year round, usually with friends, but sometimes on her own. In the summer they swam and jumped from rocks into the sea. On surfing beaches, they caught the waves and surfed in on their tummies. Swimming in the sea in the summertime was exciting and exhilarating, but she also loved the beach in the winter. She took a book, often poetry, and found a quiet place where she could watch the weather and the ocean and read by herself. A favourite poem was Masefield's 'Sea-Fever'. She loved it when a gale was blowing, and waves were crashing onto the rocks. Masefield had it exactly right – the wind was just as he described it – like a whetted knife - and she could see the 'flung spray' and the 'blown spume' of the poem.

Her parents didn't stop her doing any of those things, so the edict on the Black Book was very unusual. She wondered again whether Ben had read it. He hadn't talked about it at all and she was

afraid to ask him. If he hadn't read it, he'd tell her off for even thinking about it. And if he had ... well, he might want to persuade her not to do it. However awful, I have to know what happened, she thought.

Lara opened the book again and turned the pages on beyond the preface. She went cold when she saw a list of contents. There were sections on various European ghettos, on the different concentration camps, on the many countries in Europe in which people had been killed or from which they had been taken to the camps. There were also sections on the use of gas and crematoria, and on medical experiments. There was a section on the destruction of synagogues and the burning of books and scrolls of the Law and others giving tables of quantities – weight of hair collected, amount of gold taken from people's teeth, numbers of pairs of children's shoes and much else. She shuddered, closed the book and put it back on the shelf. She would look at it tomorrow. She had to stop now - Mommy and Ben would be home soon. "No wonder Daddy looks grey when he reads it – and no wonder Mommy and Daddy told me not to read it."

The next day at school, Lara kept thinking about the Black Book. Now that she had started, she felt she really had to know what had happened during the war in Europe.

Chapter 3: WATCHING

Lara crept into her mother's room. Only a tumbled heap of bed-clothes could be seen. Her mother always pulled the covers right over her head – her sleeping cave perhaps made her feel a little safer. But was she sleeping? Nervously Lara tiptoed over to the bed and tried to see if there was any sign of life. For a heart-stopping moment she discerned nothing, but then - yes – a faint movement, a stirring of the eiderdown. Flooded with relief, releasing a sigh – and having only just become aware that she had been holding her breath - she tiptoed out again.

Lara was fifteen when her mother took an overdose of her sleeping pills. No-one spoke openly about it. There were hushed whispers, looks, and a sense of fear as the ambulance arrived to take her mother to hospital.

What were they afraid of? Not, it seemed to Lara, fear that Mother would die. No, it was worse than that. It was fear that people would find out that Mother was mentally ill, fear of shame for the whole family. So everyone pretended that this was a normal illness. Lara found the pretence harder to bear than anything else. Much as she loved her mother and passionately wanted her to get better and not die, even her death, and even her death from suicide, felt preferable to everyone living a lie. What Lara found unbearable was being forced to pretend and lie and collude with all of them in denying the reality of her mother's distress.

Many years later Lara read about the silence that loomed over the lives of holocaust survivors and their children. The children of survivors, raised in silence about their parents' experience, nevertheless knew. They felt it in the air. It pervaded all family life. And many later testified to the power of that silence and its toxic effect on themselves and their relationships with their parents.

Lara did not know whether this had been her mother's first suicide attempt – silence about what had led up to this event was part of the denial – but it most certainly would not be the last.

She learned to watch her mother, check up on her when she was still in bed late in the morning and keep her sleeping pills away from her in a safe place. By the time Lara was eighteen Ben was married, no longer living at home; and with Dad working long hours, often leaving the flat before Mother got up, Lara had the main responsibility. This was difficult enough at home. But it was far more difficult on the journey they made together to visit Mother's three brothers in New York, when Lara was twenty. This rapidly became a nightmare as Mother's mood shifted from low to extremely depressed during the long voyage – in those days it took a full fourteen days - from Cape Town to Southampton. Lara kept those dangerous but much needed sleeping pills in her handbag during the day and under her pillow at night - but the fear that Mother might throw herself overboard was a constant anxiety and her constant companion, no matter what she was doing. Only when her mother was safe in a lounge playing card games with other passengers could Lara relax her vigilance for a while.

On their return home, Dad and Ben gave all their attention to Mother. They seemed not to notice that Lara had had a really difficult time. But she was so relieved to be safely home with Mother still alive, that she didn't complain. Despite the horrors of the voyage to Southampton and Mother's complete breakdown - which delayed them for six weeks in London while she had treatment - they had reached New York safely.

Mother had loved being there and being feted as the 'little sister' by her almost (and in one case absolutely) unknown brothers and so Lara felt that all the stress and anxiety had been worthwhile in the end. Then, thankfully, the voyage home had been uneventful. But she was exhausted by the

experience, and fell into the safe refuge of Jeff's arms as soon as the liner docked in Cape Town. Jeff was the only person who really noticed her, who saw that she was in a distressed state. With Jeff she could be honest. She could tell him the truth about mother's illness, and the truth about the journey. Everyone else heard only a sanitised version that left out Mother's breakdown, six weeks in hospital in England and shock treatment.

Within a week of her return, Lara and Jeff announced their engagement and the family planned to have a party to celebrate. But when the preparations were almost complete, mother took an overdose again. Lara found her in bed one morning after Dad had left for work, breathing heavily and stertorously. She could not rouse her, and with trembling fingers phoned for the doctor – then listened outside the bedroom door as her mother's stomach was pumped out. Once Mother was out of danger, an ambulance arrived. Another stay in hospital followed. This time, mother was given a new anti-depressant drug, only very recently available, instead of shock treatment, and in less than a week was feeling much better. It felt like a miracle.

But Lara could not simply enjoy this new, happier situation. Instead, again and again she bitterly contemplated the way her mother's psychiatrist had given her the brush-off when she had earlier on tried to tell him about this new drug, Tofranil. She had heard about it in Montreal; where she spent a few days with her cousin Simon while Mother stayed in New York with his sister, Taube. Lara had consulted a psychiatrist friend, Mark, who was working there. She had told him about her mother's mental state and treatment history and he had recommended this new drug. He had reported that clinical trials were very positive, and had given her copies of the latest medical literature.

Once home, as Mark had suggested, she went to see her mother's psychiatrist in Cape Town and showed him the literature and research findings. The psychiatrist had refused to consider them, would not even look at the literature, and had told Lara she was much too young and ignorant to know anything. He had absolutely refused to prescribe it. Lara had felt silenced and intimidated. Mother had all the misery of being so depressed that she felt she couldn't go on, then had to endure the horrible experience of her stomach being pumped out - just because he was so arrogant, she thought. Then she was given exactly what Mark had recommended – and it had worked.

Although Mother was feeling much better with the new medication, she told Lara she could not face the thought of the engagement party. "Please, Lara" she said "tell everyone you've got the 'flu and that will be our reason for cancelling the party. We can't tell people the truth." There seemed no alternative as Mother was really terrified of people finding out about her illness. She was so afraid of being sent to Valkenberg, the notorious mental hospital in Cape Town. All her life she had two enormous fears – of getting cancer and dying in pain like her own mother - or of ending up in a lunatic asylum. So Lara agreed to 'play sick'. She went to bed for a week and told everyone she had 'flu. Only Dad, Jeff and Ben knew this was a pretence to save Mother's - and the family's - 'face'. Lara would have much preferred to tell the truth, and tell everyone that Mother had been very ill. Although thankfully she was recovering well on new medication which was really effective, she did not feel up to a party yet.

It was still three or four months to the date Jeff and Lara had set for their wedding, and although Mother was a lot better, it was clear that organising such an event would be too much for her. Dad was working hard and did not have the time to take on all the work involved, so Jeff and Lara said they would see to all the arrangements themselves. They wanted a simple wedding with just family and close friends. There had been enough excitement in their lives in the past months.

They arranged to borrow Aunt Ray and Uncle Jack's cottage on the coast near Hermanus for their honeymoon, and found a small flat in Sea Point to rent as their first home. It was perfect; very near Lara's favourite beach and only a short walk from her parents' home. From their veranda they could hear the sound of the sea and had a view of Lion's Head, the mountain behind Sea Point. They loved it and set about turning it into a simple but comfortable home, one where both sets of parents as well as wider family and friends would feel welcome.

Just two months after their wedding, South Africa began to erupt, following the massacre at Sharpeville. Lara and Jeff's brief interlude of peace came to an abrupt end.

Chapter 4: AFTER SHARPEVILLE

“Lara, please lay an extra place at the table tonight - you’ll have one more visitor than you expected.”

Lara had started when she heard Daddy’s voice on the phone. “Why? Who else is coming?” she enquired.

“The children’s mother will be arriving at about half past six,” her father continued, his voice sounding strained. “Thank you, Lara. See you later”.

Lara put the phone down and walked through to the enclosed veranda, her hands trembling slightly. Standing at the big glazed windows she looked up at Lion’s Head and then down to the sea. Their flat was on the top floor of a small block part way up a hill that rose from the sea to the mountain. You could not see much of the sea as the view was partly obscured by buildings, but by leaning out of the open window as Lara was doing now, it was possible to get glimpses of it, and she could hear the distant sound of waves breaking on rocks.

She knew what the phone call meant. ‘The children’s mother’ was code for Daddy’s sister, Aunt Ray, who was in hiding from the police. Since the Sharpeville massacre on 21 March, a month before, their whole family had become involved in ‘the struggle’, even if they had not been politically active before. Sharpeville was a defining moment in South African politics. The police had fired on unarmed people who were protesting against the pass laws, even shooting those running away. Many people were killed, some with bullets in their backs. Until that event, people like Lara, Jeff and their friends believed that change in South Africa could be brought about through peaceful and legal means. Now that hopeful belief had been shattered.

The Sharpeville massacre was immediately followed by countrywide demonstrations, protest marches, strikes, and riots. About a week after Sharpeville, on 30 March 1960, the government declared a State of Emergency giving the authorities widespread powers of arrest and imprisonment. Activists knew they were at risk of being picked up. Ray immediately went underground, going from one safe house to another every few days. Daddy’s job was to find her places to stay, and to arrange for her transport after dark. Daddy’s other sister, Aunt Dora, had stayed in her flat. She hadn’t thought that the security forces would be interested in her as her activities were much lower key than Ray’s. But several weeks before, the police had rounded up thousands of people who were on the margins of the protest movement, banging on doors at 3am

and arresting them. Dora, together with many others they knew, was now in prison. Daddy had been to visit her and had been able to arrange for her to have extra food and some money for other necessities.

Those were the last of the 'good old days' in South African prisons. Within a few years even white political prisoners, even white women, were subjected to solitary confinement, sleep deprivation and a very harsh regime. On the whole though torture was reserved for blacks. Black prisoners were beaten up sometimes so severely that they were permanently injured and some even died.

There was apartheid even in degrees of suffering; as Lara was to discover when Aunt Dora and her friends and comrades were eventually released. In those relatively innocent early days they had run rings around the prison authorities, and even obtained permission to cook in the prison kitchen. The ingredients were brought in from outside by Lara's father and other relatives of the inmates, or bought with the money they supplied. No-one enjoys prison of course, but at least Aunt Dora was not alone. She had friends with her and they gave one another mutual support - and it certainly gave her street credibility in the liberation movement! She dined out on her prison experience for decades to come. Lara vividly recalled her stopping the conversation at a gathering in London many years later by announcing, loudly: "Of course, when I was in prison ..."

By the time the activist Ruth First was arrested a few years later, in 1963, she had a very different, very much tougher, experience. She endured 117 days of being imprisoned, interrogated and held in solitary confinement. After her release Ruth went into exile, first in England, and then in Maputo, Mozambique, where she was assassinated by means of a letter bomb sent by an agent of the South African police. In contrast, Ray and Dora's years of exile were relatively peaceful – Ray in Lusaka, Zambia, where she continued to work for the South African Communist Party in Exile –and Dora in London where she contributed her particular skills (such as baking cakes for fundraising events) on behalf of the Anti-Apartheid movement.

Aunt Dora did not have children of her own but Aunt Ray had three. Their father, Uncle Jack, had also been arrested and detained, although the police had not kept him in prison for long. He was a professor at the University of Cape Town and the authorities there protested on his behalf. He also wrote a letter in his own defence which set out the reasons why even the wide-reaching powers of the State of Emergency did not allow the police to keep him in jail. Potentially he could have caused the regime a lot of trouble, and at that time, 1960, the South African Government was still trying to

look like a democracy. As a result, his time in prison was quite brief, but there was always the possibility that the police would think of some trumped-up charge and arrest him again, so he too had gone underground.

During this time Ray and Jack's children, two girls aged 11 and 13, and a boy of 9, stayed at home without either of their parents. Aunt Gessie, Daddy's oldest sister, who had no children of her own, looked after them with the help of Emily, the black maid servant who was a loyal friend of the family. Lara knew that Daddy also kept an eye on them, and that other friends of the family called in and made sure they were alright. But she wondered how children could be alright when their mother was in hiding with the police looking for her and their father is also out of reach. They might be physically OK but emotionally...? She could hardly bear to think about how distressed her little cousins must be. And now Ray was to come to her flat that evening and stay for an indeterminate amount of time, instead of being able to go home to be with her children. Well, at least it was an opportunity for Lara to help keep their mum safe for them.

Thoughtfully, Lara wandered back towards the kitchen. Tonight was her first dinner party since getting married and moving into the flat three months earlier. It was Ben's birthday, and also Daddy's birthday. Daddy kept his birthday according to the Hebrew calendar, and very occasionally his and Ben's birthdays coincided - as they did this year. Lara and Jeff had invited Mommy and Daddy, Ben and Judith to be her and Jeff's first guests.

Even though newspapers and radio were censored and limited in what they could report, Lara and Jeff were both well aware of the effect of Sharpeville and the State of Emergency on black people's lives. Jeff had a job in the laboratory of one of the big food factories near the non-white townships, known as 'the locations' so he was in a position to see what was happening there. In recent weeks he had been involved in trying to smuggle food, especially milk for babies and small children, into the locations. Things were pretty tough there when the police were clamping down on protest marches and pass burning. At times they even threw cordons around the locations; people could not get out to work, and with food supplies already limited, and fresh food prevented from getting in, it was a very effective way of 'persuading' people not to make trouble. When babies and little children were hungry, parents were less likely to go on protest marches.

Jeff and Lara paid for the milk for the location babies out of their own meagre resources. Jeff's laboratory job did not pay well and, although Lara earned a little from a part-time secretarial job and from some tutoring, they had to save everything she earned. They were seriously thinking of leaving

South Africa. They would need every penny they could get together to make a new start somewhere else, somewhere less oppressive, somewhere less exploitative of the majority of the population. Nearly all their wedding present money - and thank goodness quite a few people had given them cheques rather than gifts - was in a savings account and could be used to help pay for their travel costs if they did leave.

Lara would have preferred to stay in Cape Town and work more actively for a just society, but she felt her hands were tied. With her family connections, anything she did, even relatively innocuous activities like trying to provide educational opportunities for black children, would be suspect. She could be arrested, imprisoned. She and Jeff wanted to have children, but she was not willing to bring them up in such an unjust society or to risk subjecting them to the kinds of experiences her cousins were enduring.

I'd better get on with sorting out dinner, she thought. She checked her preparations, made a list of the things she still needed to buy, and set off to the shops. Two long flights of stairs down to street level, then the hill down to the Main Road and a mile or so to walk to the bigger shops. It was a lovely autumn day, cool and sunny, her favourite sort of weather. In Cape Town it was often too hot, bucketing down with torrential rain or so windy you were blown off your feet. But today the weather was perfect and she decided to walk back along the Beach Road and enjoy the sea.

She bought fresh vegetables and fruit for the dinner. Everything else was already in the little fridge in the flat. The casserole she had prepared would easily stretch to seven if she did extra vegetables, and there was plenty of soup. Luckily, her dinner set had eight place settings. She was planning to use one of the beautiful tablecloths with matching napkins that Daddy had given her when she got married. He had been saving things like that for her for years. Whenever something especially nice came into the warehouse, he would buy it and put it aside for her. She thought she probably had more tablecloths, sheets and towels than anyone else she knew.

By the time Ben and Judith arrived, Daddy, Mommy and Ray were already in the flat being offered drinks by Jeff. Daddy had a small whiskey in his hand, and looked tired. Lara was in and out of the kitchen, checking on the meal and making sure her guests were comfortable.

Ben's eyes opened wide when he saw that there was an extra guest, and who she was. Although Judith greeted Aunt Ray politely, she was clearly on edge. Ben went up to Ray and gave her a kiss. "How are you?" he asked. Ray's reply, characteristically, did not mention herself. She said she was

worried about how Dora and their friends were managing in jail. “None of us expected so many people to be arrested”, she said. “The children are fine”, she continued. “Gessie and Emily are looking after them, and they’re going to school as normal. But I’m not sure where Jack is. We haven’t been able to speak for a while because the phones are tapped.”

Lara, overhearing this on her way in from the kitchen, noticed that Ben’s face was studiously composed. She knew he was less in sympathy with Ray and her communist activities than she was. And goodness knows, Lara was not keen on communism either. But Ben was a young businessman in the making, and although he did not want an unjust or oppressive society, he was convinced that Ray and her comrades were going about things in quite the wrong way. They would only make things worse for the majority of the people, he believed, and ruin the country for everyone else. Everyone else, of course, being the whites. He believed that more, not less, capitalism and more industrial development, for example, more manufacturing, even if built on cheap black labour initially, would ultimately benefit everyone.

Judith, ignoring the conversation between Ben and his aunt, was chatting to Mommy. They were discussing a film they had both seen recently. Lara was relieved to see her mother lively and interested. It was not long since she had been very ill with severe depression, but it really seemed the new medication was continuing to be effective. Judith’s fluent but heavily accented English could easily be picked out; she was a Hungarian Jew, a child Holocaust survivor saved by Christian friends of her family. Her mother had been in a labour camp but had survived. Her father had not. After the war, Judith and her mother had been reunited and gone to live in Israel. Later her mother had met a South African businessman who was on a trip to Israel. She married him, and he brought them both to Cape Town. With that history it was very understandable that Judith found any political instability very threatening and difficult. Lara thought that it was no wonder she was edgy being in the same room as Ray with everything that’s going on. It was not surprising that she was unhappy about Ben’s political relatives.

Mommy wasn’t too keen on her communist sisters-in-law either so she and Judith had that in common. She did not try to stop Daddy from helping them - after all, family is family - but she made no secret of her belief that they were far too extreme. She was a humanist, and in her view a communist revolution was no way to gain greater justice and equality for all the people of South Africa. And Ray’s neglect (as she saw it) of her children in favour of political activity really upset Mommy. She firmly believed that a mother’s first responsibility was to her children- As a motherless

person herself, and having helped bring up her motherless niece and nephew, she found it hard to understand how a woman could wilfully choose trade union meetings over time with her children. Of course the current situation simply underlined and reinforced what she had always thought about Ray.

Somehow they all got through the evening without too many raised voices. Everyone was aware that with Dora in prison and Ray in hiding, this was not the best time to argue about politics - normally a favourite pastime. And Daddy was clearly very tired. He had had a serious heart attack a few years before, and the strain of the current situation concerning his sisters was telling on him. But everyone seemed to enjoy the meal. Lara was complimented on the pretty table she had set and thanked for organising the joint birthday celebration, even though it was not a celebratory time.

Looking back on that evening in years to come, Lara remembered very little of the conversation. She remembered Ray, who had arrived on her own before the others (Daddy had dropped her off and then gone home to fetch Mommy), coming into the kitchen to help while Lara was cooking and showing her the best way to cook rice. ("You have to measure out the rice in a cup, Lara, and then put in two cups of water for each cup of rice. Don't forget about the salt ... And just a little vegetable oil... Then increase the heat very slowly until it's steaming, put the lid on tightly and leave it on a very low heat for about an hour. Check it every so often, and if it looks a bit dry but the rice isn't cooked yet, add just a little water ... just fill the 'holes' in the rice with water. All the water will be absorbed by the time the rice is cooked, and every grain will be separate. No sticky messes!") And what's more, it worked! The rice was perfect. From then on Lara always cooked rice that way, and remembered Ray every time.

She also remembered that, although Ray was a communist and had totally rejected conventional Jewish practice, Lara did not have to be concerned that Ray would mix up the milk things and the meat things and use the wrong cloth or platter. Aunt Ray may have thought that keeping kosher was nonsense in the modern, preferably communist, world, but she respected the fact that Lara wanted her kitchen that way, and Lara knew she would take care.

Many years later, when Ray visited them all in London - by which time Lara had long stopped keeping kosher, although Dad was now very observant - she was the only person, other than Lara, whom Dad trusted in his kitchen.

From Daddy and Aunt Ray Lara learned about the love which transcends differences, the love which respects and honours a person for the beliefs they hold, even if you totally disagree with those beliefs. The love which is able to say, “I think what you believe is misguided, possibly even dangerous, but I know that you hold that belief for the best possible motives and I believe in your sincerity and goodness.”

Ray stayed in Jeff and Lara’s flat for three days, sleeping on the couch in the living room. While Lara was teaching in the living room in the afternoons, Ray went into the bedroom, and kept very, very quiet. She had books and papers and pamphlets in there and spent the time studying and making notes. Between lessons she helped Lara with jobs in the flat, and taught her more housekeeping skills. She showed her how to fold newly washed sheets very carefully, and put them at the bottom of a pile of linen, so that the weight of the things above would press them “If you do that, Lara”, she explained, “you won’t need to iron them. A woman who wants to have a life outside the home as well as a family doesn’t have time to iron sheets!”

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Then, on Ray’s last evening with them, the doorbell rang. They were not expecting visitors and all three of them froze. Lara went pale, then flushed. She glanced at Jeff. “Who can it be?” she whispered. From the corner of her eye Lara saw Ray move silently in the direction of the bedroom. Jeff walked slowly and deliberately across the living room towards the front door. Her heart pounding, Lara watched the door. *Make it not be the police...*

“Hi, Jeff!” said a cheerful voice. “Is Lara home? I’ve brought you a melon. There were mountains of them going cheap. Fancy going down to the beach?”

“Come in, come in! Great to see you. Look, Lara, Dave’s brought us a melon.” Jeff’s voice was unnaturally hearty, thought Lara.

“They were going cheap”, Dave repeated “I thought you might like one.”

Lara’s hands were trembling. She made an effort to control them. “Thanks so much”, she said, taking the melon from Dave. “It’s great.” She was relieved that her voice sounded reasonably steady.

We've got to get him out of here as soon as possible. If he hears anything, he'll realise there's something up, and then ...

"Hey – are you two OK?" asked Dave.

"Yes, of course. Why shouldn't we be? It's lovely to see you", said Lara.

"Well, I just wondered. You seem a bit stressed. I hope you don't mind me just dropping in? I was in the neighbourhood so I thought ..."

Oh, God, he's suspicious. He knows my family are communists and involved in the struggle. Act naturally... Ray's depending on us... "It's really great to see you", she said again. "We just weren't expecting any visitors tonight. Tell us what you've been up to. We haven't seen you for weeks. I guess we are a bit stressed - about the situation and especially since the State of Emergency. You know Jeff's factory is close to Langa and there's been unrest there. What's it been like in your part of town? But first, what would you like to drink?"

Oh, God, I'm burbling. We're going to have to invite him to stay for supper. Otherwise he'll realise... I just hope Ray stays hidden and quiet... Lara went into the kitchen to get the drinks. Even though the evening was pleasantly cool after a warm early autumn Cape Town day, she could feel sweat beading between her breasts. Her hands were damp and shaky. Behave normally ... she told herself sternly... we've got to keep Aunt Ray out of police hands.

"Thanks, Lara". Dave took the drink from her. "How about the beach? Would you like to go down? It'll be a good sunset and we could take the melon."

"Not tonight, thanks, Dave but I'd love to another time. We're going round to my parents later on, and we haven't had supper yet. Have you eaten? Would you like to have something with us?"

"Yes, do stay and eat with us", said Jeff, picking up Lara's cue. "We were going to have sandwiches – we've got some pickled beef in the fridge. We'll have to go off straight afterwards, but it would give us a chance to catch up while we eat."

"We could probably manage something a bit better than a sandwich", said Lara.

“Don’t go to any trouble”, Dave replied. “I’m an uninvited visitor. A sandwich would be fine to keep me going ‘til I get back to Bellville.”

“You’re not just any visitor, you’re practically family”, said Lara with a smile. In the kitchen she thought: *I hope I can pull this off. I didn’t know I could act so well. What bad luck that Dave chose tonight to drop in.* She made a salad and sliced cold meats and brown bread onto platters. *I wonder how Ray’s feeling... thank goodness she’s being quiet... I guess she’s had some practice... Oh God, I’m so scared.* “Here it is!” she said cheerfully, carrying the tray into the living room. “Tuck in you two.”

“This is delicious beef”, exclaimed Dave. “Where did you get it?”

“We pickled it ourselves according to a secret family recipe”, said Lara. “Jeff’s the expert. He believes it’s the way to a woman’s heart ...” she paused “... and he’s right too.” Jeff smiled at her and they all chuckled. *Just keep talking, be natural, thank heavens Jeff’s picked up what we’re doing...*

“What do you think of the situation?” asked Dave. “Are any of your family involved? What about your aunts, Lara?”

I knew he’d fish... he probably thinks it’s glamorous to have relatives involved in the struggle...I don’t suppose he’d give her away, but... Out loud she said: “Aunt Dora’s been picked up but we don’t know where Aunt Ray is.” *I just hope she’s safe in our bedroom... I’ve never told an outright lie before...* “It’s an awful worry, especially as her children are so young.”

“And didn’t they pick up your uncle – Professor Simons, isn’t it? - and then let him out again when Varsity made a fuss? I read something in the Cape Times. Where is he now?”

“We don’t know”, said Lara, as calmly as she could. *He’s asking too many questions. Is he really here just to see us? How horrible to suspect him. It’s only a few months since he was best man at our wedding.* “He goes to work - he’s safe while he’s on campus, they won’t dare touch him there.”

“Where does he stay in between? Does he go home at night?”

“We don’t know. Perhaps he’s got a room to sleep on campus”, said Jeff casually.

“Well, I’d better make tracks. Thanks for supper. See you soon, I hope.”

“Next time come for a proper meal” said Jeff.

“Yes, do. We’ll ring and make a date”, Lara added “and drop in any time you’re in Sea Point. Even if the best we can do is a sandwich ...”. *Thank goodness, he’s going at last. Let him not need the bathroom. You can hear every sound from the bedroom in there.*

To her intense relief, Dave picked up his jacket, kissed Lara goodbye, punched Jeff playfully on the arm and was off. For a few moments Jeff and Lara stood silently, listening to his footsteps as he ran down the two flights of stairs to the street. Jeff went to the veranda window. “It’s OK”, he said. “He’s driving off”.

Lara breathed out a huge sigh. “I don’t think we gave anything away?”

“You were terrific”, said Jeff, “pretending we were going to have a quick supper and then go out.”

“I was so scared”, said Lara. “But you were great as well. We must tell Ray it’s safe now.”

She went quietly to the bedroom door with Jeff close behind. She opened it. There was no sign of Ray. Lara’s heart gave a jump. “Where can she be?” Her voice rose to a high pitch. She looked under the bed and in the wardrobe and then ran to the window – could Ray have tried to climb out? Surely not – it was a sheer two storey drop. Jeff raced to the back door, which led to the back stairs. The door was locked from the inside. Lara went back to the bedroom – *Ray must be there, somewhere.* She took a deep breath. “Where are you?” she asked quietly. “It was only a friend, and he’s gone now.”

“Here I am, children”, she said with a smile, appearing from behind the door. “Well done, you kept me safe. Thank you. Who was your visitor?”

“It was Dave”, they both said speaking simultaneously. And Jeff carried on, “You met him at our wedding – he was my best man. He’s a good friend but we couldn’t let him know you were here.”

“Quite right”, said Ray. “However trustworthy you think someone is you must tell them as little as possible in times like these.”

“We were so frightened when you seemed to have disappeared”, said Lara, beginning to regain her composure, but still sounding rather squeaky.

“It’s oldest trick in the book to stand behind the door. If your friend had come into the room not expecting anyone to be there, he wouldn’t have seen me, and if it had been police there’s just a chance they might not have searched properly. I stayed there until I was sure your visitor had left.”

Lara burst into tears. “Come and have supper”, she said through her snuffles. “I’m so thankful you’re alright.” *I don’t think I could stand the strain of being in hiding myself... there’s no way I could be an activist and on the run... But what a lot I’ve learned in these few days - how to cook rice, how to press sheets without needing to iron them, and how to avoid capture when being hunted!*

Ray held out her arms. “You’re a brave girl to take me in. But tomorrow I’ll be moving on.”

Chapter 5: FLOATING

There's nothing to floating. Just lie back, the water holds you up. Floating is easy - when you know how. Subtle, almost unconscious movements keep you balanced, arms outstretched, trusting the water. Your body knows exactly which muscle to twitch, which tiny adjustment to make. It's not like lying on the earth, on solid ground. On the earth you could be asleep. Or dead. Your body would still be supported. But water will hold you only if you dance with it, if you respond to it moment by moment.

Lara lay on her back drifting a little. Above, the sky was clothed with thin wispy clouds and she could see branches of the trees which grew around the pond and overhung the water. She felt the mix of sun and shade on her body, the warmth of the sun a counterpoint to the cool water. She shut her eyes. Through the movement of the water against her skin, she could feel the breeze which faintly rippled the pond.

Floating is easy - when the water's calm and not too icily cold. But when the tide's running out fast or the sea is choppy it's a different story. Then even swimming hard may not be enough to keep you safe. Waves can break over your head and fling you onto the shingle, gasping for breath.

She understood why her mother had found it difficult to stay afloat. Lara felt bruised and buffeted herself, just thinking about her mother's life.

Perhaps the people who think life is easy are floaters in calm water.

But some can't float, even in calm water. Their legs sink and down they go, gurgling, protesting. You can't learn to float unless you have easy water to practice in. If your life

has always been turbulent, you'd never learn how to balance and how to let go. That was how it had been for her mother.

Lara looked up at the sky again, at the leaves swaying in the breeze. What delight it must be to be held by life, to dance with life, effortlessly, like a happy child. That was a joy her mother had never known, one Lara still longed for.

A fragment of a poem came to her – 'take life easy / as the grass grows on the weir'. But that doesn't tell you how.

There's nothing to floating - if you know how.

Chapter 6: DROWNING

*“Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind
Cannot bear very much reality”*

It isn't easy to drown.

*No matter how much you push yourself down into the depths,
forcing air out of your lungs, the water resists.*

*Inevitably, inexorably, it fights you, pushes back against you and you
find yourself breaking through the surface tension into the air.*

*Without your will, against your will, your body asserts itself. Your mouth
opens and air pours in*

*You gasp and cough, heart racing, undrowned
the sun shines
life continues*

Lara sat on the rocky platform, looking at the sea swirling below. The foam made intricate lacy patterns which continually changed and reformed themselves. Dark green-brown fronds of seaweed clung to the rocks swaying and dancing as the water washed over them. A wave lifted a piece towards her and she plucked it and held it close to her face. The wetness of the seaweed mingled with her own wetness, its taste echoing the salt of her tears, its smell evoking beaches of her childhood. She stroked and fondled the strands, remembering long-ago love-making, enjoying the pliability, the rubbery, slithery texture.

Long ago, on a far-away beach, Lara used to make little boats out of seaweed, shaping it crudely with a sharp shell, and opening it out to form a rough coracle which sometimes even floated upright for a few seconds before toppling over. It had to be a special kind of seaweed, very thick, which you only found on some beaches. One of those was near where she lived, and her mother often took her there.

Lara's mother loved the sea. She was never happy inland, far from water. Like the little mermaid, she was out of her element away from the sea. Whenever Lara thought about her mother waves of sadness washed over her, threatening to overwhelm and drown her. She looked at the seaweed in her hands but it was the wrong kind, too feathery and light. And anyway, there were no sharp shells here. No chance of making a boat, of sailing safely through the turbulent water.

It isn't easy to live

Sometimes we forget, and are seduced by sun, or by a child's or lover's welcoming smiles and hugs.

People think that living is easy and dying is hard

it isn't easy to live

but also, it isn't easy to drown

Lara looked down at the water again. She wondered where these particular water molecules had come from, and where they were going as the tides swirled them around the globe. She imagined them being sucked up by the sun, and falling again as rain somewhere else. Then becoming part of a river, perhaps, or snow and ice which eventually thawed and flowed back into a different sea, thousands of miles away. Perhaps some of these water molecules had once formed part of the Baltic Sea which her mother had looked at and walked beside more than half a century ago. Perhaps some of them were the tears she had shed.

Chapter 7: LEGACIES (TRY)

“How about it, then, Lara? Will you come to the conference this year?”

“I don’t know ... I’d like to come ... but - Germany?”

“If you’re ever going to go there, this is the way” Rachel said firmly. “It’s a wonderful way of meeting women from Germany - and the rest of Europe - who want to build bridges.”

The conference was an annual women’s week at an interfaith centre in a small town on the Rhine. Christian, Jewish and Muslim women met to learn about each other’s lives and faith communities, and to share their histories and perceptions, hopes and fears. Lara belonged to a women’s interfaith group in London so the idea of the conference was very exciting. Several of Lara’s friends had described their experience after last year’s conference with enthusiasm and assured her that she’d enjoy it.

But still she hesitated. How would it feel to be in Germany? Could she bear to walk down ordinary streets and imagine how it had been fifty years ago? Would she walk around with her shoulders hunched for protection, imagining that at any moment someone might attack her? Or yell anti-Semitic remarks at her? When Lara was growing up in South Africa after the war, her parents and all their friends wouldn’t buy German goods. They had lost so many people in the war, that they couldn’t bear to be associated with anything German.

Thinking about her parents’ pain made Lara’s stomach knot up. Fear for her own safety welled up in her in great waves of anxiety which threatened to overwhelm her. But she knew Rachel was right. This conference was the way to confront those ghosts. The nightmares could never be completely eradicated, but perhaps they’d be diminished. She’d be travelling with friends who understood and often shared her fears, and she’d be staying in a conference centre where she’d be to some extent cocooned from everyday German life. It might be manageable. There was a good chance she would survive and return safely to England.

Lara had been so deep in thought she hadn’t noticed that Rachel was speaking to her again. “Sorry, Rachel” she said, “I didn’t hear what you were saying, I was so far away”.

“Back there fifty years ago?” asked Rachel sympathetically.

“I guess so” Lara replied. “It does seem ridiculous to feel so strongly after such a long time.”

“It’s not at all ridiculous. Totally understandable after the losses your family experienced. But perhaps it’s time to move on? Think about it and let me know what you decide in a day or two.” Rachel picked up her coat and brief-case and headed for the door. “Thanks for the meal. It was delicious. You’ll ring me soon, won’t you?” and with a farewell wave she was gone.

Lara went to her CD player and picked out a collection of piano music - pieces her mother used to play. With the familiar chords enveloping her, she set about clearing up the supper things, but what she saw was soldiers goose-stepping, the shattered glass in the streets on Kristallnacht, the emaciated bodies of survivors clad in thin striped sexless garments, the heaps of dead bodies in mass graves. Then there were the things she’d read in the Black Book which she’d surreptitiously looked at as a child, the thick and heavy book with close printing and black covers was a record of Holocaust atrocities. All her life she was haunted by the memories of what she had read; some of it was so horrific that she had never been able to voice those memories. Often she wished she had obeyed her parents and left the Black Book on its shelf. Often she wished she could blot out those images, but they persisted in haunting her and populating her dreams. And there was, as well, another part of her that passionately wanted to know and not to forget. Forgetting would be a betrayal of those who had suffered.

Returning to the CD player she replaced Chopin with Bach. Gradually, the clear structures and shapes of the Goldberg variations soothed her, as they always did. Her mother’s Chopin and Beethoven were too emotional, too filled with pain. It had been a mistake to play them tonight. She had wanted to honour her mother’s memory and pain and loss, but sometimes it was too hard.

Can I bear to go to Germany? was her last thought as she eventually drifted off to sleep that night.

A month later Lara, feeling tense and anxious, was on a plane from Heathrow to Frankfurt. In the end, the conference had proved irresistible but that didn’t mean she felt comfortable with the thought of going to Germany. And then, sooner than she’d expected, the plane touched down. Germany had always seemed so far away but now she was here, less than two hours after leaving London, confronted by announcements in German, posters and notices in German.

The journey by coach from Frankfurt to the conference centre just outside a small town on the Rhine took as long as the flight from London, so there was plenty of time to observe the countryside. It’s

so green, thought Lara, not all grey and bleak as I imagined it would be. And she wondered what other expectations would be challenged this week?

They had taken an early flight, which would enable them to arrive at the conference centre by mid-afternoon where they found a wonderful welcoming tea awaiting them. Rachel knew many of the women from previous years, and was greeted with friendly hugs and happy exclamations in several languages. Lara had been equally warmly welcomed, but the faces and voices of Rachel's friends had mingled into a medley which she knew would take her some days to disentangle.

Later, she sat in a room with a dozen other women, all strangers to her. This was her 'home group'. People smiled at one another, or looked nervously around them. No-one seemed very sure of what they should be doing. Then a woman with short fair hair dressed in comfortable dark trousers and a green sweater spoke. Her English was perfect with an accent Lara recognised as Dutch. "I'm Krista, and I come from Den Hague. I think the idea is that today we talk about ourselves and why we're here, and later in the week we will share our experiences. We'll be meeting as a 'home group' several times, and in this way, during the week, we all get to know women who were not our friends beforehand." Krista's introduction was translated into German by a woman called Eva. Lara found that she could understand quite a lot. Of course, having heard it first in English helped. But by what kind of osmosis had she learned some German? German – the language no-one around her spoke during her childhood. The language which, for her mother, was both forbidden and longed for - as Lara came to understand when her mother spoke wistfully of her love for German poetry, but never read any.

Bit by bit as she grew up, and especially after her experience of living in Israel for two years, Lara had come to appreciate the significance of the loss of a person's mother tongue. Her mother, she realised, had suffered multiple major losses: family members and childhood friends, her homeland - and her mother tongue.

With all these thoughts and memories swirling around in her head, Lara at first found it difficult to focus on what the others were saying. They went around the group introducing themselves and she discovered that she was the only Jewish woman from England in the group. The others were Christian or Muslim and Lara registered with some sense of shock that the Muslim women were European in appearance, and often blonde. She'd not expected so many Muslim women, and

certainly hadn't been prepared for them to look fair and European, rather than dark and Eastern. Well, that was another false expectation that was being overturned!

"Rachel encouraged me to come". Lara explained tentatively when it was her turn to speak. "I'm interested in women's interfaith work, but at the same time I have very strong feelings about the Holocaust - so many of my family died - and I hesitated about coming here. This is my first visit to Germany and I'm not sure yet what I'm feeling." She paused, and then continued, "I hope the conference will help me to be here in a positive way." It was strange hearing her cautious comments being translated into German and to see how several of the women nodded their heads and looked sympathetically in her direction.

Once she had had her turn, she was able to give better attention to the remaining women. Trudie, who looked about the same age as Lara, was a short, rather dumpy woman with straight fair hair. She spoke very emotionally in German, and tears seemed close to the surface. Lara understood only a little of what she'd said, and waited eagerly for the translation. "Trudie says she comes every year" explained Eva "because she finds it so hard to understand what happened in the war, and what her people did. She tries to find ways to make sense of it all. She hopes this year you will all help her". Eva, young as she was - probably in her twenties, thought Lara, less than half my age - also seemed very close to tears as she translated Trudie's contribution.

After supper that evening Lara sat by herself ostensibly looking at the conference programme but actually mulling over the events of the day. *There were so many new experiences to absorb. The flight from London, setting foot for the first time on German soil (or rather airport tarmac), seeing signs and notices in German, hearing German voices - it had all been so rapid. This world, which had always seemed so far away, so unimaginably distant, was actually so close, and could be reached with such ease.*

As Lara sat poring over the programme wondering what further revelations the week would offer, and noting with pleasure that there was time allocated for dance and song, as well as talk and study, she became aware that Trudie was sitting nearby. As she looked up Trudie said hesitantly, in heavily accented English "if I may, I'd like to speak with you".

"Yes, of course" said Lara. "Shall we go somewhere less crowded?"

“I wanted to speak to you” Trudie explained once they had found a quiet spot “because of what you said in our group. You are a Jewish woman who lost much of her family in the war. I am a German woman, and I feel very, very guilty, and very, very ashamed.”

Lara was taken aback. “But how old are you, Trudie? I think we must be about the same age. What year were you born?”

“I was born in 1938, in Berlin” said Trudie.

Lara nodded; she had thought they were very similar ages. “I was born in 1939, in South Africa.”

“I feel continually guilty and ashamed” said Trudie. “I don’t know how to live with my feelings. As I explained in the group, that is why I come to this conference each year, and I also try to do other things during the year. I teach young people about the terrible things that happened during the Holocaust, and I tell them that this must never, never happen again. But none of this takes away my guilt and my feelings of shame and responsibility.”

“That is such wonderful work” exclaimed Lara. “But I don’t understand why you should feel guilty. You were a baby when the war started, and still a small child by the time it ended. How can you be responsible? There was nothing you could have done-

“Ah” said Trudie sadly with a deep sigh. “But it was *my* people who did those terrible things. *My* father was in the SS, *my* grandfather was a General. I carry the guilt and responsibility for my family.” She paused and looked directly at Lara with an expression of deep anguish. “It was my people”, she repeated “they did it”. Trudie raised her head again and said, “But please tell me about your family.”

As Lara and Trudie continued to talk, Lara tried to take in the implications of what Trudie had said. “I lost many of my close family” she told Trudie, “but I didn’t understand what it really meant for a long time. They were people I had never known as my parents had left their homeland in Europe about ten years before the war. Only little by little as I grew up and my parents told me about their life in Latvia, and about the people who remained behind and died, did I begin to get some feeling of what they had lost. And now you’re telling me something else that I don’t yet understand. I was frightened to come to Germany because of how I might feel meeting people who could have actually

taken part in terrible deeds – especially those of the older generation. I thought people like that might still hate Jews, or, perhaps, might feel guilty - or, even worse, indifferent - about what they had done. It didn't occur to me that people of my age or younger would have strong feelings like you have."

"Some of us have very strong feelings" said Trudie. "And it is very important to me that Jewish people of my age understand what I feel. You have suffered as a result of the war. So have I, and so have many others who were small children at the time, and even those who were born afterwards. The children of Jewish survivors, or - like you - Jewish people who were outside of Europe when the war began but had friends and relatives there, suffered very much. But I, and my friends who feel as I do, have also suffered. But we don't feel we have the right to complain because of our guilt and shame. All we can do is try to live with the guilt, and make reparations as much as possible."

There were a few moments of silence while Lara thought about what Trudie had said, and Trudie waited patiently for her reply. Slowly Lara began to speak, feeling her way through what felt like shifting sands. "I think it is worse for you than for me" she said, and paused for a while. Then she continued: "I have to live with the pain of loss, with my parents' loss and grief. I don't also have to deal with shame and guilt. I and my family can believe that we would never have done such terrible things, that we are good people who became innocent victims - but maybe that's not true? Who knows what any of us would or could do...? "

"You are very kind" said Trudie, with tears in her eyes "and I think you do understand. Thank you for talking to me and listening to me. But I cannot accept what you say - that who knows what any of us would do - because only my people actually did do those things. But I am thinking now that it is a good thing that I feel shame. It makes me do the work I am doing, and makes me come to this conference and talk to people. Perhaps my feelings will help others to understand, and that will help make it impossible for such terrible things to happen again. Anyone who has children would surely not want to leave them with such a legacy as I have."

"I hope so" said Lara. "That would be the best outcome." She paused to reflect and then looked very intently at Trudie and took her hand. "I am very glad you asked to speak to me" she said. "I think this conversation must be the reason I came to the conference, although I couldn't know that I would meet you. I will think a lot about what you have told me."

That night, Lara told Rachel about her conversation with Trudie. Rachel listened attentively, and when Lara had finished speaking she said, thoughtfully, “Yes, there are many kinds of legacy. We must remember that.”