Memories of My Mother

We were sitting in the living room of my mother's apartment recently, chatting about clothes, the weather and her trip to Florida in a week or so. Suddenly the memories of our turbulent refugee years flashed through my mind. Seeing her sitting there in the afternoon sunlight, surrounded by her collection of paintings and memorabilia, it is hard to connect her with the mother I knew as a child, the woman who risked her life and struggled through all odds to ensure the safety and future of her children. She does not reminisce very much — the past is too painful — but every once in a while, particularly now with refugees getting so much attention in the media, she comments "people don't know what it means to be a refugee."

What she did during those terrible years was an extraordinary and heroic effort, but not a unique one: thousands of women — mothers, wives, daughters — are doing the same today, in all parts of the world. They, like my mother, are refugee women, and in telling my mother's story I feel I tell the story of thousands of these women.

Mother is now retired, after many years of being an active business woman. She is a collector, active volunteer, traveller — no different from thousands of other well-off widows in North America. Yet, for a few years, she led a very different life; she worked with the underground, saved lives, managed to cross borders illegally, survived great poverty and ensured the future of her children. When did we become refugees? I have a clear memory of the moment when life changed forever for all of us, the day when we began to lose our home, our identity and become refugees. The year was 1944, it was a spring day and we just got home from school. Until then, although the war was on and my father was away most of the time in the army, life was calm and routine. I remember a normal middle-class European childhood, going to school, playing with dolls, birthday parties, ballet lessons, staying with my grandparents on weekends. All came to a halt on that memorable day in 1944. I was seven years old.

It was early afternoon, shortly after I returned from school, when mother came into the kitchen and sat down. She explained to me the notion of persecution, the persecution of the Jews by the Germans, and what this meant to our family. Until then I had no idea what it meant to be Jewish — we were Catholics. I went to a Catholic school and planned to have my First Communion in a few weeks. It was very confusing. My mother told me that she was born Jewish (I did not know this; in Europe in the 1940s I guess one did not speak of being Jewish). According to the rules just published by the government, we all were considered Jewish. It is my first recollection of my mother in her new role as a refugee woman. And refugees we became: persecuted, hiding, mourning the death of many family members, years of running, poverty and hardship — all are part of being a refugee.

My memories are vignettes, brief little episodes that poignantly illustrate the events that show the strength and will of this remarkable woman.

In the fall of 1944, the gathering of the Jews of the city where we lived was going on at a furious pace. A section of the city in which many Jews lived was boarded up and declared a ghetto: the plan was to move all the Jews of the city in there. We had false papers and therefore were not picked up. My mother immediately sprung into action. She joined an order of lay nuns (she had been a Catholic for years) who worked with an underground network

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of priests helping Jews to escape from the ghetto. She went there daily, risking her life to bring food and false documents to the people inside, to help them escape. She did not know that her only brother, who had been taken away to a forced labour camp that spring, lay dying a few houses away from where she worked. His death was the first of many in her family.

Her mother, father, and sister were considered "safe" until then due to the age of her parents and the fact that my aunt was disabled. Suddenly mother heard through the underground that all Jews were to be taken to labour camps in Germany, regardless of age or physical fitness. My grandparents were marching towards the station to the trains that were taking people to Germany, when my mother, dressed as a nun, went and took them out of line, telling the Germans that these were German Citizens and not Jews; she produced papers to prove it and saved them. She hid them in a basement for the rest of the war. I know all this because every night she would tell me what was going on. "You are not a little girl anymore, but a grown up, you have to know." I know that she was right in telling me, but it also meant the loss of innocence, the loss of my childhood. I almost wish she did not tell me everything and yet it was the best way to ensure that I would never forget what happened to us. Years later when I was talking with someone regarding refugee children, I realized that I was never a child after that winter, never played with dolls or toys after 1944.

Another vignette. During the winter of that terrible year when the city where we lived was under siege for two months, we had to live in underground shelters. There was no food. We had flour so mother could bake bread, but she nearly got killed twice, running to the bakery around the corner where the ovens were on every morning so the women could bake their bread. It is hard to imagine women risking their lives to bake bread, but it happens during times of war.

Finally the Germans left, the siege of the city was over; after months of living in shelters we could come out of hiding. We survived and had a roof over our heads. Our building was the only one left standing in a long row of apartment buildings.

Now a new concern was looming on the horizon — the Russians. My father was with the army in Russia for three years and knew what Russia was all about. He was concerned that there would be no freedom and that people would be taken to Siberia to forced labour camps if we stayed in the occupied territory. Could we cope with any more losses? Should we leave? Where could we escape to? There was the shock of the holocaust to deal with, when the months passed and people did not come back. One had to come to terms with all those people dying. Within a few months we found out that all of my mother's uncles and aunts were killed by the Germans. The death toll in our family was very extensive: my mother lost sixteen uncles, eighteen cousins, her only brother and my maternal aunt's husband. On my father's side, his older brother was killed in battle, the brother's only child died of meningitis during the siege. Those who survived this disaster — the immediate family, mother, dad, my grandparents and my aunt — huddled together in a couple of rooms, because most of the apartments were confiscated for soldiers and we had to share our place with some other people. Now my parents were talking of leaving.

I remember my mother talking with her parents and my aunt — begging them to come with us but they were afraid. My parents decided that, for the future of their child, they had to leave. One of my saddest memories is the sight of my grandmother on the day we left. She not only lost her only son, all her brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews, but now was losing her only grandchild and one of her daughters. She knew that she would never see us again. A year later she had a breakdown, never recovered and spent the rest of her years in and out of institutions. At the end, when she died in 1953, she was still wondering why we did not come to see her. She spent her days waiting by the window for our return. My mother could have afforded to go back, but of course this was not possible: we left the country illegally, we were refugees, and at the time it looked as though we could never go back. When we eventually did return, all we could visit were the graves. Mother says that she will never overcome the guilt of having left her parents, but yet she feels that it was something that had to be done.

Our last day home was quite memorable. Mother cooked a meal and used her dishes for the last time. My father took me through the ruined city, and said "never forget what war can do to people." We packed our belongings into knapsacks. I was allowed to bring one book and one doll. We left at dawn on a cold February morning. We were on the run, starting our wandering that lasted almost two years. From camp to camp, through a number of countries, until we reached our final destination in South America in 1947. Through all our wandering, mother was a tower of strength, the one who kept the three of us together, always finding food, a way to cook a meal — sometimes outdoors, on wood stoves intended for heating, washing clothes in tubs, keeping the family going. She never gave up, she always insisted that my education had to continue. She made me read every day, even though it was the same book over and over again, made me do mathematics, took me for walks around the places we were staying, explaining the history or the geography of the place. She was the best teacher I ever had.

Time went by. We had been to a number of refugee camps in Austria and Germany, supported by the United Nations, hoping to get to North America. We did not know how many millions of people were in the same boat; that knowledge came years later. My mother was pregnant. I guess my parents, like millions of others, were replacing the dead. My mother kept insisting that her child was not going to be born in a camp, but as a citizen of any country except Germany. As the months went by and it became evident that we were not going to be selected to go to North America, mother decided that we should escape and go to another country. We heard that you could get visas in France, so that was our destination. Refugees could only enter France illegally (the places and times change, but the story of the refugee is the same, whether it is in Canada in 1989 or in Europe in the forties). My father crossed the border first, was nearly shot, but made it through and recommended that we try another route. The group crossing the border consisted of my mother (now four months pregnant), a boy of sixteen who had lost all his family in the concentration camp and was trying to join relatives in Israel, and I. It was not an ideal group to walk for several hours through the woods. Mother was quite ill (she had problems with her pregnancy), the boy was more terrified than I, — and I was pretty scared! The guide who

was recommended to take us across took the bribe of cigarettes (the only currency at the time), but never showed up the next morning. Mother, who spoke German fluently, made inquiries as to how to get to France. We were given some direction; she refused to wait and we started off on our own.

After walking for two hours, my mother could not go on. Her legs were all swollen. She kept our spirit up, sat down on a log and started to sing to us "we will wait until someone comes, someone will come I am sure." We had no food and it started to rain. After a long time some men and women appeared, they were gathering kindling wood. They told us that we were sitting next to a minefield, that these woods had seen some heavy fighting during the war: we were right in the middle of the Maginot Line, one of the fortified lines established by the Germans along their borders. The woods were full of mines, we could have been killed by walking further. After giving out some more cigarettes, we were guided to the border safely. Mother never let on how terrified she was; we did not dare to cry either, although we were hungry and scared.

Months of struggle followed, eating in soup kitchens, living in fleabag hotels, picking used clothes in refugee centres. Incredibly poor, barely surviving. But my mother spent two hours every day teaching me French from a used book she picked up (she went to a cultural association to pick up books so I could read). Every Sunday we went to the Louvre because it was warm and free; she explained art and gave me a love for art that stayed with me always.

She continued her quest to find a safe place for all of us — particularly her unborn child. It was going to be a boy, she knew it, and he was never going to be a soldier. My father was working at two jobs to save some money when we finally got out of France. After months of lining up in front of embassies with millions of other desperate people, mother got a visa to go to Paraguay. We had to check it out on a map as to where it was. Due to accidents of fate we never went there and for that I am eternally grateful.

We crossed the Atlantic in the cargo hold of the first passenger ship that sailed after the war. The holds were fitted with bunk beds to transport soldiers. We were several hundred people cramped into the holds, just like the cattleboats of the nineteenth century. When we arrived at Brazil on our way to Paraguay, we found out that there had been a revolution in that country and that all the borders were closed until further notice. We were stuck in Brazil, with no funds and no place to stay, along with several hundred other refugees who needed a place to stay.

Brazil was not prepared for us. Mother was seven months pregnant, and had difficulties with the heat, but my lessons continued and we explored Rio. Years later I found out that Brazil pressured the United Nations to find countries of settlement for these unwanted people. The money for shelter and food came from the Red Cross and the United Nations while we were waiting. My parents were desperate; finally we were selected to go, but the pilot of the plane did not want to take a pregnant woman. My mother put on a girdle to hide her pregnancy and went to tell the pilot that she lost the baby, even had a medical certificate — who knows where she got it.

We got on a plane, we crossed Brazil in a two-engine plane that nearly crashed twice, and was stranded for repairs for two days in the jungle. After four days of travel, with overnight stops, we arrived at our final destination, a new beginning. We were met by a community group, taken to a house, given a meal and a room. We had arrived. My mother went into labour two days later and had a healthy baby boy, a citizen of a country that had not had a war since the war of independence in the nineteenth century.

The odyssey was over. We were safe. Many years of poverty followed, but we never had to run again. My brother certainly had a better childhood than I; he cannot imagine his mother doing some of the things I tell to him. But I remember, and feel like a veteran. My mother and I have a special bond: we survived hardship and battles together. We are veterans of the refugee experience.

LAURA GARCIA RENERT

Acclamation

You will pay all your debts
You will collect all the repressions
You will comply with the slogans
You will question every order
You will dissolve the Yours into the Everybodys
You will wield whatever your language
You will invent new methods
You will tear down walls
madhouses mausoleums
frameworks, dungeons, museums
We are not momentaneous
    We are more
    We will be Tanias
permanent not perennial
present and not past
And I promulgate you Comrades
And I proclaim you Women
for being alive, for being legendary
for being ancient, for being contemporary
for being dead and for being killed
for being deflowered virgins
for being tormented with joy
for being rabid and for being clear
for being madwomen in love
    for being Women
    for being Ours
    for being Us