

Stolpersteine Konstanz

Werner HALPERN

Verlegungsrede
von Miriam Halpern

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May 4, 2012

In Memorium:

They were ordinary people; a butcher, his wife, and their two children. They lived behind the shops on RosegartenStrasse and did what ordinary people do. He, Solly, by our father's report, was a stern and demanding man who idolized the baby, our aunt Melanie, a blond haired cherubic child that forced him to give in to her demands with her charm. He worked hard for his family, singing as the cantor at synagogue with his deep and powerful voice, and slaughtering the animals according to the rituals of our ancient religion. She, Elyse, was a small, birdlike woman who worshiped her son, tempered her husband's nature, and maintained an orderly home. Our father, Werner, was a boy, like other boys; sometimes defiant, sometimes mischievous, jealous of his sister's attention, adoring of his mother and a bit fearful of his father. Our aunt Melanie, well, she was the center of attention in her early years; adorable, from what we hear, which tortured her brother, our dad. Especially since he left Germany first. Left his family, his country, his friends, his school, his neighborhood, to travel alone to a distant and unknown country. They were, as you know, ordinary people in extraordinary times.

We have learned that their own lives were extraordinary as well. Our grandfather learned to write in English around the time he was interred at Camp de Gurs. It is difficult to learn a language over several years let alone over a few desperate months. The family managed to keep in contact with each other for a period of time, before the doors closed on communication, before the last attempts were made unsuccessfully to ensure they could all leave safely and immigrate to the United States. Our father enrolled in the US army before the end of the war and was naturalized in England while serving his new country. An ordinary boy became an extraordinary man, who found his sister in Switzerland after the war, worked for 2 years to bring her to the United States and then trained to be a child psychiatrist, working tirelessly for years up until the time of his death to heal the most damaged of youth.

We are the descendants of those ordinary extraordinary people. We are here to remember their lives, no matter how short, how interrupted, how desperate, how extraordinary. We are forged from their coiled loops of DNA, from their backbones of strength and fragility, from their daily existence and their inopportune destruction. At the same time those twists of fate, that left them without a homeland, without neighbors and friends, those very twists of fate, have molded our lives as well. We are caretakers and teachers, doctors, and lawyers, living our ordinary lives with their extraordinary courage in our hearts. We live with the knowledge of their lives as real people, whose shoes walked this very street and whose lives entwined with yours. We are here to remember that every life has meaning, every obstacle incurs memory, and every day brings new hope.

Werner HALPERN

The Forge, an ode to ancestors

read by Naomi Schlagman

No need to pound life
into residues of memories,
yellowing correspondence,
stiff forms posing forever
posted in studio frames,
snippets of gossipy
long buried hatreds
nestled like burrs
in the brain's labyrinth
of passing experience.

you are within me
a surging heated dissonance
that leaves me no rest
whether pleased or sad.

The quiet, ruddy giant,
father of my gentle mother,
reluctant merchant
who is as nebulous to me
as our milky galaxy,
yet surrounds me, molds me
into his resigned and unseen
form,
a link as I am
in the passing of codified genes.

Not so the other patriarch,
diminutive, yet a presence
and transmitter of longings
firmly edged into awareness,
a beacon, a bearded watchman
with the scholar's sleepy gaze...
Our paths never crossed
except by post and in images,
spectral guide to my dim
destiny.

Neither of you wielded hammers
to shape my substance.
Why do I feel the pulse
of the influence of you both
like a blacksmith's blows?