



My Parents

A few weeks ago, during a short stay in Vienna, I plucked up the courage to visit the house I grew up in. I walked through the gate and crossed the courtyard. Everything looked the same, only the contraption for beating carpets was gone. I walked up to the second floor and stood outside the door to our old apartment, but there my courage failed me and I was unable to knock at the door. I just stood there motionless as feelings of sadness and loss swept over me. I turned around and left, not without making up my mind to finally write the story of my parents.

For some time now I had decided to write about my father Otto Drachsler, because he was a colorful personality, but now when I try to start, other thoughts crowd into my head. What about my mother? I thought that I knew more about my father than about her, but that is not so. I remember my mother very well. I was fortunate to be with her till after my 18th birthday, which I “celebrated” in Auschwitz.

My mother Marianne Grossman grew up in Znaim, a lovely old town in the former Czechoslovakia. She was one of seven children, and when she was eighteen she went to visit her aunt’s family in Vienna. I am trying to picture her arriving in the big city, being picked up at the railway station by my father and brought home to his parents. Shy and overwhelmed by it all, she soon fell in love with her handsome and sophisticated cousin, and he with the very pretty and attractive girl from the small town. The inevitable happened and she fell pregnant. I can only imagine how frightened and desperate she must have been when she discovered it. They did get married in the end, but not before a big family scandal and a failed suicide attempt on my mother’s part.

Were they happy? Maybe they would have had a better chance if they could have afforded a place of their own. For lack of money, they had to share a tiny apartment with my grandparents. We lived in one of those old houses, which had no running water in the apartment and no bathroom or toilet. Everything was out in the corridor, shared with one or two neighbors. We washed ourselves in a basin filled with water heated on the stove, or sometimes in a wooden tub in the kitchen. Life must have been very difficult for the grownups, but for us children it wasn’t too bad. We were used to living like this, and besides, we were surrounded with love and attention. We had plenty of books, and we could always take out more reading material from the many libraries in our neighborhood. The radio and gramophone played an important part in our lives. Even when times were hard, there was usually enough money for a new record, a ticket to the cinema, the theater, or a variety show. And of course we all loved the circus!



It was impossible to be oblivious to the tension at home. My grandmother resented her niece whom she blamed for ruining her son's chances for a better life (he had to give up his studies and earn a living). I remember my mother as a quiet and gentle person and my grandmother as quarrelsome. It must have been very hard for my mother. When I was older she sometimes took me for walks and talked to me about her unhappy situation. On one occasion, when she walked out of the house to avoid an argument with my grandmother and we crossed one of the bridges over the Danube, she confided in me that she often toyed with the idea of throwing herself into the river, and that only the thought of my sister Evelyn and me kept her back. I became very frightened and clung to her. She realized then what an effect her words had on me and promised me that she would never do such a thing. I sometimes followed her when she left the house after an argument, but when she discovered me sneaking behind her, she would laugh and hug me.

With my grandfather she had a very good relationship – he was a sweet man and he loved her. Strangely enough, I never heard my parents fight. I would have been aware of it as our apartment was really so tiny that Evelyn and I had to share a room with my parents. I often heard them talking quietly in bed, that was the only place they had some privacy. I know that my father was sometimes unfaithful to my mother, but he always treated her with respect.

She was happiest when we went to Znaim for the summer. There she spent a carefree time with the family she loved, her parents and sisters. I often overheard my aunts telling my mother to leave my father, but she refused. She remained in love with him till the end. I wish I could have spent more time with her when I was a child, but she was busy with my ailing sister. Much later, when my father was taken away and I was thirteen, I became very close to her. Only then did I really get to know her and discover her wonderful qualities, most of all her strength and loyalty.

My mother was a good-looking woman, petite with a nice figure, a little fuller than is fashionable today. Her face was sweet and framed by beautiful dark hair. She had a natural intelligence but not much formal education. Like her sisters, she only went to school till the age of fourteen and then she learned dressmaking, which came in very handy to keep us all well-dressed despite our reduced circumstances. Whenever I think of my mother, I see her busy with something or other, mostly with my sister who was handicapped. She was forever taking her for tests and treatments in various hospitals and doing exercises with her. Of course I was jealous of my sister after she was born, but as she got better my mother had



more time. Since my grandmother ran the household (she was a wonderful cook), my mother used her free time to earn a little money by sewing and giving manicures.

She was always busy doing something. Part of her time was spent keeping us clean. I still picture her combing my hair and brushing my coat vigorously before I could leave for school. Whenever we left the house she would inspect us to see if we were clean and tidy. Although she had little time for leisure, she liked to read, and like all of us she loved the cinema. She and my father used to go often to see movies in the evenings. I don't remember ever going with her when I was young. It was always my father who took me to matinees, she was too busy during the day. As I remember her, she was much stricter with me than my father who could never say no to me.

All that changed when my father was arrested and sent to concentration camp and was later deported. My grandfather had a heart attack and was taken to hospital. Shortly after that my grandmother died and my mother became the head of the family. That's when she showed her strength. She never panicked, remained calm during any crisis and looked after us the best way she could. She started working in the Jewish Institute for the Blind, and since I worked in a factory near her, I often picked her up and we rode home together on the train, which was almost an hour's journey. Sometimes I had to wait for her, and then I played with the blind children who lived in the Institute. My mother loved her work. She was very popular and much appreciated. Another thing that contributed to my mother's enjoyment of her job was the fact that she didn't have to worry about my sister, who was well looked after in a kind of day care center.

Life was anything but easy in those days, but we had each other and made the best of things. Transports to the east were leaving more and more frequently and we knew our days in Vienna were numbered. Still, we managed to hang on till 1942 when we were taken to Theresienstadt. My mother soon started to work in the typhus hospital and we saw much less of her than we did at home. Later, I moved in with her for a short time after leaving the children's home (Evy remained there). After we were deported to Auschwitz and Stutthof we were always together, the three of us, clinging to each other.

During that time in the camps she proved her strength again and again. Although she was quite helpless, she still tried to look after us, especially Evy, who was often ill. I can only imagine how worried and frightened she must have been, but she never let it show. What must she have felt when on that terrible day in August 1944 my name was called and I was



taken away from her without a word being spoken. I can still see her and Evy standing in front of the barracks, confused and waiting to be called, me looking back and being herded towards the trucks. That was the last time I saw my mother and my sister, although I didn't know it then. I still had some hope that we would meet again, but after working for three and a half months on a farm we were sent back to Stutthof where I started desperately to look for my mother and Evy. Alas, I never found them again. Only long after the war was over did I find out what had happened to them. Apparently, their names must have been on another list, because they were also sent to work on a farm. When my sister fell ill, they were transported back to the camp, where soon afterwards their lives were extinguished in the gas chamber. My little sister was only thirteen and my mother thirty-nine, much too young to die.

My father played a dominant part during my early childhood. He was good looking, charming and very bright. It must have been a bitter disappointment for him when he had to give up the study of medicine, but he never seemed resentful. He was generally cheerful and adored company. He was very talented and creative, he loved cooking, acting in amateur theater and was interested in politics. He had many friends, and everywhere he went he took me with him, showing me beautiful Vienna and teaching me its rich history.

When the Nazis came and he was arrested and transported to Dachau, we all thought we would never see him again, but he survived. It was my mother who had made it possible for him to return home through her efforts to scrape together enough money to buy him a bogus passage to Shanghai. The trouble was that he had to leave Vienna, but had nowhere to go. He had to report to the Gestapo every month, and finally in October 1939 he was deported to Poland. We never saw him again, but received two letters. The first was from a work camp in Nisko, describing the harsh conditions in the camp, the hard work and most of all the bitter cold. He never complained, though, that was one of his endearing qualities, that and his optimism. The second letter came from Kiev. He had managed to escape and cross the border into Russia. His letter was full of hope that we would see each other again soon, but the war with the Soviet Union had begun and we didn't hear from him again until many years later, when I thought I was the only one left alive.

One memorable day in 1960 I received a postcard from Vienna, written by a Mr. Renczes, a complete stranger to me. He told me that he had been on holiday in a resort by the Black Sea. He was standing in front of a kiosk trying to make himself understood and looking lost, when a man came up to him, introducing himself as a former Viennese by the name of Otto Drachsler, and offered his help. Before they parted, the man had given Mr.



Renczes a list of names asking him to do him a favor and find out whether any of his family was still alive. This kind stranger made inquiries and found me living in Israel. None of the others on the list were still alive. He wished me well and hoped that I would soon be able to get in touch with my relative! He had no idea that I was the daughter of that Otto Drachsler, and the happiness his postcard had brought me.

My father and I started a correspondence, which lasted till his death, with the hope of ever seeing each other slowly fading away. There was so much to catch up on, many years had passed since we had been together, but we tried our best. We told each other our stories from the time we had been apart, and I found out that he was married and had two daughters. He lived in Almalik, a small town near Tashkent in Uzbekistan, and worked as a doctor, specializing as a radiologist. He told me that he had studied medicine in Kiev and had become a Russian citizen. He seemed genuinely grateful to his new homeland for giving him a second chance. When he died in 1976 his family wrote to me, but we didn't keep up the contact. It was such a blow for me when he died without having met with him once more, although we tried every avenue. It was plainly impossible at that time to overcome the Russian government's reluctance to let people in or out (I have often wondered what our Viennese friend, who found my father, did there. Maybe he was a spy?)

A few years after my father's death, I received a letter from his family with the news that they were coming to Israel. I was looking forward to meet them, but very sad that my father was not one of them. From then on I tried to find out as much as I could about my father. To my disappointment I had to wait a long time before I could learn more. The reason was that his widow didn't want to talk about him. I think she resented me. My half-sister Lena spoke only Russian, and it took a while until she learned Hebrew and we became close. Gradually, we started to compare notes, and to our mutual amazement we realized that her father and mine seemed to have been two different people. Although he and I corresponded and exchanged pictures for years, he never became totally real to me, and the more I try to make sense of the bits and pieces I found out, the more he becomes a puzzle to me. One thing is certain, he was a survivor and he used any means to reach his goal. He was actually a bigamist, since my mother was still alive when he married his second wife. Of course he had no way of knowing and I am not judging him for that, but I have a sneaking suspicion that he didn't look too hard for us earlier. He had never been a doctor, but he worked as one in Russia. His family believed his story that he was a doctor in Vienna, and apparently so did everybody else. In a war, everything goes. People either have no documents or lose them,



so there is no way to check up on anything, and my father must have been very convincing. All his life his burning ambition was to study medicine, and when he had the opportunity to work in a hospital, he presented himself as a doctor. He studied all his remaining life, taking courses and specializing in radiology. He became a fine doctor and was very competent and well-loved by his patients.

Almalik was a small town and quite primitive, so it was not surprising that he stood out with his elegance. He was always well dressed and when he met people he knew in the street, he would doff his hat! Almalik had never seen anything like it. His marriage was not a happy one. He loved other women too much and was often unfaithful and his wife Sophie made his life a misery with her jealousy. In letters to my aunt in Znaim (I had told him that she was still alive), he mentioned how unhappy he was with Sophie and how difficult she was to live with. He said that only now did he realize what an angel my mother was!

He was a devoted father, but he didn't spend as much time with his daughters as he had with me when I was a child. He didn't talk too much about his past, although his second family knew that he had been married with children. What they didn't know was that my mother was still alive until August 1944, when he had been already married to Sophie for three years. His daughter Lisa was born in 1941 and Lena in 1945. Before settling in Almalik they lived in various places: Birobidjan, the Ukraine and others. I wonder how he fitted in. Most of the places they stayed in were quite primitive, but he was very adaptable. He did miss Vienna though. In his last years, when he was listening to the music he so loved, like opera or Viennese operettas, he was often so overcome with nostalgia that he had tears in his eyes. He was a passionate philatelist and spent many happy hours with his stamps. I was glad that I could contribute a little to his hobby by sending him all the first-day covers and various other stamps.

There was so much more I wanted to know. Little things about his everyday life in Russia, but I had to be satisfied with the stories Lena told me and of course my father's correspondence. In his last letters he had mentioned that he wasn't well. He had heart trouble and various other ailments, but he continued to work until his death. The last week of his life he spent in hospital, the same place where he had worked in the past (in the last few years he had worked in a clinic). The hospital had deteriorated, and like most medical facilities in the Soviet Union, the conditions were shocking. There were not enough medicines, the wards were filthy, there was no laundry and patients were left lying in their own mess. The staff was indifferent and uncaring, and even the people who used to work with my father didn't help much.



The family had to take care of all his needs: they washed and fed him, brought clean sheets and towels, and begged for better medical attention, but to no avail. He was treated like everybody else with no exception. He had a foreboding that he would never leave the hospital and that he would die soon and sadly he was right. The family was convinced that with proper medical care he could have been saved, at least for a while. They felt that like so many other patients, he died of general neglect and indifference to human suffering. It is ironic that my father, who had wanted nothing more than to cure people, should end up like this, helpless and in pain.

I am sad that I never saw my father again, but in a way it made his death easier to bear. The same goes for my mother, from whom I was so cruelly separated without being able to say goodbye. Now when I remember them I see my parents in my mind's eye alive and forever young. It's a comforting thought.

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