

“Welcomed as a Stranger ---> Welcome the Stranger”

When Rabbi Lyon asked me to speak at this Symposium, I surprised myself by hearing the words, which just fell out of my mouth: “I am honored, and my grandfather would be so proud of me.” When I told my husband and several close friends, they immediately said, “That’s wonderful, Janet. You are a survivor; you definitely have a story to tell.”

Most mornings before getting out of bed, as a comforting therapy to help me face the day, I think of at least ten things for which I am grateful to God: a terrific, supportive husband with a great sense of humor, a thoughtful family, wonderful friends which includes my precious animal friends, living in America, the existence of a homeland for the Jewish people, Israel, excellent doctors, feeling better, air-conditioning, beautiful music, the ability to be charitable, and the satisfaction of volunteering in the community. I’ve always felt a sense of gratitude.

In 2000, after a routine mammogram which indicated no problem, I felt a small lump on one side. I went to my O.B.; he sent me to a surgeon. The surgeon did a needle biopsy, and even though it was negative, he said: “I’m leaving town next week, and I’m operating on you this Friday.” Unfortunately, it was malignant, so I had a lumpectomy followed by seven weeks of radiation. The trauma of that experience still lingers. Of course, I am thankful to God for the excellent medical care I received and the fact that I have not had a recurrence.

In early September, 2005, I underwent open heart surgery to repair a leaking mitral valve. It resulted in a major complication known as ARDS, acute respiratory distress syndrome; it’s very serious and often fatal. I was in ICU for six weeks; very fortunately I had incredible doctors and nurses. My heart surgeon would come by my bed every morning and tell me he admired my strong will and my courage. He said I was a real fighter. Being in ICU for six weeks was awful – it was 24 hours-a-day of bright lights, loud beeps and other noises, constant suctioning, popping of plastic gloves, and since I had to have a tracheostomy, I couldn’t even voice my frustration. I also wasn’t allowed visitors, except for my immediate family, doctors, of course, and members of the clergy. After six weeks, I was finally released to an acute care hospital, and then major rehab at TIRR, where Gabby Giffords also had rehab. I received wonderful care, improved and was finally released to continue my recovery at home in mid-December. Yes, I survived all this, because I come from a family of survivors.

You see, my parents, my maternal grandparents and uncle were Holocaust survivors. My grandfather was an orphan, born in Lithuania; he had an older sister and brother who made it to America many years earlier. That maternal grandfather married Leah Schatz who was from a prominent Jewishly-educated family. Many of my grandmother’s family went to what was then Palestine in the early 1900’s. They started what have become major Israeli businesses. A great uncle of my mother was Boris Schatz, who founded the Bezalel Art Museum in Jerusalem. My grandmother also had family in Bonn, Germany, who were in the timber

business. Eventually my grandfather, an astute businessman, learned the business and bought out the Schatz family of Bonn, who then moved to Palestine.

My mother's family lived cosmopolitan, comfortable lives in Germany until around 1937-1938. And in 1939, they barely escaped to London, England, where a cousin sponsored them. One uncle's papers did not arrive in time, so he perished in a concentration camp. My grandmother, I was told, died of a broken heart. My grandfather always said she was an angel. What message do you think I derived from that?

My father was from a well-to-do German family from Hannover. When he attended the University of Bonn, my mother's parents invited the Jewish students for Shabbat dinner, and that is how my parents met. They married in 1932. After several years, my father was rounded up and thrown into prison just for being a Jew. He swore that if he was released, he would pack his belongings and leave. At that time, influential friends were able to gain his freedom, and he left for South Africa in 1936 where a cousin was willing to sponsor him and my mother who arrived in 1938. And that is how I came to be born in Johannesburg. All this upheaval was very difficult for my mother. She had several stillbirths and was told not to have children, and then I was born.

Around 1946, we left South Africa to visit my grandfather and my uncle in London. They were comfortably situated in the Jewish part of London where my grandfather took in borders. My grandmother died before we arrived. My father disliked the cold, dreary, bombed-out city which reminded him of Germany, so, at the urging of my grandfather's brother, my mother, father and I came to the United States to Fort Worth, Texas in 1948 where I grew up.

The Fort Worth Jewish Federation welcomed us and helped my parents acculturate. In the beginning, we were poor immigrants with no car living with my mother's uncle and his wife. Eventually my father got a good job as a bookkeeper. In addition my father also became a German professor in the evenings at TCU. Also welcoming to our family in Fort Worth was Temple Beth El, a reform congregation, where I began attending Sunday school. My parents tried hard to make a pleasant world for me. They were grateful to this country and happy to be here. If things got a little tough, my father always said, in German, "Alles soll recht kommen" which means "Everything will be okay." This is remarkable to me since my father lost his entire German family and property. My parents invited my uncle and grandfather to come to live with us. My grandfather brought his unconditional love and sense of wonder. He was my adoring cheerleader. I remember him enthusiastically reading "The Jewish Daily Forward". He was a superb storyteller, and we soon had guests coming to visit him.

As soon as I was old enough, my parents took me to concerts and operas. Fort Worth was able to attract great artists. In grade school, I was introduced to the violin, and I was hooked. If making parents happy is a Jewish thing, my involvement in the music world accomplished this. Practicing, performing and competing also gave me discipline, fun, friendships and interactions with the communities wherever I lived. When I was recruited to teach German in Wichita Falls, after graduating from the University of Texas, I also played in the Wichita Falls

Symphony. One really memorable experience during that time was meeting Radu Lupu, the now-legendary pianist. In 1966, after he won the Van Cliburn Competition, he was invited to perform with the Wichita Falls Symphony. He spoke no English and a little German, so I was asked to take him to the TV stations for interviews and to his rehearsals and to show him around town. That evening he performed with the symphony and when he passed my chair, he paused slightly; my face must have turned quite red.

Throughout my performance days, I was often asked to play Max Bruch's beautiful "Kol Nidre" which we heard last night and the "Nigun" from the Baal Shem Suite (Three Pictures of Hassidic Life) by Ernest Bloch. These are beautiful and meaningful pieces to me. I am always moved by Max Janowski's "Avenu Malkenu". I remember when he visited us here at Beth Israel and explained how he came to compose it. Not long after moving to Houston, I found myself chairing the JCC Music Committee. One of the members of my committee suggested a city-wide cantors' concert. It gave people the opportunity to hear the cantors singing non-liturgical music in duet, trio and ensemble settings. This turned out to be a very popular annual event which I chaired for some nine years. Music brings joy and solace to me, both in and out of the synagogue. It was a great source of comfort and perhaps healing for me as I lay in the hospital ICU.

Odd as it may seem, I majored in German literature and philosophy at the University of Texas. It had one of the best German departments in the country. Since I already spoke German, it was an easier fit. Also, at UT, I studied Hebrew literature under Dr. Bar-Adon. In 1962 I went on my first trip to Israel with university students from all over the country. There, my relatives met me and showed me what they had established, and I had a memorable time. We also visited Hadassah Hospital which Mickey and I and my parents have long supported; Hadassah has played an important role in my volunteer world.

Back in Wichita Falls, my students introduced me to a professor of economics from Germany with whom my family and I are friends to this day. When he found out that I was Jewish, he seemed to make it his mission to prove to me that there are good Germans. His family has visited us in Houston. He also visited my parents in Fort Worth. Later he returned to Germany and was one of the ministers who helped with the reunification of East and West Germany. During my cancer treatment, he sent me a beautiful book of Jewish prayers called "L' Chaim". He has made Mickey and me members of the Beethoven Society. He and his family live in Bonn.

While I was still teaching in Wichita Falls, just as my grandparents invited Jewish students to their home for Shabbat dinner, my mother invited Mickey Frost, a young, single man working at General Dynamics in Fort Worth, to their home. And 42 years later, we have two wonderful children who were Bar and Bat Mitzvah here at Beth Israel and graduated from religious school. Our children, Karen and Louis are happily married and have given us three precious grandchildren.

In 1990, we welcomed an immigrant family from the former Soviet Union seeking religious freedom - the Risins. Mickey and I "adopted" them through the Federation's Family-to-Family program. We have remained dear friends; they are Beth Israel members and are now accomplished American citizens. In fact one of my frequent visitors during my ICU recovery and afterwards was Dr. Semyon Risin.

Though my journey is still ongoing, I am home, now. Presently at Beth Israel, I chair the Library Committee and I serve on the Gathering Place and Outreach Committees and as a Director of Sisterhood, which years ago I served as president. It is my great hope that I can help convey the strength, wisdom and beauty of Judaism to my treasured grandchildren, Arabella, Davin and Evan, just as my grandfather did to me. With the support of my own cherished family, as well as my congregational family, I have reached this time in my life with gratitude. Thank you to all the Beth Israel clergy and staff with whom I have shared much time over the years. Thanks to all of you for allowing me to share my personal journey with you.

Shana tovah!