

CHAPTER I

Glimpses of a Shattered Past

I WAS A COLLECTOR OF VIGNETTES from my mother's life, out-of-sequence fragments revealed in a hush in unguarded moments. Sometimes in the night she cried out for her father in her sleep, "Papi!" Or was it I who cried out in my own dreams for mine?

Her lips trembled, "Mops, Mops."

Who is Mops? In time, I wrested from her that Mops was the pet name she had given to her younger brother, my Uncle Ernst, who exulted, as did my whole family in Berlin, when the news reached them from America that I had been born. My mother was five years old when Mops came into the world. At the very mention of his name she could barely contain her remorse. Mutti was not willing, in her waking consciousness, to talk of him, although thoughts of Mops were never far from her mind. Sometimes, when I displayed a certain characteristic or made her laugh by doing mischief, she let slip, "You come by your impishness honestly. Your Uncle Ernst used to do that. You remind me so much of him."

When she watched a comedian, she lost herself in laughter, but while she laughed, she was sad. So was I sad. Isn't that the way it always is, the natural condition? Isn't everybody sad, and how is a child

to know the difference if she is born into it? Mutti was then just as innocent, as new to America, as I was to the world. I was her world. She knew little English, knew not a soul, and had no money. She didn't want to talk about "what happened."

As the years passed, I invented two techniques that might encourage her to talk. The first one was to take a chance and brave it out, constantly pestering her to answer my question. Then, just to find peace, she might yield to what I asked and, having done so, talk a little more. The second way was to become completely silent when Mutti would not answer a question, with the hope that she might, on her own, feel compelled to fill the void. When she did answer questions that I asked, she spoke with an economy of words. I felt guilty then, for pushing her. I feel guilty now as I remember, because the recounting of such things caused her to relive them with unabated pain.

Perhaps Mutti was not reliving the pain. Maybe that was where she spent most of her time, emerging into the present only out of necessity to perform her motherly duties. She might have been visiting Mops or replaying a time with her father, Herr Professor Doktor Fritz Wachsner, or her stepmother, Paula, the only mother she'd ever known, or the three grandmothers she adored, or her courtly uncle Heinrich, or all the rest of her uncles and aunts and cousins and the extended family she had left behind in Germany. She never conquered the despair of no longer having them in her life. I still see her eyelids flutter on her pillow as she recaptured a moment with them in the timeless imagery of the mind.

It remained for a child to intuit what Mutti saw in her dreams. Intuition was the mortar that held together the few building stones, the contradictions and meager facts I knew of my lost family. In the waking state, the disconnected memories she let slip told no narrative—they were just shards of a broken mirror that still held shattered glimpses of her former life. To talk freely of this might open the floodgates too wide and sweep away the precious little she clung to of her hidden, vanished world. Today, when she is no longer here, endless unformed questions still float just beyond the edge of my consciousness. No matter how much I come to know, I rue the gaps

I will never fill that lead me to conjecture. Making sense of it all is an ever-evolving pastiche for me to sort out if I would understand my own story.

Mutti wanted me to think that the time before I was born did not exist, that life began for her when she came to America. No less is true for other refugees. But if her physical being was now safe, she had left much of her mind, heart, and soul in Germany. And although I was born in America, as much a part of me was there with her in Germany. As years passed, Mutti chose to exhume more, even initiating conversations by opening herself to tormenting recall, “so their faces will not be erased as if they never lived at all, as if what happened to them didn’t matter.”

From the time I learned to talk, Mutti spoke to me as if I were an adult, the better not to love me as a child. All we had was each other, and I knew she loved me with her whole being, as I loved her. But she was cautious with her affection and rarely kissed me. What is a childhood without kisses? She would not let herself feel too much in case that which was dear might once again be taken from her. This was her barren world in which I grew to consciousness.

She invited me to call her by her first name.

“You may call me Lotte.”

“I just want to call you Mommy.”

She picked me up. She did not hug me to her. She held me at arm’s length. The warmth I got from her came from her eyes. “Then call me Mutti, too.”

It struck other children as odd to hear me call her by her first name. I never heard them address their mothers this way.

“But we are friends, as well,” she added, her inflection suggesting that friendship was the higher virtue. The recollection still stings with rejection.

When I was old enough to read and write, she gave me a journal.

“Do you have a journal, Lotte?” I asked.

“No more.”

“But why?”

“It is ended.”

To what level of hopelessness must a person sink to say her story is ended?

“I threw my journal in the sea. I almost threw myself overboard with it. Thank God, I did not, for then I would not have had you. I do not wish to talk of things you do not need to hear. It is better, perhaps, when you are older.”

“I do need to hear.”

“*Bitte*, please, then you be the one to keep a journal. You be the one to remember.”

From then on, I kept a journal, and for a time, while I grew up, it was my only friend and confidante.

Somewhere along the way, I ferreted out of Mutti that my father had left Germany and sailed to Cuba on the day of their marriage, December 16, 1938. Mutti followed him six months later aboard the Hamburg Amerika liner the SS *St. Louis*, a nightmare voyage that she refused to talk about for years. Not until I was older did I learn that the *St. Louis* had been forced to sail back to Europe, where my mother was interred in Westerbork Detention Camp. Then I heard the story of how she escaped the clutches of Hitler by the narrowest of margins.

With no money for rent, we moved from room to room until Mutti found a garage for us to live in. It was in Watts in South Central Los Angeles, which then, as now, was mainly a black neighborhood. The garage was the first home I remember. It had a cold water tap and a basin for all our washing needs.

The day we moved in, we were on a crowded bus on the way to our new home. In our arms, on our laps, and spilling into the aisle were paper bags holding everything we owned. For Mutti's eighteenth birthday, her father, the professor, had gotten her a wonderful heavy greatcoat for the bitter Berlin winters. The coat was old and worn now, but the gift from her father was something he had touched and thus was an extension of him, gone from this earth. She was not yet ready to give up either. Who wears such a coat on a mild spring day in Los Angeles? Mutti did, to avoid carrying one extra thing when her hands were full. The American modes and styles she had lived in the

midst of for nearly four years, since immigrating, had no influence on her. Nor did American women wear their hair the way she did: long braids pulled back tight and rolled up in a severe bun. I stuck out, too, like a Raggedy Ann with my mop of curly red hair. Passengers stared, even more so when Mutti widened the gulf by talking in German to me. The one I loved embarrassed me. Strangers' eyes seemed unwelcoming as they burned into us. We didn't belong.

We awoke in the garage the next morning to the sound of children laughing and playing and mothers chatting outside on the street. Mutti bathed me with cold water in the laundry tub, then dressed me and told me to go outside and play.

"The voices of children that now you hear playing belong to new friends that you soon will be making," she intoned in her sing-song, lyrical Berlin German.

I was just beginning to learn halting English and was too shy to go out by myself to play. She would have to take me. Mutti had her own aversion to meeting new people. Self-effacing in her new country, she was quick to spurn any attention that came her way. But she had been raised to strict German discipline and so when impelled knew how to deal with her social anxieties. Those she held inside were not so readily conquered.

Resolute, she took me by the hand and marched me out to the street. On the lawns and the sidewalks, mothers with coffee cups and cigarettes turned and looked our way. Children stopped playing and stared. Through our hands, clenched together firm as an umbilical cord, I felt her tremble. Her fear legitimized my own. An eon passed before a mother, whom we soon learned was our next-door neighbor, unthawed the tableau with a "Good morning" and a smile. Mutti managed to send back a smile of her own. For weeks afterward, I went outside to play but stood on the sidewalk instead and watched other children play. They belonged.

What is family? I had neither concept nor sense of family. There were no photographs to connect me to the past but one, a picture of my father, Warren Meyerhoff, who had joined the army and was now a U.S. infantry sergeant fighting somewhere in Europe. I had still been

an infant when Daddy enlisted. I didn't remember him, but I idolized his picture and longed for him with all my being.

"Just like you," Mutti said, "I was a little girl waiting for my father to come home from war."

"Do you mean there was a different war when you were little, Mutti?"

She nodded her head sadly. "A very different war. *Siehst du, meine süsse*, you see, my sweet little one, Jews fought then for Deutschland alongside their fellow Germans. *Ja*, it was a very different war."

And now, my father, my hero, had gone back to Europe to fight and protect us from a great German evil. I did not understand.

"*Sind wir auch nicht Deutsch?* Are we not Germans, too?"

"*Ja*," Mutti answered, unmindful of her residual pride, "we are Germans. But, *meine Tochter*, my daughter, you were born in America and are first an American."

"But if my father is German, why is he fighting other Germans?"

Heartsick for her Deutschland, Mutti groped for an answer that I might understand while her eyes flooded for the beloved homeland that had cast her out. Her tears of rejection were contagious, for I wept, too, and felt the victim of whom or of what I did not know or understand and, for that, was all the more terrified. The mantle of victim is poison to the psyche. Lifelong pondering of the dark side is no antidote, for who could ever come to a whole understanding of evil in such awesome dimensions? But I will never forget the simple answer that Mutti gave to my question that day.

"Most people are good. There are some who are not. No less is true in Deutschland. But, in this world, *Liebchen*, there are few among us who are at all times the one or the other. *Mehr als das gibst uns nicht zu wissen*. More than this we are not given to know." She took my father's picture and *kusst* her "good German." I kissed him, too.

"He will return soon. A day is coming in *die Zukunft*, the future, when we will be together and safe in America forever." Nothing brought more happiness than imagining that day. We would have a hero to take care of us. He would know how to make us not be afraid in the night.

We were walking down a street one day and passed a five-and-dime. In the window were children's birthday supplies and party favors, little crepe paper-covered tubes that opened with a pop when pulled at the ends to reveal a surprise inside. I had to have one and nagged and pleaded with Mutti. Every cent meant a lot in those days, but she took me inside and bought it for me. Outside on the street, I pulled on the ends of the tube, and, with a pop, a little cross fell out on the sidewalk. I felt an instant, powerful fascination and bent down to pick it up.

"No, you cannot have that," Mutti said.

"But why?"

"Because we are Jews."

Just the same, she took me to the Unitarian church for my religious education to hear the inspirational sermons of the Reverend Stephen Fritchman, whose words I carry in my heart to this day. But what of the transcendental beauty of Judaism and the meaning of being Jewish? Of these, she told me little. Even as a child, I knew some precious thing had been smashed that I had to make whole again, realizing all the while that it could never be put back together as it was.

Mutti told me to pick up the little cross and put it on the bench at the bus stop, "so a little Christian child might find it and give it the love it deserves."

I remember the incident of the little cross because Mutti linked it immediately to a name, as we continued on down the street, a name that came floating up from the deepest recess of her mind as a gift once uttered never to be buried again.

"Rabbiner Gottschalk. I wonder what happened to dear Rabbiner Gottschalk. Reverend Dr. Benno Gottschalk."

"Who is he?"

"A rabbi I once knew. My father's best friend. Rabbiner of the New Reform Synagogue of Berlin at Johannestrasse 15. He came every Friday night for Sabbath dinner."

"Tell me about him, Lotte."

"He was a towering presence, charming, and rugged as a movie star. I had a crush on him when I was hardly older than you. I was not alone.

He was the only rabbi my girlfriends ever met. They were taken with him, too. Everybody was. His home was beautiful. He gave me the first book I ever owned, a book of his essays. Everyone in Berlin was reading his book those days. He was like an uncle to me.” With a wrinkled brow she shook her head sadly. “I wonder,” she kept repeating to herself, “I wonder what happened to him, dear Rabbiner Gottschalk.”

Our street in Watts was just around the corner from what is known today as the Watts Towers. On my first day of kindergarten, Mutti held my hand as we crossed the street. We turned a corner and there was Simon Rodia, bending and lifting as always, hard at work erecting out of his fantasy and broken bits of colored glass and pottery his magical towers that one day would be a landmark, his great legacy to the city of Los Angeles.

“*Gut Morgen, Frau Meyerhoff,*” he shouted.

“*Nein, it is ‘Guten Morgen,’* Signore Rodia. *Buon giorno,*” she called back, waving as she corrected his German and returned the courtesy in his native tongue.

I loved to climb and swing on the colorful towers.

“*Nein, meine kleine Afe,*” she said to me, waving a finger. “Not today, my little monkey. Here, there will be no swinging this morning.”

She was taking me to school, on my first day. Or was I taking her? For soon Mutti was lost. She hadn’t the English or the confidence to approach passersby, so it was I who had to ask for directions.

At school, I became wholly immersed for the first time in the English language with no German to fall back on. I felt overwhelmed by a chasm of separation, for I had to say good-bye to Mutti and stay with the children. My frightened classmates felt abandoned by their mothers, and they cried for them. I cried, too, but it was I who had abandoned my mother, and I worried whether she would be able to manage, for she had never in her life, since the time of my birth, spent a moment alone without me.

In kindergarten I met a little blue-eyed girl with blond hair, and soon we were best friends. How I admired and envied her. All real American girls had blue eyes and blond hair. We became inseparable.

I was elated to belong somewhere aside from my relationship with my mother. I could not wait to go to school every day.

One day, I went around the corner to her house. We were playing in front when her grandfather came out in a huff, angrily stabbing his finger at me.

“You started the war,” he hissed. “We don’t want any Germans around here. Go home, you little Jewgirl.”

He pulled his granddaughter inside and slammed the door in my face.

Was there something wrong with me? Who was I? Jew, Unitarian, German, American? The familiar shame of the outcast came over me. How distorted, when it was he who should have been ashamed. Terror clutched me then as it clutches me now when I return to that time: the racing of my heart, feeling belittled and not as good as, always the outsider.

The next day in the schoolyard my “best” friend called me a “little Jewgirl.” I pulled her hair and threw her down. Other children backed away from me as if I were a pariah. I did not want to cry in front of them. The teacher witnessed all of this, but it was me she ordered to “Go sit in the corner.” I never could tell Mutti. My instincts said it would remand her back to a terror beyond comprehension. And still I envied the little girl because her grandpa, bigot though he was, came and fetched her every day after school.

“If only I had a grandpa, how much I would love him. Where is my grandpa?” Too late, I felt my question break Mutti’s heart. Her silence lay bare the answer. Sorrow pulsed with every beat of my own heart. She was too proud a woman to be pitied. I would have held her if only she’d have let me, but she would not. I couldn’t comprehend why my love was not enough to fill her emptiness. I was left to drift in my own feelings of inadequacy and loss and sadness.

I heard the children talking in the street about fireworks. They said a holiday they called the Fourth of July was coming in the summer. But before it came, something unimaginable happened that dwarfed all else. Just before my fourth birthday, on May 20, 1945,

Adolf Hitler killed himself. A few days later, Germany surrendered unconditionally, and the war in Europe was over. I remember the whole neighborhood milling in the street. Mutti picked me up and danced me around the garage. She was staring oddly that way, peering into my eyes as if she couldn't believe we were out of harm's way, searching them for some hidden meaning as if I were a miracle and an oracle rolled into one. I saw a confusing mix of terror and relief in her eyes. With my eyes of today, I understand better what I saw: how odd that Hitler is dead and we Jews are still alive.

Before we knew their fate, our hearts were filled with tears for our brethren, Jews and every other victim. But now that Allied victory had brought the war to a close, the disaster overcame and engulfed us and spun us even deeper into its eddy. Mutti was frightened, more so than ever, for soon she would face learning the fate of her loved ones. Yet even worse would be not learning their fate. Once a victim, always a victim? You cannot modify history, so how do you get out of it? It was a long time before she really accepted that no one would ever take me away from her. That sort of imagery stays with you. I was a child who tried to shoulder her mother's catastrophe. I know now what an impossible task I'd set for myself. Yet I would try to do it again, if only I could.

Mutti had a special treat in mind for me. She took me to the movies. I don't remember the film we saw, but I will never forget the newsreel: *The Eyes and Ears of the World*. You would have had to see Mutti's eyes in the flickering light to understand. On the screen were aerial views of Berlin, the still smoking shell of my mother's city. Everything in every direction lay in ruins. I felt Mutti's panic rise in me. On the streets of her neighborhood, a few blocks from the Kurfürstendamm Station, expressionless children, old men, and ragged women stumbled in a daze through the rubble of their homes. On Rosenthalerstrasse in die Mitte, the City Center, the buildings were flattened. There once stood her adorable uncle Heinrich Schlesinger's shirt factory, which made as fine a shirt as could be found in Europe.

Mutti half rose from her seat, gasping, "*Mein Gott, meine Freundinnen*. My God, my girlfriends." All at once she realized the danger to old

friends she once had in Berlin. “*Nur bloss nicht!* Oh, no, no, the very thought,” she cried out. “*Ilonka und Erika.*”

People turned to stare.

“*Mein Gott, mein Gott, Erika und Ilonka. Gott steh dem bei. Erika und Ilonka. Gott steh dem bei.* Oh my God, oh my God, Erica and Ilonka. God stand by them, God stand by them.”

A terrible wound in her had reopened. What I saw in her eyes made clear to me the meaning of terror. She stood like a sleepwalker and left the theater, mumbling as a mantra, “Thank God, Ursula is safe in Africa. Thank God, Ursula is safe in Africa, *mit Bruno und Herbert.*”

I followed her out into the sun and took her hand. “Ilonka and Erica. Who are they, Mommy? Who is Ursula? Please tell me. And who are Bruno and Herbert? I want to know.”

She nodded as if to acknowledge my right to be told, and she opened her mouth to speak. There, on the crowded street, she held her head in her hands and her lips moved, but no sound issued forth. Mutti, always so proper, tried not at all to conceal this public display of emotion. I knew this was good, for she usually kept her pain inside.

I got her home and sat her down. I was a little girl who well knew how to make a pot of tea, and I poured her a cup. I needed to know. I was insistent to know who those names belonged to. Again and again I asked, to no avail. When night fell, she slipped back into this world again and was calm.

“I sing for you a present,” she said apologetically, and she gave me a private little concert of my own, my favorite, “*Der Kleine Sandmann bin Ich. The Little Sandman Am I.*”

Abends will ich schlafen geh'n

vierzehn Engel um mich stehn.

When I lay me down to sleep,

fourteen angels watch do keep.

This is the tender lullaby from the opera *Hansel and Gretel* by Engelbert Humperdinck. It had been Mutti's favorite when she was a

child. She never forgot the name Humperdinck because her father grieved so terribly for the composer the day he died in 1921.

“I was only six years old, then,” she said. “That he felt the loss of Humperdinck so deeply influenced the meaning of music for me ever since. Allow your grandfather’s example to so influence you.”

She hadn’t answered who the names she cried out in the theater belonged to, but she spoke of her father. My grandfather. He taught Mutti as she taught me, to take in music, not with the ears alone but with the heart—an easy lesson because her singing was, for anyone who heard her, a heartfelt joy.

“Thank you for my present. It’s the best ever.”

“*Nein, nein,*” she said. “Victory in Europe is the best present you will ever get.”

I was disappointed. Other children got toys. “The best present I will ever get for the rest of my life?”

“The rest of your life,” she said, “is your present.”

The meaning was too subtle for the mind of a child, although the words were not too subtle for me to hold in memory more than sixty years later. I could not but measure the relative importance of birthday gifts ever since, against Mutti’s astonishing remark. For there are perplexing things in this world that echo inside as special just because they are not understood but felt. Still, I was not too young to understand that the victory in Europe celebrations in the street paled next to her triumph. She had sat by the radio to hear how the Allied armies had prevailed over the liars, the thieves, the murderers. If she was vindicated for the murder of her family and the outrage she had endured, it was a triumph without victory. She had survived, but a lifetime of healing would never make her world whole because of the loss of her loved ones. For all her warmth, for a long time she kept an impenetrable shield around her heart against the dread she learned to expect from the world.

Patriotism and celebration ran high upon the defeat of Germany, and never more so than on that Fourth of July in 1945, though the war in the Pacific did not end until August. The mother next door, Gigi McCoy, would not stand for her new German neighbors spend-

ing it alone. She invited us to come to a family barbecue she held in her backyard every year. Mutti spoke only a few words of English. She was reluctant to go, although she knew I would stay close by and interpret as best I could if someone tried to make conversation. She also knew she must reach out, if only for my sake. The aroma of barbecue in the air made an equally convincing argument. We went next door and stepped into a world light years away.

“Um Gottes willen. Warum stierst du so? Es ist unhöflich. Lord’s sake, why are you staring? It is impolite,” Mutti whispered.

I was gaping at a huge family milling about in their backyard, women busy setting a long table with all the different dishes they had brought, a young man in a sailor suit just home from war, men tending barbecue, brothers and sisters and cousins and kids, one of them named “Corky,” playing hide-and-seek and arguing and running everywhere. Cowboys and Indians whooped it up and did their mischief. Loving parents, aunts, and uncles wagged warning fingers, and grandparents reminded them that they, too, once were children.

What is family? The revelation I stared at was family. A big family in the utter pleasure of the company of one another. This is why my first memory of the Fourth stands out. I saw what it meant to have family, to belong, while at the same time the experience threw into sharp contrast that I had missed the great joy of knowing my own. That Fourth of July also stands out because I remember seeing Mutti happy. Swept up in the joy of family *gemütlichkeit* (coziness), she, for a moment, stepped out of herself. I conjure up her face in the rare light of that day. She didn’t know a smile curled her lips and her eyes shone with yearning or that she was gaping, too, at a venerable gray-bearded black great-grandfather as he creaked down on a lawn chair and rested his hands on his cane, adoringly observing the generations of his progeny with pride and satisfaction. How we envied them their family, the old and easy familiarity of shared history.

That Fourth of July, Mutti lived in the fantasy of a ghostly equivalence of a past I knew little of but she knew well, the love that runs wide in a big family circle. For me, such happiness was something new. All the while, our next-door neighbor, Gigi, was radiating love

for us. Later, when Mutti was fortunate to find a job, the only one she could, in the home of Otto Preminger as a sleep-in caretaker for his aged mother, Gigi took me in. It was not from Mutti that I learned how to cook. And it was Gigi's son, Corky McCoy, a friend still to this day, who let it be known in the neighborhood that if harm came to a hair on my head, that "fool" would have Corky to contend with. No small matter.

All of this set our loss fresh in front of us. The war had torpedoed Mutti's ship of life and sent it to the bottom, and with it her history. She had not even a photograph of her parents to cherish. Peace left us marooned, without linkage to a past. We were physically safe now in America, but what of the psyche? What safe haven exists to balance the mind? My mother was a gentle woman for whom the very idea of hatred and violence was bewildering. She saw it, knew it, felt it, but never quite grasped how such a phenomenon could be. How to undo the psychic poison of years of persecution and the unrelenting daily dread of wondering about her brother, Mops, and the family she'd left at home in Germany? As for her father and mother, she knew all along what had happened to them. Going through Mutti's papers after she died, I came across a German Red Cross letter from my Uncle Mops, dated September 13, 1942, which allowed the sending of no more than twenty-five abbreviated words:

"This morning, on my [twenty-second] birthday, [our] parents 'have traveled,' destination unknown. No change [for the] better. Friends and little girlfriend help touchingly. [Just the same] I hold [my] head [up] high. Write to me. Your Ernst."

Mutti never told me of this letter. There were two more letters from Mops before they stopped coming. Who would want to tell their child such a thing? And no wonder. I never have been able to push away morbid thoughts of what happened to my grandparents on that morning. The professor, the favorite of his students, among whom were more than a few Nazis, proud soldier in the army of the Kaiser, hears a pounding on his door by his fellow citizens garbed in the same uniform he once wore and with his wife, Paula, is thrown helpless to the street and forced to march in front of their neighbors



Deutsches Rotes Kreuz
Präsidium / Auslandsdienst
Berlin SW 61, Blücherplatz 2

15. SEP. 1942 397966

ANTRAG
an die Agence Centrale des Prisonniers de Guerre, Genf
— Internationales Komitee vom Roten Kreuz —
auf Nachrichtenvermittlung

REQUÊTE
de la Croix-Rouge Allemande, Présidence, Service Etranger
à l'Agence Centrale des Prisonniers de Guerre, Genève
— Comité International de la Croix-Rouge —
concernant la correspondance

1. Absender Ernst Israel Wachsmier
Expéditeur Berlin W 50 Schaperstr. 30
bittet, an
prie de bien vouloir faire parvenir à
Verwandschaftsgrad: .. Bruder

2. Empfänger .. Lotte Meyerhoff
Destinataire .. JACKSONVILLE Fla. USA
.. .. 2581 Park Str.

folgendes zu übermitteln / ce qui suit:
(Höchstzahl 25 Worte!) Eltern an meinem Geburtstag
(25 mots au plus!) unbekannt abgereist. Wohne, arbeite,
lebe unverändert gut. Freunde und
Kleine Freundin sorgen rührend.
Mitteilen Rudolf. Trotzdem Kopf hoch!
Schreibt Eurem Ernst.

(Datum / date) 13. 9. 42 (Unterschrift / Signature) Ernst Israel Wachsmier
3. Empfänger antwortet umseitig Jude, Hermann Berlin
Destinataire répond au verso Hermann B 45 32 17

The Red Cross letter from my uncle Mops in which my mother learned her parents' fates. She never told me of the letter.

in a tragic parade through Berlin to the Anhalter train station to be “sent east” in boxcars as cattle to a sadistic slaughterer.

How far down can one fall into hell when shocked out of the ideals of a lifetime, which are shown to be an illusion, when the safety net of a caring world is unmasked as a sham, as only a veneer the human race uses to delude itself into believing it isn't savage? How to imagine being caught in a trap with no rights, living among once

fellow citizens who are encouraged to hate and revile you and don't want you to stay but won't let you go. How to climb back up to God and find faith again in the society of humans?

Later, I remembered the Germans who went against the socially encouraged hatred of the Jews and put themselves in harm's way. I wonder what kind of immunity they had to protect themselves from the propaganda, what kind of mettle it took for them to expose themselves in a public way to the possibility of dire punishment, when so very many others did not. The mental scars Mutti carried with her were not so tidily erased by physical safety. Nor, I have come to understand, were mine. My identity went to the bottom with hers. All she had left of Germany were the ghosts of her family. She believed her German roots were dead and gone from this world forever.