

Dispatches from the Holocaust



letters From The Lost, by Helen Waldstein Wilkes (AU Press, \$24.95 and aupress.ca/index.php/books/120165)

Memories of our history hold us together as individuals, as families and as communities. When we forget who we have been, we remain unaware of who we are.

— *Helen Waldstein Wilkes*

In 1938, at the age of three, Helen Waldstein and her parents fled Europe for Canada, where they settled on a farm near Mount Hope.

Along with Helen's aunt and uncle, the Waldsteins learned how to operate a mixed farm, despite having no previous experience. The life they faced was not one they would have chosen, but as the only relatives of Helen's father to escape the Holocaust, they had no choice but to persevere.

Letters received from Helen's uncle in Europe focused on encouraging the family in the daunting work they were undertaking. Almost in passing, they mentioned the escalating deprivations inflicted upon the Jews in their country, and asked whether Helen's father had made any progress in helping them escape to Canada.

Almost every letter sends hugs and kisses to "dear little Helly" so sadly missed. As for "Helly," she was happy on the farm, loved by everyone she knew. Her parents, never close adherents of a synagogue, in a desire that their daughter grow up "Canadian," sent her with friends to the United Church of Canada, where she became an enthusiastic member of the CGIT (Canadian Girls in Training). Helen learned details about the lives of her European family as she and her mother pored over their precious photo album; but her parents never spoke to her of the increasing privations these people were so bravely enduring. All these letters from afar were consigned to a cardboard box that young Helen regarded as "Father's Box," not to be touched. Not until she was 60 did she summon the courage to open the box.

Helen's life was forever changed by what those letters revealed. Eventually she began to write the appalling chronicle of the various deprivations and persecutions experienced by her aunts, uncles and cousins during Hitler's regime. At the same time, the author has her own story of her reactions to the letters, quoting from them to reinforce or explain what she discovered about her extended family. Inspired by the emotions the letters aroused, Helen travelled to Europe in search of news of her lost relatives and began to identify with her Jewish heritage.

As we read this amazing book, we are enlightened concerning the plight of the Jews under the Nazis. We become emotionally involved, sharing their feelings of misery, while marvelling at their bravery and resilience in the face of cruel, senseless and ever-increasing deprivation. We all know about the Holocaust, but Helen Waldstein Wilkes involves us so that we relate to these victims as though they might be our own family or friends.

Do read this fascinating book.

A postscript: When little Helly arrived at the farm near Mount Hope, I was a Grade 4 pupil at Adelaide Hoodless Public School in Hamilton. Many of my classmates were Jewish children from reasonably comfortable families like my own, and we studied piano with the same teacher. We had Jewish neighbours on both sides, so all my early playmates were Jewish. Each summer, I looked forward to the arrival from Montreal of the grandchildren of the Jewish family across the street. I well remember the day the War with Germany ended, when I was in Grade 9.

Only when I read this gripping story, did I wonder if the parents of my Jewish friends, like Helly's, had been receiving heart-rending letters from their families, imploring them to help get them out of Hitler's Europe. And what about that boy who joined us in Grade 10, the only poor Jew in my experience? We should have been kinder to him.

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