Letters from Europe
(and Elsewhere)
Ruth Ellen Gruber

Letters from Europe (and Elsewhere)

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To my father, Jacob W. Gruber, and to the blessed memory
of my mother, Shirley Moskowitz Gruber
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FOREWORD

EPISTOLARY JOURNALISM is a time-honored form — for good reasons: Unlike straight reporting, it gives a skilled practitioner the opportunity to bring his or her own experiences into play in a positive way; the reader, meanwhile, feels a sense of intimacy with the writer that is the underlying strength of a personal letter. The symbiosis will quickly become clear, I think, as you enjoy this collection of missives from Ruth Ellen Gruber that originally appeared in The New Leader.

The NL was launched on January 19, 1924, as a weekly newspaper “devoted to the interests of the Democratic Socialist and Labor movements” in the United States. Before long it was taken over by the Mensheviks, who had fled from Russia after the Bolshevik Revolution. In 1950 it switched to a magazine format, and by the very early ’60s began describing itself as a “small ‘i’ independent, small ‘d’ democratic, small ‘l’ liberal” journal of news analysis and opinion.”

Throughout its history, however, the NL has remained firmly focused on international affairs. So it is not surprising that a decade ago when we met Gruber, an American correspondent
admired for her keen perceptions of European political, social and cultural developments, we asked her to write a “Letter” for alternate issues of the magazine. Happily, she agreed.

Since January 2007, the NL has only been publishing online. Anyone who wants to continue receiving “Letters” from Ruth Ellen Gruber, or is curious to see the rest of the magazine, can simply click on www.thenewleader.com (without charge).

Myron Kolatch
Executive Editor, The New Leader
IN SANTA MONICA this past spring, a week after my mother’s funeral, I found myself on a pavement paralleling the Pacific Ocean, unconsciously avoiding the lines between the concrete squares as I walked along. “Step on a crack, break your mother’s back.” The old schoolyard rhyme ran through my head, over and over; it was insistent, unavoidable, something absorbed in childhood, reflecting the instinctive fear children have that their parents, particularly their mother, could be taken away from them — and that they should, they must, do everything in their power to prevent it, even if it means walking funny down the sidewalk.

My mother died at the end of April, just three months after being diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. I am not a child, except in the sense that I’m a child of my parents, and there was nothing any of us could have done this time to save her. She went into hospice care and died at home, in her bedroom, surrounded by her family. “Serenamente, nell’abbraccio della sua famiglia” is the way I phrased it on the poster I had put up in the village in central Italy where my parents and I both have houses and, for
the past two decades, have spent much of the year. That’s what they do in Italy; they broadcast the loss of a loved one in stark black on white, big clear posters that are affixed on village notice boards so that everyone can get the news.

Mom’s death was, in fact, a natural process; grievous for our family and friends, devastating to my father, but a passing that we consciously try not to call a tragedy. It was Mom in her way who set the tone. “I’m 86, I knew that one day or another something would happen,” she told me on the phone in January, when she informed me of the diagnosis. “But I never expected it would be this.” After all, her own mother had lived to be 96 and had had a sister who made it past 100.

All her life, my mother was an artist, and, even as she slipped away, her art remained the clearest focus of her thinking. She was concerned at what would happen to her art works, which span more than 70 years of creativity and encompass a variety of media, from simple line drawings and sketches to sculpture and oils and the joyously complex, multi-layered collages that had become her signature style.

Mom began working in collage in the early 1960s, first focusing on subjects that were of interest to her intellectually, but not on an intimate level — landscapes and cityscapes, for example, of Prague, Rome, Israel, even Egypt, where she had never been. From the late 1970s, however, she became more and more immersed in her subjects, using her collages to project a richly textured vision of life as she lived and perceived it, among her family, friends, neighbors, and local landscapes. Many of them were set in Italy, and particularly in rural Umbria, where she spent so much time; bustling with activity and always exuding
a touch of whimsy, they mixed dreams and reality but were never sentimental or cliched.

I guess Mom saw the world differently from most people. Outwardly, she was one of the calmest people I ever knew, but her inner vision was dazzling. Her works were based, she once said, “on personal experience and are a controlled mixture of a variety of textures and media, composed in such a way as to affect the viewer from a distance while at the same time inviting him to participate in the action — to experience through color, dynamic contrasts of light and dark, textures and techniques, a reality that may seem fantastic but is still real.”

To achieve this, she used a complex process that combined her own sketches, photographs and monotype prints with ink, paint, and scraps of paper, textile and other materials. Almost all are densely populated with real people, drawn from and elaborated from the photographs that she took incessantly at every social occasion. Whether the overall subject was a grape harvest or the ruins of Pompeii, or a wedding, or a family reunion, they burgeoned with life; almost all seemed like parties, where everyone and everything had no trouble mixing or mingling.

Mom’s last really articulate conversation was a lively, and sharp, critique of the invitation design for an upcoming exhibition of her work in Los Angeles, an exhibition that we — and she — knew full well would be posthumous and which the curators had decided to call a Celebration. Mom felt that the invitation, which utilized an uncharacteristically dour self-portrait that none of us really liked, was not representative of either the style or attitude inherent in her work. It looked so gloomy, she said, who ever would want to go to an exhibit of that! I am the artist, she said, tell them that the artist objects to this design.
“Mom, you haven’t lost any of your marbles,” I told her, as I wheeled her the few feet back to bed from the living room.

“Yes, that’s the problem,” she replied.

“What do you mean,” I asked.

“Well,” she said, “how would you feel if you knew you were going to die in a few days?”

“Are you afraid?” I asked.

“No,” she answered. “But I’m not happy.”

Mom lived a long, creative, fulfilled and happy life. Her final illness was also really her first. She was born in Houston and spent half a century in Philadelphia; since the mid-1980s she and my father had divided their time between Philly and their farmhouse in Italy — their arrival in the village each May, neighbors told me, was regarded as a welcome sign of spring. We have always been a close family, my parents, myself, my brothers and now their own wives and children. But, growing up, we were never into to what one calls public displays of affection. That we all like, respect, and trust each other were givens, as was the given of love. On her deathbed, Mom cut off one of my brothers when he tried to voice his feelings. “Frank, don’t be sentimental,” she admonished.

Outside the family, Mom touched people in ways that I didn’t really comprehend until she got sick and the letters, cards, emails and telephone calls began to arrive. Acquaintances she hadn’t seen in more than 20 years wrote about how they would never forget her. Friends of my own generation, and younger, described how she had set an example or been a source of strength in times of trouble. Villagers in Italy with minimal education wrote beautiful notes in careful, schoolchild script. Dad read everything to
her; he printed out the emails and put them all, with the cards, in a special box. In the brief months of her illness, he barely left the apartment.

Mom and Dad moved to Santa Monica a few years ago, and that’s where she’s buried, in the town’s Woodlawn Memorial Cemetery. She chose the place — the cemetery, if not the plot itself. As someone whose research and career over the past 20 years has involved visits to Jewish cemeteries all over central and eastern Europe, I think she couldn’t have made a better choice.

Woodlawn is eclectic, and, for southern California, it’s historic, the final resting place of a full, wide range of settlers drawn from around the world by the California dream. There are romantic monuments from the late 19th century, and the simple graves of unknown John Does. The city’s founding families have their tombs here, and there are monuments with epitaphs in Japanese, Persian, Spanish. Memorials honor anonymous Civil War dead and the pioneers of California. One stone marks the grave of a woman with the uncompromising name of Sarah J. Death; she died in 1912 at the age of 81.

Mom chose the cemetery, but Dad chose the plot. It’s next to a little bench and a newly planted sapling, where tall, graceful palm trees cast stripey shadows in the late afternoon.

Doug McClure, the brash blond actor who played Trampas on the old TV show The Virginian, is buried a few yards away from my mother. He was, says the epitaph, a “loving husband and father” who is forever in the hearts of his family. And dashing Paul Henreid, who starred as Ingrid Bergman’s husband in Casablanca and so romantically lit two cigarettes at once for him and Bette Davis in Now, Voyager, also lies, with his wife, nearby. “Oh Jerry,
don’t let’s ask for the moon,” Davis tells him, in the famous last scene, “we have the stars.” The simple grave marker bears a star under Henreid’s name, and a rose under that of his wife.

Other Hollywood personalities are buried here, too, as well as writers, political figures, and even a professional wrestler. Mom would probably enjoy the company. She was an artist, a mother, a sister, a daughter, an aunt, a grandmother, a friend, a mentor and all that. And she was forthright, and honest, and fair. But she was also a fan — and she was also a romantic.

As a teenager in Houston, she cut school one day to wait for her then-idol, Nelson Eddy, to exit his hotel. She stepped forward and presented him with a portrait of him she had drawn from photographs. “I’ll hang it in my den,” he told her. Decades later, when I myself was a teenager, Mom took me to New York to see the musical *Camelot*. Afterward, it was she who led the way to the stage door, where we waited for Richard Burton to emerge. I still have the Playbill on which he scrawled his autograph.

My parents met at Oberlin College in the early 1940s. Then, during World War II, when my father was stationed in Iran, Mom sent him a photo of herself, leaning against a wall, wearing a pair of short shorts with distinctive, sailor-style buttons. Both she and Dad had recently been jilted, and the photograph kindled a correspondence that led to a marriage that lasted more than 61 years. Indeed, Mom’s cancer diagnosis came just a couple weeks before she and Dad marked their 61st wedding anniversary. The year before, for their 60th, we had held a party, which they presided over wearing fanciful paper crowns made by the child of friends. This year, despite her illness, we also had a party; small groups of friends and family commuted between my brother’s house and the hospital, where Mom sat in bed in
a fluffy, pink bed jacket, a present from my aunt, and unlike anything I had ever seen her wear before.

The photo of Mom in the short shorts takes pride of place on the first page of the oldest of our family photo albums, with the caption, in Mom’s handwriting, “What started it all.” On the same page is a photo that Dad sent her from Iran, a handsome young man, sitting musing in a forest.

After her funeral, I, the only daughter, spent several days going through Mom’s things, separating what to put away, what to give to friends as keepsakes, what to send off to charities. In doing so, I learned something that I had never realized and which, given my own wardrobe preferences, is rather remarkable: My mother did not own a single piece of black clothing.

Mom was very organized. Storage bags were clearly labeled; drawers and shelves and hangers were neatly arranged; shoes were in boxes. Still, before I put anything in the charity bags, I checked pockets and opened handbags to make sure they were empty.

In one handbag, an old, brown, leather purse that had been made, decades ago, by a craftsman friend, I found something wrapped up in tissue paper and further protected by a plastic bag.

I took it out and removed the wrappings.

There, carefully folded, was a dark brown cotton garment, decorated with buttons. I unfolded it. It was the pair of shorts Mom had worn in the picture. The one that had started it all.

Ruth Ellen Gruber
September 2007
heute ab 20 Uhr
Klezmer
auf der Schillerstraße
Eintritt frei
I don’t remember ever hearing of the north German town of Flensburg until shortly before my recent trip there. But when I called a friend in Budapest and told him where I was going, he reacted immediately. “Oh, it’s a very famous place,” he said. “It’s home to the main computer of the German traffic police, the one that keeps track of everyone’s traffic violations and how many points you have to go before your license is taken away.”

So now I knew.

Flensburg is 120 kilometers almost due north of Hamburg, at the narrow tip of a fjord opening eastward into the Baltic Sea near the top end of Schleswig-Holstein, just below the Danish border.

I first traveled in this region when I was a child. It was 1959 and my father, an anthropologist, was on sabbatical in England. Our family took a trip, our first on the Continent, to visit a Danish colleague of his. Stopping in Brussels to tour the site
of the 1958 World’s Fair, we gawked at the “Atomium,” the Fair’s symbol, a massive and at that time ultra-contemporary tribute to the Atomic Age. (For years its schematic form would define the world’s vision of matter — so much so that, in the collective imagination, atoms looked like an agglomeration of spheres rigidly connected by tubing.) From Brussels, our nice Jewish family of five piled into our new Hillman station wagon and set off for Denmark. It was 14 years after the end of World War II, but the scars were still obvious. Back in London, great areas around St. Paul’s Cathedral were still swaths of rubble, and in France we had encountered building after building pockmarked by bullet holes.

My father did not want to stop in Germany. We left Brussels in the morning and just kept going — all day and, eventually, through the night. My brothers and I sprawled in the back, trying to sleep. Reaching Denmark at dawn, we stopped at the border post, showed our passports, and crossed out of Germany. I remember the sun coming up, a huge red ball in a clear summer sky. My father pulled the car over, got out, stretched his arms wide with the rising sun in front of him, then got back inside and went to sleep.

Now, decades later, I was going to Flensburg for a klezmer music concert, one of the stops on a German tour by the American klezmer group Brave Old World.

The trip was research for a book I’m writing on non-Jewish European interest in Jewish culture. Its working title is “Klezmer in the Wilderness.”* Looking at the map, I thought Flensburg

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* The book was published, in 2002, as Virtually Jewish: Reinventing Jewish Culture in Europe (Berkeley, University of California Press)
would be an appropriately out-of-the-way place to hear East European Jewish music.

I traveled from Berlin with Brave Old World’s sound man, Florian, a big, bearded man who, it turned out, came from Flensburg. He had even worked at the traffic police center — back in the late 1960s, before the facility was computerized. “My job was in the S’s and T’s,” Florian told me, as we sipped huge 5-mark paper cups of coffee in our comfortable Intercity train coach. “A lot of names began with those letters, so I saw all sorts of things, like people who got fined for trying to direct traffic when they were drunk.”

Florian had moved away from Flensburg nearly 30 years ago. Now he lives in Berlin, which he rather detests. As we crossed into Schleswig-Holstein after changing trains in Hamburg, he grew more expansive. He told me about Flensburg’s glory days as a great rum trading center and pointed out the raised boundaries of the flat local fields. Farmers form them by piling up stones at the edges of their holdings and covering them with earth, he explained. Trees and bushes then grow, serving as natural windbreaks, living fences called “knickie,” from the onomatopoetic word meaning to crack or break.

Midway between Hamburg and Flensburg we crossed a high iron railroad bridge over the man-made Kiel Canal, which cuts through the peninsula from the Baltic to the North Sea. To Florian, it was a symbolic as well as a physical boundary. “Whenever you go away from Schleswig-Holstein you have to pass through the tunnel under the River Elbe, or go over a bridge,” he said. “So I think the clocks work differently there. They’re slower. The world doesn’t open until you have passed that tunnel.”

Germany’s Klezmer Craze
“When I was a kid,” he said, “I would look over the Flensburger fjord to the Danish side, and I would think how exotic it must be there in Denmark, how different — like people in Berlin must have felt about the other side of the Wall. And then I got my first passport, and we crossed the border — and found that everything was almost the same. Nowadays, they usually don’t even check your passport at that crossing. I think this is how borders have to go everywhere.”

The Brave Old World concert took place in the St. Marien Church, a towered landmark whose foundations were laid in 1284, the year Flensburg was granted a city charter by Duke Waldemar IV of Schleswig. The four Americans played electronically amplified Yiddish music in front of a massive 16th-century altar whose carved and gilded woodwork framed a painting of the Last Supper. Front man Michael Alpert, sporting a dark pink shirt that perfectly matched the painted draperies in the picture, joshed with the crowd in Yiddish. Above, an enormous 15th-century crucifix hung suspended from the whitewashed, Gothic vaulted ceiling.

About 300 people of all ages filled rows of chairs set up in the nave. Brave Old World had played in Flensburg in 1994, as part of a month-long “Anne Frank weeks” program promoting multicultural brotherhood. This concert now was a follow-up, sponsored by local church organizations as well as by the city itself and a local society for “testimony and service among Jews and Christians.” In his introduction to the concert, a man from the church youth organization stressed the unifying significance of music, which “helps us discover the soul of others.”

Klezmer music is popular in Germany. American and other klezmer groups have toured regularly since the 1980s, and there
are dozens of homegrown German klezmer bands now, most made up of non-Jewish musicians. The interest has spawned klezmer workshops, klezmer festivals and klezmer societies; local groups put out their own CDs, and there is even a German klezmer site on the World Wide Web. Brave Old World’s CD notes have pointed out that Germany is one of the few countries where one can make a living playing Jewish music.

Many Germans, particularly of older generations, seem attracted to Yiddish music as a conscious means of Remembering, with a capital R: It’s part of the manifold process known euphemistically as “working through the past.” (One American klezmer friend speaks of his German gigs as “gelt for guilt.”) “Personally, I like the meeting of melancholy and very gay music — most people feel it in their hearts,” a woman of about 50 who plays in an amateur klezmer group in Berlin told me. “Sometimes I’m even a bit melancholy when I remember that the Germans did away with the culture of the Jews and destroyed the Jewish people. This is a tragedy for us. For us as a group, playing the music is a little bit thinking of the people who died because of our fathers — it allows the music to live again, prevents these wonderful songs from being lost.”

Her viewpoint is quite common, but many other Germans, particularly younger people, say they simply like the music. The twentysomething woman sitting next to me in Flensburg, who had bobbed and jived throughout the concert, certainly had nothing weighty on her mind. I asked her whether she felt it strange to hear this kind of music — I meant Jewish music — performed in a church. “It is sort of funny to hear a concert like this in a church,” she agreed. “You feel that you can’t really get up and dance...”
The morning after the concert I took a quick walk down Flensburg’s pedestrian main street, lined by elegant 18th-century facades. I threaded through crowds of shoppers, past fast food stalls overflowing with sauteed mushrooms, Thai noodles, fried potatoes, egg rolls, pizza, beer, and sausages of all descriptions. At the local tourist office on a side street near the fjord, I picked up a leaflet about the police traffic headquarters. An introduction thanked me for my interest in the Kraftfahrt-Bundesamt and informed me that the facility is the biggest employer in northern Schleswig-Holstein. At a stationer’s I bought some last-minute postcards. One, emblazoned with the message, “Greetings from Flensburg!” featured a photo taken from space of the earth, hanging in blackness, with a big arrow zooming in on Flensburg’s position.

On the same rack I found another card, which I also bought but didn’t send. It was a caricature of an old man in a Santa Claus suit. He had swarthy skin, a long, pointed nose, lascivious lips, a rapacious expression, a straggly beard, and what looked like earlocks. His shoulders were hunched up and he was greedily rubbing his hands. Above the Santa hat was a halo.
Niedostępne w wersji demonstracyjnej.

Zapraszamy do zakupu

pełnej wersji książki

w serwisie

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