The Secrets My Mother Kept

Author: *Elana Milman*

Category: Historical

Description: One fateful choice changed their lives forever.

Germany, 1946. Still picking up the pieces in the aftermath of World War II, Franka and her infant daughter Danka hastily leave their home in Helmstadt and make their way to the displaced persons camp in Bergen-Belsen.

Against all odds, Franka narrowly survived the liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto, only to leave the man who sheltered her for a desperate attempt to track down the remnants of her Jewish family. She knows not to expect much, yet in her heart, she still clings to the hope that some of them are waiting for her among the thousands of survivors looking to start their lives anew.

But it’s not what Franka is leaving behind that will change her fate—it’s what she is heading towards.

Israel, 1976. Since she was six years old, Elana Rosenfeld felt like an outsider. Adopted by a childless couple when she was just thirteen months old, she knew nothing of her birth parents, their origins—and hers. But whenever she asks her adoptive parents for answers, she always gets the same response: “When you grow up, you’ll know.”

Then, a letter arrives at the kibbutz carrying an unfamiliar name, sending Elana on a worldwide search after all the secrets her mother kept.

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O n an autumn morning in 1975, I was lying down in our room on the hill in Kibbutz Merhavia, a few steps from my parents' room, where I had spent my childhood. For the past week I had lain in bed all the time, getting up only for the bathroom and shower, carefully safeguarding the fruit of my belly, which was scheduled to see the light of day in May. I spent the days reading and thinking. I had just finished a book about a mentally challenged child named Todd. It was a fascinating account by two researchers, Glen Doman and Carl Delcatto on how to improve Todd's quality of life by means of a method they had developed. Influenced by the book, I repeatedly hoped that the child growing in my womb would be born healthy and whole. A determined decision echoed in my head: not to give up my right as his mother, and the mother of his two siblings, to let them know what genetic heritage I was passing on to them.

It was 3:45 in the afternoon – the hour that in normal times I would go out after a short midday rest to pick up the children from the children's house. I would take them either to the playground, to visit their grandparents, or for a tour of the barn and chicken coop. On that day I'd arranged with Dubi, my husband, to take our seven-year-old daughter Shani and four-year-old son Shafi for a walk. I knew that my parents would be arriving any minute. My heart raced with excitement when I heard their footsteps nearing the door. My mother came in first, carrying a bowl of fruit. She asked how I was and went straight to the small kitchen. The "kitchen" was in the corner of a porch that was closed in with two sliding windows, creating a kind of narrow nook with a sink and a tiny bit of marble, with barely enough room for a cutting board and a kettle.

"Would you like me to make you a fruit salad, or just cut the fruit up onto a plate?" she asked, her voice coming from beyond the open window frame.

“I’d love a fruit salad,” I answered hastily from the double bed that was wedged into the narrow passage between the living room and the shower. My thinking was to buy some time, because today it was happening – today I was going to break the silence.

My father sat at the foot of the bed and stroked my hand that was sticking out from under the blanket. “How are you feeling, Nanchik? Have you had anything to eat today? Do you want something to drink?”

“I’m fine – just passing the time, reading, and enjoying the peace and quiet.”

My father glanced at the book that was lying next to me and picked it up with hands that were lined with prominent, dark blue veins. His rough fingers flipped through the pages as if trying to figure out the gist of the story. “So who’s this Todd?” he asked.

“A child born intellectually challenged, and thanks to the determination of his mother and his devoted family, he became a lifelong project for two doctors who believed in a treatment method that included physical exercise. They set up an intensive treatment program, which included therapists and volunteer aides working in shifts. Together they managed to better Todd’s quality of life and improve his functioning.”

I saw this as an opportunity to get to the question I had always wanted to ask but hadn’t dared. “You know, what intrigues me the most about the book is the conflict of his parents, knowing they have passed on a defect to their child, one they can’t change. What was most exciting for me is that out of their terrible frustration, they turned the world upside down and found a way to help him.”

I was still talking when my mother came in with the fruit salad. I thanked her and asked her to take a chair and join us. With trembling hands, she handed me the plate.

I had been noticing the tremors for some time; apparently they were a side effect of the anti-depressants she was taking. I remembered them from childhood when she

would be away from home. They told me she was in HaEmek Hospital in Afula, although I never knew exactly why. I'll never forget how my father and I once hiked from the kibbutz to the hospital, a half hour's walk on a dirt road. From the hospital gate we turned down a path to a lawn with trees and a wooden bench. I saw my mother sitting there in a dressing gown and slippers and was incredibly surprised. If she was sick, why was she in the garden? And if she was in the garden, why was she wearing a robe and pajamas?

I had seen her in pajamas only a few times, usually when I went to my parents' room on wintry Saturday mornings and got into their warm bed. Usually my father would be the one to stay in bed. Mother would get up early, and by the time I arrived she would often be preparing a quick breakfast.

A short time before I got pregnant for the third time, she seemed somewhat apathetic and her speech was slower. Her eyes glistened, and her face was swollen. She gained weight and lumbered heavily on the kibbutz paths. Despite her condition, she made sure to get to her job as a seamstress every day. She would walk from their room in the new housing area in front of the dining room, cross the large courtyard, and go into the sewing room in the building with the arches – the room that everyone called "The Big House" (a house with a square yard that survived from the first cooperative period in 1911, when Jewish settlement in the Jezreel Valley began).

"You know, Mom," I said, "I was just telling Dad about a boy named Todd, the main character in this book I'm reading, and I thought to myself that I actually don't know anything about the genes I inherited. You already have two beautiful grandchildren, and a third one on the way. What I want the most for the baby and for all of us is to know where I came from. Who was my birth mother?" There was silence in the room.

This time, I wasn't giving up, I promised myself. I won't settle for the clichéd answer, "When you grow up, you'll know." I already am grown up, and I don't know.

I continued, “You probably both remember – when I was nine years old, during the 1956 Sinai war and in the stark days before the war – that you said that if something happened to you both, there was an important document for me in the dresser drawer. I never found anything there. What was it?”

My mother broke the oppressive silence. I will never forget the way she looked down and not directly at me…and said in a quivering, acerbic voice, “Her name is Franka Lewinska. You were born on January 17, 1947.”

My father’s face went pale and he jerked his upper torso towards her with a surprised, anxious look. Then he turned to me with sadness in his eyes and a loving smile and stroked the back of my hand. “So now, finally, you know,” he said softly.

I stared at them both – frozen, almost paralyzed – and was barely able to comprehend what I had just heard. My mother went to the kitchen and brought out a glass of water. She sat sipping from it, her hands shaking uncontrollably. My father took the glass from her. He put his hand on her knee, the one touching his own, in an intimate, moving gesture. My parents almost never showed affection for each other in my presence. This was a supportive, respectful moment from him. Mother looked into my eyes, took a deep breath and whispered, “The woman who handed you over to me at Haifa Port gave me a note with her name and your date of birth. You were born in Germany.”

Not for nothing did she say “her” name.” I was her only daughter, about to give birth to her third grandchild. In a few months it will be 28 years since the day she first held me in her arms and wept with joy right there, at the Haifa Port. All those years she had harbored the fear that one day her happiness would end, that one day Franka would come and find me…

My mother and father, March 1932

On the morning of March 18, 1932, a group of girls got off the Emek train, which was heading from the Haifa Port to the town of Afula. They disembarked as “tourists” after a long, wearying voyage on the Dacia, a dilapidated ship. These young women, members of the “Pioneer Movement,” had come filled with the burning desire to help build the Land of Israel in the agricultural outposts of the Jewish settlement. After spending their first night at Kibbutz Merhavia, some of them continued on to Petah Tikva, where they would remain while waiting to settle in Kibbutz Neve Eitan in the Beit Shean Valley. Hulda was among them. A few hours earlier, when they spotted the shoreline crowned by the Carmel Mountains, they hurried to change their clothes from the arduous journey and put on the attractive dresses they’d packed specially for the exhilarating meeting with veteran pioneers from the city who were to greet them at the Afula train station and take them to spend the night on the kibbutz. Many of the girls, if not all, hoped to find among the young men who greeted them “the one” with whom they would build a family in their old-new homeland.

In her small cabin on the ship, Hulda took great care in getting ready for the meeting. She applied a few drops of scented oil to her thick black hair and combed it back, gathering the strands into a neat, symmetrical circle that was formed modestly at the nape of her neck. She stood erect, showing off her lovely figure; her smile revealed a row of white teeth that accentuated her dark skin and intense brown eyes. Impressive and attractive, she moved gracefully on the soil of the valley along with her excited friends. Three young men approached. Her eyes were drawn to the shortest of the three. He looked familiar, but his clothing and appearance had undergone a significant change since the day she had met him in Yaroslavl, and that led her to doubt if it was indeed he. As she got closer, she recognized the high forehead and black hair. His face was tanned and his body firm. He wore black work boots and the cuffs of his brown trousers were tucked inside them. A white shirt was casually stuffed into his pants top, the sleeves rolled up to the elbow. He held a small brown notebook in his hand.

Hulda looked away for a moment to ask her friend Roshka if she, too, recognized the short young man. Suddenly she heard him call her name. “Hulka?” And when she turned back around, he was standing in front of her.

“Hulka Steinbach?” he asked.

“Yes. You know me?” she said.

“You remember me? Six years ago, just before I emigrated, there was a big conference of youth movements in Yaroslavl. We met there and exchanged addresses, but we didn’t have a chance to see each other again before I left.”

Hulda restrained herself from bursting out and telling him that she had always hoped to see him again. Her heart was pounding; she couldn’t believe he was standing there in front of her. “Yes, I remember you,” she answered, feeling her cheeks turning red.

Eliezer Rosenfeld (the short young man) did his best to make Hulda’s stay in Merhavia pleasant that night. His efforts were rewarded by her decision to remain on the kibbutz where he was, and not to join the group of girls who continued their journey. Love blossomed in both their hearts, and within a short time they moved into a tent together. They had to share their tent, however, with young men called “primus” in the local jargon, named for the portable cooking and heating stove. The “Primos” were single men who, due to the limited living facilities, had to live with the pair of lovers and be ‘as if not there’ during the couples’ love-making in the darkness of the tent.

My mother was considered lucky. Her friends were jealous of the love that was rekindled the moment she set foot on the soil of Eretz Israel.

The lives of the young pioneers on the kibbutz were turbulent and exciting. During the day they worked, and every evening they planned the next day’s work. The

evening culminated in group singing and exuberant dancing of the hora. Many love stories were born around the campfire and in the threshing fields. Hulda applied to be a “ havera ” – member of the kibbutz – and within seven months she was accepted with full and equal rights. Her life was full of activity, sharing in the building of the kibbutz with manual labor. Bursting with idealism and a desire to contribute, she volunteered to help build roads and clear stones from the fields. The work was difficult and tiring, even for men who were much stronger. After a short time, she was assigned to the vegetable garden and the makeshift chicken coop set up in the center of the large central yard.

In her first years there, Hulda didn’t have a permanent position. At harvest time she was sent to work in the vineyard, and for a short period she took care of small children. Only after several years went by did she find her rightful place when she joined the seamstress unit that made clothing for the kibbutz children. Joining the sewing group was the closing of a circle for her. After several years of excruciatingly hard labor, she had returned to sewing, a vocation she had studied for three years when she was younger.

Her first years on the kibbutz had been difficult for her, especially getting used to the hectic schedule and manual labor, particularly during the summer’s scorching heat in the Jezreel Valley, where the temperature could soar to 43° C. Everyone’s workday – for both men and women – began at sunrise, and after a midday meal, they rested in their small rooms that had no toilets and no showers. In her first six years in Eretz Israel, she sometimes wondered if it was all worth it. Her days of training in Poland hadn’t prepared her for the austere lifestyle, the uncomfortable living conditions, the extreme heat, and the mosquitoes – all of which sapped her strength. She was reluctant to complain in front of her friends and to her new husband, who was considered a seasoned veteran. Twelve years of pioneering had smoothed his memories and obliterated any nostalgia for the home he’d left behind.

After six years, Hulda and Eliezer were told that their new home on the hill – one

apartment out of five units in a small building – had reached the final stages of construction. That day, despite the oppressive heat, she felt hope and optimism for the first time. She didn't manage to nap and waited impatiently for the time to pass, visualizing the moment when they would go up the hill to see the apartment. A feeling of well-being and rejuvenation nestled in her heart, even though none of the eight new buildings on the hill had bathrooms or toilets, just a sink for brushing teeth on a small side porch. These were one-room apartments with two air directions, and used for both living and "entertaining." Bathrooms and toilets were in the two public buildings built on both sides of the hill – north and south.

In the weeks remaining before they could move into the new apartment, she often pondered the meaning of the word "home." Her thoughts wandered to her childhood in the town of Rava-Ruska in Poland in the good old days, before the disastrous death of her mother when she was a child. To celebrate the Jewish holidays, her parents, Yosef and Sara Steinbach, would take the family on picnics and sit around a table laden with goodies. The children played under the table or in the nearby grove. On vacations, they would go to the nearby city of Yaroslavl to visit her Aunt Gittel (her father's sister) who, with her husband, Yoel Graf, was raising a large family. The Grafs lived in a big, comfortable house suitable for a family of nine children: David, Hulka, Bella, Rivka, Shunio, Hankah, Asher, Shankah, and Shmuel – her beloved cousins. She often told me about the games of hide and seek in the many rooms and hidden nooks in the attic, about how the girls would dress up in her aunt's fancy clothes, and the delicious meals around the huge table in the dining room.

In those early, happy years, my mother couldn't have imagined that before reaching puberty she would find herself as the tenth child in Aunt Gittel's house. Her father, Yosef, was a successful textile merchant, who was often away from home, and her mother, Sarah, ran the household by herself. When she was about nine years old, her mother died after a long illness. During the mourning period, her father went to live in Yaroslavl and split his children up in their different aunts' homes. When he'd return from his travels, he'd gather his children at his house for the weekends. Soon,

however, he remarried and started a new family. At that point, my mother told me, the visits to his house became less and less frequent, until they almost stopped.

Soon after she went to live with the Graf family, my mother suffered one of the worst traumas of her life. As a polite, well-educated girl, she wanted to help around the house and one day tried to light the fire in the kerosene stove. When she bent over, her beautiful black braid unwound and caught on fire. Her aunt, who was busy nearby preparing for Shabbat, threw a towel over her head to smother the flames. The stench of burning hair filled the space. My mother's face was untouched, but the experience was ingrained in her for all time.

During my childhood, I noticed that my mother never had a gas stove in the house, but her fear of fire didn't stop her from making the various foods that I liked, especially the cakes and cookies. My father would carefully ladle the batter for her cakes into a "wonder pot" (a baking pan with a cone-shaped hole in the center), and place it on the kerosene wick in the shower area (there were no gas or electric stoves in the kibbutz members' rooms at the time). My mother would stay out of there while the fire was burning. On the counter in their kitchenette was a round, electric hot plate with spirals, on which she would cook and fry our food.

I also loved the " tzuker liakach " cake, made with sugar and eggs, that she baked for Shabbat. Already at the door you could detect the aroma that heralded Friday night dinner. I also loved her coconut cake with chocolate chips, the traditional strudel made with thin dough, and the " makagigi " almond brittle that she and my father made together. The preparation of the brittle and the kneading of the dough for the apple strudel required the coordination and precise planning of those involved in its making – who does what and when. I remember that there was tension between my parents at those moments; my father was a perfectionist and gave my mother orders, admonished her, and sometimes even scolded her. Mother was offended, but continued helping.

My favorite dish of all was her special soft-boiled egg dish. She would bring the water to a boil in the kettle and put the fitted wooden board that my father had made on top of it, in place of a lid. Then she would add a cube of butter to the pot. When the butter started bubbling, she poured in the raw eggs, stirring continuously until the egg hardened on the sides. Even today, years after her death, I continue to make "Grandma Hulda's soft-boiled egg dish" for my children and grandchildren, who ask me to make it for them every now and then.

My father never spoke about his parents' home or his childhood. The little I knew was from what he said off-handedly, talking about his days as a member of the "Hashomer Hatzair" youth movement in Jaroslavl. He talked about the heated debates involving the activities and visions of aliyah (immigration), about his training period before coming to the Land of Israel and, of course, about what he went through after he arrived in 1926 (in the fourth wave of aliyah) as a young man in Palestine/Eretz Israel.

My father was the eldest son of Shoshana and Moshe Rosenfeld. He was born on February 12, 1906, in the city of Turka in Poland. His parents weren't natives of the area and probably came to the city in the south-east of the country just before he was born. The proximity of the settlement to the Hungarian border, and the first railway line, which arrived there in 1903, turned Turka into a bustling city, with three separate enclaves: Jewish, local ethnic Christian, and the Polish nobility.

Eliezer immigrated from Turka with a Shomer Hatzair group and for several months was housed at the Jidro tent encampment near Kurdani, a British military outpost in the Krayot area outside of Haifa. From there he moved with some of his comrades to Bat Galim on Haifa Bay and joined a group of about 60 "shmutznikim" – that's what they called the members of the Hashomer Hatzair Movement – young pioneers from Galicia who came to Israel as early as the Third Aliyah (1920 – 1922) and went to where there was work, going from Tel Aviv to Kiryat Anavim, Zichron Ya'akov, Neveh Sha'anan, and to the Jidro pioneer camp at Bat Galim. They worked at

building roads and housing, dredging the Kishon River, and doing other odd jobs while they waited impatiently for the moment when they could begin to build kibbutzim.

Meir Ya'ari, the historical , ideological leader of Hashomer Hatza'ir, spearheaded the decision to accept the proposal of the settlement institutions to establish a kibbutz in the cooperative at Merhavia, as the first one in the Jezreel Valley. Anyone wanting to join had to submit an application. After six months and a vote, he was formally accepted as a member of the Merhavia group. In March 1927, my father also applied for membership. Along with him, about 20 other members of his group applied, and in September 1927 they were all accepted. Two years later, at the end of the second holiday of the New Year, on September 20, 1929, members and guests gathered at Merhavia with Avraham Herzfeld (head of the Mapai Party) for the ground-breaking ceremony.

The first years at Merhavia were challenging and exhausting. My father said that they had "little sleep and much work," although he never complained or felt a longing for his parents' home in Poland. He kept up correspondence with them, urging them to come. His efforts bore fruit when in 1933 his younger sister, Henia, arrived to take part in a training program, and was sent to a kibbutz on the Haifa Bay. After a short time, Henia, who was two years younger than my father, parted from her friends when she decided to go to work and save money to help pay for the immigration of her parents and her younger sister, Sima. So in 1934, a year after Henia's arrival, my grandparents, Moshe and Shoshana Rosenfeld, immigrated to Israel with their youngest daughter, Sima. (Binyamin, Sima's older brother, enlisted in the Polish army and they lost track of him; he apparently perished in World War II). After a provisional year, my father's parents were accepted as members of the Kfar Yehoshua settlement in the western Jezreel Valley, and they were allocated a plot of land for a house. A favorite story of my father's was how he loaded planks and tools onto a horse and cart and rode together with his friends to build the house for his parents at Kfar Yehoshua.

My father was always close with his family, and we often hosted them at the kibbutz or visited them at Kfar Yehoshua. Sometimes my cousin Sarah would come to the kibbutz by herself, and my parents and I were very happy to have her. When we were older, she told me that she especially loved the dining room and the kibbutz holidays that were always celebrated in a special way – and that she knew nothing about my being adopted.

My father's family had escaped the Nazis just in time, but although he was close to his parents, he wasn't at all nostalgic and rarely spoke about his early life in Poland. Once, after a soccer match on the kibbutz, he told me that he had been an excellent soccer player for his school's team.

The world of music had an especially important place in his life. He played the mandolin, violin, and guitar. He also sang very well, his tenor voice blending in with the kibbutz choir. When I was older, I joined him in the choir, and I remember how he smiled when I had solos. As a child, I mostly listened to classical music coming from the radio receiver in my parents' room – which was my introduction to the great composers: Bach, Vivaldi, Mozart, Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, Ravel, and Khachaturian.

My parents' radio was a rectangular wooden box covered with a glossy varnish. On school holidays I would go to their room, listen to radio programs, and dance to the classical music, moving around, imagining that I was on a stage, enchanted by the magical sounds and dreaming of becoming a prima ballerina.

On the kibbutz, my father's skills as a shoemaker were immediately put into use. From the day he arrived, he was assigned to work as a shoemaker. Even after eventually moving to work in the vineyard and orchards, he always came back to the shoemaker shop during the rainy winter days or when there was an urgent need for more shoes before the change of seasons. Towards winter, there was a demand for high-top shoes with laces, and with the arrival of spring, sandals were needed.

I loved visiting him in the shoe shop, where the smell of glue and leather was intoxicating. My father would put a stool next to him for me to sit on, and I would help him apply the light-colored leather soles before fastening them to the lower heel. From a square wooden table, he took wooden nails pointed at one end and cone-shaped at the other. He held the nails between his lips, just as he had learned from his own father.

In his right hand he held a round, iron hammer with a wooden handle, and with his left he took the nails out of his mouth one by one and banged them into the holes on the edges of the sole. He pounded and pounded in a continuous tempo like musical accompaniment – three beats…and a pause. I loved the magical moment when he removed the shoe from the mat after it had dried; it always reminded me of the story of the dwarves who worked all night to surprise the poor cobbler in the morning. From leftover scraps of leather, my father made me a case for the stones of the " hamesh avanim " (five stones) game that Israeli children played. I have it to this day, along with the hole puncher and the wooden ruler he used for measuring.

On school vacations I would go out to the vineyard with him, where he patiently taught me how to pick grapes and pack the clusters in a crate in perfect order. I also spent many hours with him in the deciduous trees orchard, which was on the northeast side of the farm. Those hours are engraved in my heart. Every morning, when he went to work, he slung over his shoulders a khaki coat with deep pockets on the sides and smaller ones sewn on the chest area. He was pedantic – a lover of order and cleanliness. Everything had its place, and every object its proper spot so he could find whatever he needed without having to look for it. I learned how to prune trees so that the area around them would be ventilated and open, their branches bending at eye level from the center outwards. I helped him take out "pigs" (soft, unruly branches that grew around the trunk), which dared to burst out of the soil. I even served as his "right-hand man" while he was doing his "grafting," and later he taught me the whole process. We went out to the orchard early in the morning, looking at the drops of dew glistening on the leaves with the flash of the sun's first rays, coloring them a

multitude of shades. The fresh, clean morning smell reaching our noses was so different from the routinely suffocating dust that settled on us later in the day. I inhaled the scent of grass mixed with the night humidity that perfumed the air with its unique aroma. The morning inhalation of the blending of dew and the dust of leaves on tufts of soil is something that can only be treasured and preserved..

On the way to the peach tree that was marked with white tape, Father explained to me that grafting is done when you want to expand the tree's variety of fruit, or when the tree has dried up, and on its stable trunk you graft the same variety. When we reached the tree, he bent down and spread a sheet of cloth at his feet to cover the clumps of earth that were soaked with moisture from the night's wet chill. From his coat pocket he took out a "surgical" kit that was rolled up in a leather pouch that he'd made for himself in the shoemaker's shop. It had pockets for each item to be used in the grafting work.

From his other pocket he took out a several small branches that he had pruned the day before and kept in the cooling hut next to the packing shed. He spread them side by side on the cloth bed below, arranged the sharp knives, the dressing, the ointment, the bags, and the plastic tags on which he would write the date of the graft and then hang them on the branch with string.

"Now we're ready," he said. "First, I feel the barrel, the branch where I'll graft the small branches," he explained to me as he carefully made a vertical slit so that the core of the branch was exposed under the bark. "Second, I rub the end of the rider branch and put it on the core, three inches above the sharpened point. Then I attach the rider to the barrel so that core touches core. . . Come here and hold the branch tightly, and I'll wrap the dressing around it." I watched his nimble, skillful hands and thought of Bilha the nurse, who had bandaged my injured knee.

"Does it hurt the tree? Does it cry?" I asked in childish innocence.

“You know, sometimes when I check the grafting site, I see a few drops of sap on the ground,” he answered, and then asked me, “What do you think?”

“Yes, it cries. We just don’t hear it. The tree is alive, only it doesn’t know how to speak.”

When he finished tying the dressing, he took out a flat stick and applied black paste where he made the cut. Then he covered it all with an inside-out bag, tied a ribbon on the bottom, and put on a marking tag. “Now they’re going to sleep for a month in the dark and humidity. When they wake up, we’ll remove the bag and find that the branch is blooming.”

In this enchanting orchard, with its many varieties of apple, plum, peach, and pear trees, I had my first taste of fresh fruits picked straight from the tree. I learned to recognize the treetops in all seasons and I knew the strange names: Kelsey, Red Delicious, Santa Rosa, Green Apples, Golden Delicious, Jonathan, and others.

The many hours I spent with my father, who would explain, describe, teach, and sing to me, often seemed to me to complement, even compensate, for my mother’s withdrawn nature. She spoke less and was a quiet, passive person, doing only what was needed. My father always helped her, turning things on and off, and making sure that everything was clean and tidy and in the right place. She was a good worker in the seamstress shop and her production was satisfactory. Others made the cut and the pieces of fabric, and she sat and sewed. She always obeyed, didn’t disturb, did what she was told…

I always felt that my mother spent her life in the kibbutz “alongside” reality. Everyday life in the Jezreel Valley was different from the way she grew up and was educated. You could see that she was dissatisfied, frustrated, and resentful. Her actions and behavior merely hinted – not explicitly, but silently – “This is not what I prayed for.” Status on the kibbutz went according to a hierarchy of “excellence”

dictated by members' opinions and work assignments. Everything was based on volunteerism and conformity, but a discerning eye could identify the pushers – i.e., the ambitious ones – who actually ran things. Sometimes it was clear that the "game" was fixed in advance.

The highlights of my mother's dull routine were visits from her family. Six of the 10 cousins she grew up with made their way to Israel, like her, before the Second World War. More than once my parents had guests who arrived unannounced at the kibbutz gates. The joy at their arrival was great, and the house was always ready for them, neat and clean with the aroma of freshly baked goods. No one ever left our home empty-handed. Dad always took the trouble to pack a carton of pecans ahead of time from the huge tree in the garden, or prepare a basket of seasonal fruits. Sometimes he would arrange a bouquet of flowers for them from the garden. The most beautiful gift of all was a bottle of the wine that he made himself (often with my help) in the makeshift "winery" under the house. He was a man of many talents, and he imparted many of his skills to me…with great love.

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C ommunal living for children was customary at Kibbutz Merhavia, as it was in other kibbutzim in the Hashomer Hatza'ir movement. It wasn't just spending the night ? it was also shared activities during most of the day. The children lived their lives in the framework of the children's house rather than in the family home with their parents. This was a central feature of the daily reality on the kibbutz, reflecting the movement's principles of ideological equality.

The children's entire lives unfolded there. We did everything together and spent time supervised by the teachers and caregivers who worked in the children's house. At that time, children's house workers didn't have to go through any professional training – and as children, we absorbed everything, both the good and the bad. We visited our parents in the afternoons for approximately two to four hours. In the evenings they would bring us back to the children's house. Our children's house was called "The Big House" because it was a three-story building; each floor housed a group of toddlers who were born in the same year.

My early childhood coincided with Israel's formative years: the absorption of a huge wave of immigration, together with a policy of austerity. Food was rationed. In cities where a black market thrived, basic items like eggs, meat, and fish were very hard to come by. In the agricultural settlements, where there was livestock and orchards, the situation was slightly less difficult, but even our food was rationed. We children were made to finish every bit of food allocated to us in carefully measured amounts. We received our meals from the children's kitchen, often with some delectable additions specially prepared for us. I wasn't a very good eater, however, and sometimes I would linger at the table for a long time until breakfast was over, which often led to punishment; usually this happened when I had hidden bits of egg in my hand, until one of the substitute caregivers gave up on me and threw the egg discreetly into the

trash.

Gitka, the nursery teacher, was strict with all of us. Sometimes, with both her hands she would shake the shoulders of whichever of the children was driving her crazy. She would purse her lips and snarl, “I will take the evil out of your heart!” Fortunately, Gitka never accused me of being evil-hearted, but I remember that she sometimes called me “ shiksa ” (a non-Jewish female), a word whose meaning I didn’t understand then. I always got an earful from her; she would call me “ hishuk ” (chubby), and sometimes, in the yard, she would grab my plump cheeks (back then, they were called “ feyskalach ”) and glare at me with a half-smile of distrust mixed with admiration.

Gitka had significant influence as our teacher in the children’s house, but thanks to my father I learned to stand up to her. One evening I went back from my parents’ room to get ready for bed at the usual time (our bedtime was 8:00). I ran up the stairs with my father trailing behind me, then stood at the door and proudly announced: “Today, I’m going to teach everybody a Yiddish song that my dad taught me.” All the children gathered around me, and I began to sing excitedly:

“Zeh zeh zeh zeingen, zeh zeh zeh zeingen A zimerl, a zimerl: Lekhem iz broyt, buser un dugim Vekhol mat’amim” (Come, let’s sing, come, let’s sing a little song, a little song – bread is bread, meat and fish of all kinds)

Before I could finish, Gitka let out a nasty chuckle and said, “We sing ‘lomer ale zeingen’ and not ‘zeh zeh zeh zeingen.’” I gasped for breath, blushed, and stopped singing. My father stood behind me, stroking my hair and he whispered in my ear, “Keep going, you sing beautifully.” I leaned against him as he held both my hands, and I sang the whole song from beginning to end. From that day on, I never stopped singing and playing the harmonica, an instrument my father taught me. On summer evenings we would sit on the steps at the entrance to my parents’ room, where my father taught me to play the flute and the ocarina (a small, wide, plastic flute). When I

started to learn to play the recorder with the teacher Shlomit, I had no trouble producing accurate, musical tones.

There were four children in each room in the children's house. We weren't biological siblings; we simply were born in the same year. We spent time there together, woke up together, got dressed together, ate together, bathed together, played together, explored together, and slept together. Until school age, we had creative activities and played in the sandbox every morning. In the summer we swam in the swimming pool almost every day. Sometimes we flooded the sandbox with water and waded in bathing suits in the mud, building castles and sand cakes on the concrete rim. We often walked around the kibbutz, going to the barn and chicken coop, to the scrap yard outside the blacksmith shop, and we would also go outside of the kibbutz – to Givat HaMoreh "Hill," and to the tracks of the Emek train that had already been partially dismantled, and then on to the sugar factory, to the Merhavia Moshav, the olive vineyard, the grape vines and the orchard. We got to know every tree and bush in our surroundings; we followed the birds, insects, and butterflies, and we knew wild flowers by their names as we walked to "our hill" – a hill beyond the chicken coop fence in the moshav area, where we religiously tracked the changes in vegetation in the various seasons. In those days, people would pick bouquets of anemones and cyclamen until they began to be scarce. The decision to protect them by law returned the spectacular bloom to the fields of the valley.

In my parents' house, I had a little corner to play in. It had a small iron bed where my rag doll lay covered with the tattered blanket my mother had made for her, and there was a small carriage for my "fancy" doll in her hat and dress. I danced around with my dolls and whispered secrets to them. I loved my parents' room on the hill. On winter evenings my father and I would play chess, dominoes, patience, and other games. As we children got older, we saw our parents less, and we preferred to spend time with the other children, even in the afternoons on the playground, on the grass, or in the dining room. In the late 1950s, the eight houses on the hill were renovated. Each apartment had an additional modest bathroom and shower, a gas water heater,

toilets, and a sink. No more walking out of the communal showers clean ? and right into the mud and dust…

Every evening we returned with the parents for “lying-down time” at the children’s house. Kibbutz rules forbade sleeping in the parents’ house, and our parents went along with this “educational” law. We put on pajamas and said goodbye to our parents at the door, sometimes in tears. The “the lying down” nanny would read us a story as we sat around small tables or lay in our beds, straining our ears to hear the nanny who sat in the hallway between the rooms, or at the end of the corridor so that everyone could hear. The parents went to meetings of the various committees, to organize the work assignments, or assign a team for the holidays, or they would go to the members’ club room, or back to their own rooms. Only rarely were we children asleep when the story was over.

Instead, we waited for the moment when the nanny would close the door behind her. As soon as we heard her footsteps moving away, it was time to run “wild” with the pranks we played every night, according to well-known rules of the game. The “lookout” was a boy who was stationed by the door; his job was to look out the window and give a warning signal if he saw someone coming. On the days we didn’t play games together, we would keep talking until we fell asleep.

Children who couldn’t sleep well had a difficult time, as they didn’t receive any help or comforting. One option was to cry and call the night guardian; the second option was to cry under their blanket and not call for help; and the third was to wake up a girlfriend or boyfriend and talk a little. And there was a fourth option: to crawl under a friend’s blanket and sleep there together until morning with the intention of getting back in your own bed before the nanny arrived. The last option was to run to the parents’ room and get into their bed.

The guard post was in the babies’ house, which was far from the big children’s house. A child who couldn’t fall asleep, or who woke up frightened, would try to relax and

seek comfort. The calculations were usually made based on his and his friends' past experiences. Sometimes it took a long time until the night guardian arrived, from the moment of the call that was sometimes made by a friend who woke up and went outside to call her in the cold, or the dark, silent night, hoping that she would hear and come to help. Sometimes she didn't come at all, and when she did arrive, she would shine her flashlight and follow the voice until she focused the beam of light directly on the crying child's face, thereby blinding his narrowed eyes, which radiated distress. The moment of this encounter determined the fate of the child's night's sleep. If she was a gentle night watchman, she would sit down next to him, caress and soothe him until he fell asleep. If he were unlucky, he would be scolded with the well-known saying: "What are you afraid of? Turn around to the wall and go to sleep. I have other children to take care of."

The biggest shame was bedwetting. All the events of the night were sent in a written report to the teacher. Whatever was chosen for help in times of distress, either consciously or out of necessity, the humiliation was worse: to wake up in fear and be afraid of the unknown reaction of the night watchman (who changed every week). The obligation to report everything was the first of the Ten Commandments in the Shomer Hatzair movement. The reports created anxiety and fear. We were put in a position of helplessness in the face of what was expected of us, even though it was due to behavior beyond our control and was certainly not our fault. Words like "It's all right," "It's okay to be afraid," "It's okay to wet the bed," "It happens," "It'll pass," or "We'll change the sheets and pajamas so that you're dry and comfortable" – were words that were never uttered. A caress and a hug from comforting hands were also absent on such nights.

Until the age of six, I don't remember waking up at night by myself. Sometimes I woke up hearing others crying and looking at them compassionately through the slit of the blanket in their heart-wrenching struggle, or else I chose to be the one calling for help in the night lit by the sidewalk lamp. When I was school age, I remember summer nights when I ran to my parents' room in my pajamas. I wanted to be close to

them rather than be at the mercy of an unfamiliar caretaker. It took a lot of courage to run up the hill (about 270 meters) in the dark. When I arrived at their door – panting and out of breath – I sometimes stopped and sat on the steps at the entrance, hesitating whether to go inside or go back, going over the possible repercussions in my head: If I stay the night with them, would they take me back in the early morning to my bed before the nanny comes, or would they immediately return me to the children's home – an option I liked less. This nightly exercise in courage usually ended with the first option – getting into their bed, then getting up and being accompanied by one of my parents to sneak back into my bed in the children's room before the nanny's wake-up time, something that bound us together as accomplices in an agreed-upon "crime."

We knew it was wrong to break the "educational law" when we sought the warmth of our parents' closeness at night. I went through a period when I would wake up almost every night after the scary suspense stories that David, my friend Hannah's father, would tell us at bedtime, stories from the adventures of Sherlock Holmes and his associate, Dr. Watson. One story, called "The Speckled Band," kept me awake for several nights in a row. I imagined a snake (the speckled band) dangling from the ceiling straight down to my bed. And I wasn't the only one who ran to their parents' rooms at that time.

On hot summer nights, lying in bed facing the window, I would wait for a breeze to flutter the leaves of the trees to play games in my imagination that were inspired by the silhouettes of the leaves on the walls of the room. A shadow dance played out on the wall – the stage – in shifting gesticulations, marvelously choreographed by the wind. Night noises accompanied the dance like an orchestra of intermittent chords. The eye, the ear, and the imagination produced the fruit of my nocturnal creation with excitement and curiosity without fear of any kind.

On one of those magical evenings, when I was about six years old, my imagination games were interrupted by an announcement that resounded in the space. It was Uri,

one of my roommates who had penetrated the silence and declared sharply, “There is somebody in this room whose parents aren’t really his parents.”

I felt my heart begin pounding and a sick feeling in my stomach came over me. “I can’t tell you who, because my parents will kill me,” Uri continued, and he then fell silent. I gathered my courage and said in a whisper, “What do you mean? If you already started, you have to tell,” He didn’t answer. I don’t think any of the three girls in the room slept a wink that night.

The next morning, I still had Uri’s dreaded sentence in my head and I impatiently waited for bedtime. After the nanny finished the evening’s story, we lay quietly, waiting to hear the door closing and her footsteps moving away. Only then did I ask with trepidation, “What about the secret? Uri, you have to tell us who it is!” I sat up in bed and looked straight at him, hoping to catch his eye so he couldn’t refuse.

“Anybody who says he has a big secret has to tell what it is, because he already said he has a secret,” Na’ama added.

“I can’t, because I heard my parents talking about it and I’m not allowed to say what it is. They said it was a big secret and nobody should know.”

“You have to tell us who it is, because now everybody thinks that their parents aren’t their real parents, except you, and you’re the only one who knows. So you have to tell,” I said with confidence and a tone of reproach.

“Okay, then …Your parents aren’t your real parents,” he whispered, covering his head with a blanket. I froze. No one said anything. Everything seemed to be in slow motion. I lay down with my hands on my chest, trying to calm the pounding of my raging heart. I felt my pulse beating in my temples, that my life was on fire, and I was on the verge of tears. My throat was dry and I was afraid I would stop breathing. I wanted some water, but I couldn’t move. I was scared stiff – with no one to hug, no

one to lean on, and no one to ask if this were true. I had so many unsettling questions, such as Why didn't I know? How come Uri knows and I don't? Why did they hide it from me? Maybe he was just saying it? Why would he all of a sudden say such a thing, and who could believe him? These thoughts flooded my mind for a long time. I knew everyone else had already fallen asleep and only I was awake. I looked up at the wall where the shadows flickered. I took comfort in the moving shapes and let myself sink into the magical world of imagination until I finally fell asleep.

The next day I was detached from what was going on around me. I only vaguely heard the nanny's words. I ate with no appetite and finished everything in a hurry so as not to stay at the table and be a target for the snooping eyes of my roommates. None of them said anything or asked how I was. I went out to the sandbox, and with my fingers in the sand, drew a picture of a father, a mother, and a little girl all holding hands. I rubbed it out and drew the same thing over and over. I shut myself off to anything else, lost in thought until I realized I had missed the call for the shower. The nanny hurried me along, and I took a quick one. Afterwards I got into bed under the light, colorful "pika" blanket that we covered ourselves with in the summer. I started counting by tens and hundreds and was thinking about what number I could reach when they opened the blinds and told us, "Time to get up."

At exactly 4:00, when the signal was given to go to the parents' rooms, I was the first one at the gate. I ran like a deer up the hill, panting for breath. I gasped, my heart pounding again…I was desperate for the answer.

I ran past the last walkway in front of my parents' house, planning to jump the three front steps together and rush inside to ask about what had been disturbing me since the night before. I skipped the regular ritual where I run straight into my father's arms and he picks me up for a hug. I stopped a few steps away from him, and before he realized what had happened, I asked aloud, "Is it true…what Uri said?"

My father turned pale and said nothing. His silence seemed like a long one to me. I

had already learned to recognize when he was uncomfortable. I saw that he wanted to say something, but wasn't sure what or how to say it. Maybe he wanted to tell me everything, maybe only part of it. After what felt like ages, he got up and came towards me. He reached out his arms for a hug and asked, "And what exactly did Uri say?"

"That you are not my parents," I said loudly.

At that moment the door opened and my mother joined us outside. I saw her surprised and worried look. She had probably listened from inside. My father picked me up in a hug. They both showered me with kisses and whispered, "We love you; you are ours and we are yours." The words were pleasing, but they weren't enough.

I lifted my head from my father's shoulder, straightened up, and looked into his eyes. "But are you my real parents?" I asked anxiously.

My father put me down very slowly, bending until his eyes were level with mine. He held my hand and said, "We are your parents. Do you want me to peel an apple for you? Let's go inside. I'll slice you some apple with cookies on the side. We'll go for a walk to the chicken coop and there I'll tell you a story." I kept humbly quiet. I sat down next to him at the table and watched as he peeled the apple from the stem downwards in peripheral circles. When he was almost finished, I held out my palm so that the skin of the apple, which looked like a coiling snake, would fall from the knife straight to my fingers. I used to always eat the curled peel, holding the edge with my fingers and slurping it down like a sweet and sour noodle.

We all left for the chicken coop. I walked in the middle, between my parents. My hands stretched upwards, my father holding my right, and my mother my left. We went down the hill on the steps that separate the slope of my father's garden between our terrain and the one belonging to Reuven Eshel, the kibbutz "noynik" (gardener). Reuven, like my father, had a green thumb and a glorious garden. In Reuven and my

father’s gardens, seasonal flowers abounded: verbena, silver baskets, nasturtiums, and large geranium bushes with red and pink blooms. Later we passed by a raspberry bush, and I picked a few for the way. We also passed by our loquat tree ? the one that the kids would sneak up and pick fruit from on their way to the swimming pool. We approached the coop. “Where do you like to sit the most?” asked my father.

“Under the mulberry tree,” I answered.

I sat down between my mother and father. “So now you’ll tell me the story?” I looked at him impatiently.

“What do you want to know?”

Again, I asked, “Are you really my parents?”

“We are your parents. We did not give birth to you, but we are raising you and we love you more than anything in the world. There are children whose parents didn’t give birth to them, but they are their parents… Sometimes who gives birth to the child isn’t the most important thing; it’s more important who raises the child with a love that is the strongest ever,” he said warmly and put his hand on my shoulder.

“You didn’t give birth to me?” I turned to my mother.

“I didn’t give birth to you, but I chose you. I wanted you more than anything, only you. I chose you and you chose me. You are ours even though we didn’t give birth to you, and we love you the most in the whole world,” my mother blurted out in a single breath. She smiled, her white teeth gleaming. Her black hair glistened in the sun’s rays, a warm orange hue in the sunset. Her beauty shined forth and her face was alert, ready for anything else to be said.

I was silent, and confused, but I felt very loved. I knew I loved these two people with

all my heart. “So…I am really yours,” I said with relief as I leaned back.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:53 am

A s the month of September approaches, you can feel a certain relief from the heat in the Jezreel Valley. The fiery sun and oppressive temperatures slowly give way to light breezes and pleasant evenings. The end of summer also means new beginnings: a new school year, and a new class. I was five and a half years old when we started first grade. We were joined to an older group (two grades were combined due to the limited number of births in 1946-1947).

Until the end of the sixth grade, we lived in a building with five bedrooms, a shower, a toilet, and a classroom. We were taught that the group is more important than the individual. Our group was called “ Snunit .” We took great pride in belonging to it – above all else. We lived in a moral spotlight and undisputable collective responsibility for the common good. Values such as responsibility, commitment, diligence, mutual aid, belonging, listening, and thinking were inculcated in us by a team of teachers and a counselor specifically for activities of the movement, conversations in our children’s group (“ kvutza ”), and in the larger group setting. Topics for discussion were brought up by the teachers and discussed in an open dialogue. The group conversations took place under the guidance of our teacher that year, and we children took turns writing down the minutes of the conversations. Afterwards, the Snunit report was passed on to the kibbutz archive. Personal identity was defined, to a considerable extent, by one’s level of standing in the group.

We had a fixed routine: Wake up time at 6:45, bathroom, and teeth brushing. Eighteen children wait in line for two sinks and two toilets. At 7:15, the first lesson in the classroom. Anyone who didn’t wake up in time found themselves getting dressed on the run, streaking through the balcony to class, and stopping in front of the door like a duck stomping his feet with a loud thump on landing. At 8:00 there was a break for breakfast, after which we had two consecutive lessons until the 10:00 recess, and

after that, two more classes. School ended at noon and then we went to work. Our work consisted of performing all the tasks related to our daily lives: cleaning the rooms and the classroom, and working in the children's farmyard, where there were rabbits, ducks, chickens, and other animals. We also worked shifts in the " communa " (clothing warehouse); some of us also helped in the yard with ornamental maintenance or helped in the dining room. We each had a permanent job that was changed three times a year and recorded in the "work schedule." Although we only worked for half an hour, this was enough to instill within us a work ethic and a realization that serving others was a valuable and inseparable part of life.

At 12:30 we would gather for lunch in the schoolchildren's dining room. The building had an attached kitchen, and at its north end was the bakery. This place had been used by the founding members of the kibbutz, and its name was changed to " katan " (small) after the "big" dining room was built in 1940. After the meal there was free time to play in the yard. Often we would just pass the time chatting with each other. After lunch and a shower we had a break.

Showering wasn't a simple process. Boys and girls showered together until the seventh grade (age 13). The nanny used to bring us in, in groups of four or five, while the others waited their turn. The boys and girls whose hormonal development began early were embarrassed and didn't want to be stared at by the other children. They found ways to avoid sharing the showers and kept to the back of the line. When they failed in their attempt to avoid the "cooperative" order, they did whatever they could to hide their embarrassment by quickly spreading out with their backs to the others. A quick cover with a towel, or walking at an angle to hide the front of their maturing bodies, were also tricks to avoid the stares. Hands have been used as a time-tested substitute for the fig leaf since Biblical days. Whispers and giggles of embarrassment were heard at the sights of maturing bodies. The boys tried everything to shower together with the girls whose breasts had begun to develop and pubic hair appeared in the triangle between their legs. I was small and shy, and I started puberty late, so I remember very well being glad for the gift my body gave me.

Anyone who didn't fall asleep for the nap between 2:00 and 3:00 had to read. I liked reading, but I preferred to spend my rest time in the room of my favorite nanny, Feigeh, who took care of us until sixth grade. Whenever I came across an incomprehensible word in the book, I would go to her and ask her the meaning of the word and stay with her in the workroom until she sent me back to bed. She often didn't bother sending me away, and I stayed with her until nap time was over. I loved Feigeh and had the courage to ask her intimate questions and talk to her openly and frankly.

When I was eight, I read the story "The Golden Heart Flower" by Hans Christian Andersen, which tells the story of a sick mother whose son goes out to bring her the flower that can heal her. The devotion and love of the child for his mother, and the mother's love for her son, moved me and brought me to tears. Very quickly I found myself asking Feigeh, while wiping away my tears: "If my real mother is alive, where can I find her?"

Feigeh patted my head, handed me a handkerchief, and answered, "Maybe in Haifa?"

Often, when I visited my mother's cousin and his family, the Graf family in Haifa, I would walk in the streets looking for women that I resembled. Once, when a nice blonde lady passed by, I stopped next to her. "Maybe you lost your little girl?" I asked. The woman gave me a strange look and continued walking. Later I learned that it was no accident that Feigeh mentioned Haifa. The adoption issue was not discussed in the Snunit group. The children didn't ask me any questions or refer to the matter because it was considered to be taboo; in other words, it was forbidden to mention it. Thus the children imitated the adults who wouldn't talk about the subject in public, even though there was no express prohibition for the children to avoid talking about my having been adopted.

My parents treated me like a precious treasure, and their attitude even extended to relatives outside the kibbutz, who showered me with beautiful gifts. I received the

most expensive gifts from my mother's cousin Oleg (Olesch) who had emigrated from Poland with his wife and two children in 1957. Oleg made a living selling bicycles that he brought in from the business he left behind in Warsaw. On my 10 th birthday he gave me a "Diamond" bicycle. I streamed down the kibbutz pathways with great pleasure, feeling free and exhilarated. To this day bicycling is my favorite sport.

That same year, my uncle gave me a pair of roller skates that you could adjust by turning a key and tightening the clamps to fit the size of your shoe. I was considered someone born with a silver spoon in my mouth. In the modest and minimalist environment in which I grew up, in the life of the kibbutz collective in the 1950s and 1960s, personal possessions like the bicycle and the skates were a source of immense pride, aside from being an abnormal deviation from ideological equality.

Besides these rare and unexpected gifts, we were all equal in our clothing, footwear, hats and blue Sumerian shirts with white laces. Twice a year, in spring and autumn, two special events took place: For Passover, we received new sandals made at a shoemaker's shop, new shorts, and new short-sleeved shirts from the seamstress shop. We tried on clothes passed down from the older children to the younger ones in a stuffy, mothball-smelling room. Piles of second-hand clothes were stacked and tied, carefully and neatly arranged in perfect order by Penina, the young kibbutznik in charge of the task. The measurement process lasted about a week. I usually came away with clothes I liked, except for the shorts with elastic that were ridiculous and left red marks on the inside of the thighs. It was only when we reached age 14 that we were "blessed" with the airy stitching of straight, open trousers.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:53 am

T he transition from elementary school to middle school and high school is always a milestone in the lives of teenagers. At Merhavia in the 1950s, it meant a major change in lifestyle. Our older group separated from the younger children's group, and joined the group at the high school called the " Mossad " – the educational institution – that was located on the western side of the kibbutz.

We were young and "green," but we felt big and mature. We embarked on a different agenda, full of new procedures that led to independence and responsibility for ourselves. Every day after school and lunch, we worked for about two hours in different branches of the kibbutz. We were included in the various committees and began to be part of the youth group society, and we organized our cultural life, work, events and holidays by ourselves. We were still a functioning unit, and we kept our identity as the Snunit Group. We had a daily schedule of duties, shifts in cleaning the house, group discussions once a week, and the planning of activities, yet the "nanny" and our teacher were still very important. In group discussions, we were free to express ourselves on social issues, current events, and the state of the kibbutz. I remember the 7th and 8th grades as a fascinating gateway to an active and vibrant society that filled our lives with rich, formative content. We had entered a new world full of excitement and growth, on a personal as well as social level.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:53 am

T he romance between Dubi and me began in the summer of 1962. I remember as if it were yesterday. It began with a meaningful exchange of looks as we passed each other on the lawn in front of the Mossad dining hall during summer vacation. Dubi had just left the hall and I had gotten up from the grass and was going in for lunch.

“Don’t I know you from somewhere?” he asked jokingly, changing direction to join me even though he had finished eating. He sat down next to me at the table and talked excitedly about the wonderful time he had had at Kibbutz Kinneret. All of us in Snunit knew about his love for Lake Kinneret and that he often spent time on the shores of the lake thanks to his sister-in-law’s being a member of Kibbutz Kinneret before she was married.

“Why did you come back after only one week?” I asked.

Dubi looked around, lowered his voice in secret sweetness, and said, “I missed you.” I was surprised and didn’t grasp his meaning. Until then there had been nothing between us that hinted at longing or a romantic relationship. During the many years we were roommates, we would argue about the use of the small room during our free time. I insisted on practicing the violin, and Dubi insisted on resting in his bed while I played.

At that time, Dubi was studying at the ORT School in Afula, a nearby city. He would get up earlier than the rest of us and ride his bicycle to school. Our paths almost never crossed during the rest of the Mossad activities because he didn’t care for the music that filled my life ? which is why his confession of longing during that midday summer hour didn’t receive an enthusiastic response from me. Still, it made me think. There was one sign, however: Our Friday night meals ended in the dining room with

folkdancing. Dubi never joined in, claiming that he didn't know how to dance, but he would remain in the dining room, sitting and watching me as I danced non-stop. His powerful stare pierced every fiber of my being as he followed my movements with his eyes. Now he had become my persistent suitor and even crafted on a wooden veneer a picture of a couple dancing – and gave it to me as a gift. This treasure still adorns the wall in our bedroom.

By the time we finished our studies at the Mossad, we were an established couple. For the 12th grade graduation party, I embroidered a beautiful cross-stitch shirt for him, the kind that was in vogue at the time. I spent hours sewing the golden sheaves of oats onto a black "Russian Pioneers" shirt. Dubi was very proud of the shirt, even though he wore it maybe twice; to this day, the shirt is kept in the closet as a souvenir. At the end of the 12th grade, we moved from the Mossad to live in the soldiers' barracks area of the kibbutz. The new dining hall that was built to the west of it made the area intimate and isolated. As there wasn't enough living space, two girls had to share a room as did the boys ? except for Dubi, who volunteered to accept a tiny room, long and narrow, with space for a single bed. No more than that was needed for privacy…

Two toilet stalls and a sink were built on at the end of the neighborhood, but no showers. Like my parents at that time, I showered in the common showers near the laundry. There were no complaints; the rows of barracks were deserted most of the time. Most of my group mates were in the army, and I spent the weekdays at the Oranim Teachers' Seminar. On weekends, the neighborhood came alive, full of fun from the soldiers who had come for Shabbat. We would all get together and exchange impressions of the week's events, sharing experiences over a cup of coffee and a cigarette.

During the years that Dubi was in the army and I was at the seminar, we managed to see each other quite a few times. He would wander in from the base and come to see me regularly. My classmates called him "the determined suitor in uniform," an

impressive and prominent figure in the seminar's otherwise female environment.

Our relationship was a continuous, persistent courtship with ups and downs over the years. My parents – and especially my father, for whom I was a precious and carefully guarded treasure – weren't completely pleased with the match. On a kibbutz, where everyone grows up together and knows everything about everyone else, it's very difficult to get rid of the labels that have been attached to you. Dubi was known as a boy who loved hanging out on the kibbutz lawns, chasing butterflies, climbing trees, and rescuing chicks that fell out of their nests. Over the years, he became an outstanding athlete and a competitive sportsman through and through. He wasn't focused on his education until he began studying at ORT in Afula, from which he graduated. Thanks to his skillful hands and the technical ability he was blessed with, he was highly regarded. Towards the end of his military service, we submitted a request to the kibbutz for a shared room, which was acceptable and possible even before marriage. Soon afterwards, we received the sought-after double room in the soldiers' section.

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N othing could have prepared me for the moment following my mother's confession at my bedside that autumn day. In one brief outpouring, she told me what I was yearning to know for years: Where I was born, under what name, and the name of my biological mother. She'd kept the secret inside her for 27 years, and now she'd finally set it free. I rolled the names over and over on my tongue, my thoughts scattering in all directions.

My parents looked at me cautiously, and gathered themselves together. No words could define the weight that was lifted from me as the facts shot out of my mother's mouth and into my ears. We remained silent together for a long time, experiencing a different atmosphere, a new situation. Not knowing my birth identity all those years had created an intense longing inside me. The information ignited my curiosity. I knew I was going to take responsibility for the coming phase of my life; I would leave no stone unturned until I uncovered my exact origins. I rose to a sitting position, went to my parents, and hugged them for a long time.

My mother cried softly, murmuring that she was sorry she hadn't told me earlier. My father said they would always be by my side, no matter what I decided to do. All three of us were relieved. What made her tell me? Maybe she felt pity and compassion when she saw me confined to bed rest for the duration of the pregnancy. Maybe she felt sorry for herself, having wanted a child her whole life and not being able to have one, or maybe she finally felt that our relationship was strong enough. Or had she listened to the story about the boy Todd and his parents that illustrated the uncompromising covenant between parent and child from the moment of birth? Was it simply my determination to know that had worn her down until she realized it was her duty to give me the details of my past? Whatever the case, I knew now that the conditions were ripe, and that a new chapter in my life was about to begin.

The agonizing bed rest pregnancy finally ended with the quick, easy birth of Shahar in the spring of 1976. Joy filled our home. Most of my attention was on my family, my work, and my further training in movement and dance studies at the Kibbutz College of Education in Tel Aviv. It seemed that I needed a break to absorb the news, internalize it, and think and plan how to start with the few details I had. The first real progress in the search took place only after a year had gone by, at Dubi's initiative. He would occasionally travel to Austria and Germany to bring himself up to date professionally for work. Often he would go together with Itzik Bar-Noach, a machinery agent for "Cincinnati," an Austrian company that supplied equipment to Plassim. On one of their joint trips, Dubi decided to share my story with Bar-Noach and ask his advice on where to begin the search.

Bar-Noach, who speaks several languages, including German, introduced Dubi to his lawyer friend Dr. Friedrich, who was intrigued by the story. Without hesitation, he offered his help and promised that he would use his expertise and connections in order to uncover more details about my origins. The Austrian believed that with the data in my possession – the name of my biological mother, my date of birth and country of birth – it would be possible to locate my birth certificate. He requested an official letter from me authorizing him to search for the birth certificate and further information about my mother. The days following my sending the letter ? until I got an answer from him ? dragged on and on. Every day I would go down to the kibbutz mail room on the ground floor of the "new" dining room. The mail room was inside the Technical Secretariat, which was the real heart of the kibbutz. If you wanted to know what was new, who was looking for whom, if there were any new announcements, and what changed from day to day – or from yesterday to today – that was the place. The mail room became a magnet for me. Every day after work in the movement studio, I would go to check my mailbox.

Less than two weeks had gone by when on February 24 th I spotted an envelope addressed to me with an airmail sticker from Vienna. With trembling hands, I took the envelope and stepped outside into a wintry February day. Instead of placing the

newspaper and mail in my bag and hurrying to my room on the hill for a midday rest, I sat down on the square stone surface in the covered entryway of the dining room. I didn't feel the cold. I had difficulty finding the edge of the envelope so I could open it without damaging the papers it was packed with inside. I went back into the dining room, carefully slit open the envelope with a knife and went back down to my quiet corner outside in the square. It was 2:30 in the afternoon ? nap time at the kibbutz. Utter silence, and not a soul in sight. With my stomach churning, my hands shaking, and my heart aflutter with excitement, I removed two sheets of paper ? one a printed letter and the other a document. Both were in German. I quickly scanned the document, which was in two columns: On the left were headings in small letters, and on the right were names and dates. My eyes scoured the lines, trying to decipher any familiar word. I recognized the name Franziska Lewi (Syten), my date of birth, the name Helena, and another, unknown name: Eugenius Lewinski.

At last, I knew! I was born "Helena" to father Eugenius and mother Franziska, in Bergen-Belsen, Germany. In the evening, after Nehemiah, Dubi's father, translated the letter for me, I realized what I had in my hands. Dr. Friedrich had sent the photocopy of my birth certificate that he'd received from the archives of the registry office in Bergen. The attached letter was written by an archive employee, a Mr. Reinhard, in these words: "These are the details of the infant born January 17, 1947, to mother Franziska Lewinska, in the district of Lohida (Landkris) Tsela in Germany." Reinhard added that according to the evidence, there was no proof of relinquishment or of giving the child up for adoption at birth. For the first time, I had a document confirming my birth identity. I noticed something else ? albeit symbolic ? that moved me very much. Exactly 29 years to the day had gone by since that morning in Haifa, where Hulda had hugged me for the very first time with tears of joy. I was now 30, and I'd received another identity, which was both new and old…

The road to my adoption that Hulda and Eliezer had traveled wasn't an easy one. It began with attempts and failures to conceive naturally and ended with the painful conclusion that they would be unable to have children. In their distress, they turned to

the kibbutz institutions and asked for help in adopting a child. Years passed, with no balm for their yearning souls. With the end of World War II, a window of opportunity opened for them.

After the war, under the auspices of the Jewish Agency, emissaries of the National Kibbutz Movement were sent to Eastern Europe with the aim of locating children and teenaged “displaced persons” and bringing them to Eretz Israel. These children were taken in by kibbutzim, moshavim, and other places. The Youth Aliyah enterprise was founded even before the war, in 1932, by Recha Freier, who wanted to protect Jewish children from the evil winds blowing in Europe. Later, the organization was managed by Henrietta Szold, head of the Youth Aliyah Project at the Jewish Agency for Israel. After the war, the organization worked to save Jewish children who had been handed over by their parents during the war to monasteries and gentile families in villages and cities.

Some of the emissaries also arrived at the displaced persons camps where survivors were concentrated (mainly in Germany, Austria, and Italy). The emissaries worked in children’s homes where there were orphaned children, or with children given over to their care with the goal of adoption in Israel. Their job was to provide for all the children’s everyday needs, as well as give pedagogical advice for the children’s education in the children’s houses in the camps. Some of the women had an additional role – to bring children to Israel and give them over to adoptive families. I don’t know if Hulda and Eliezer were given a choice, or if the match was coincidental. I assume that they knew in advance where I’d come from, and they may have seen my photo. Had they undergone any screening? Were they offered any recommendations? How long did they wait? I never got answers to these questions.

At the beginning of February, 1948, Huldah and Eliezer received a message from the kibbutz secretariat that the baby who was to be given to them for adoption would arrive by ship at Haifa Port on the 24th of that month, and they were asked to come and pick her up. They were overjoyed as well as a bit afraid, but more excited and

stressed than frightened. In the days leading up to the baby's arrival, Hulda and Eliezer made every effort to be prepared. It wasn't foreseen that they would have private transportation in an armored car all the way to Haifa, and at the same time, in the north of the country, the war that the Arabs had begun against the Jewish settlement in Eretz Israel was already under way. Their friend Yona Gerstenfeld acted with determination and managed to get the use of an armored vehicle for two days. On the morning of the appointed day, Hulda took the package she had prepared and climbed into the vehicle that was laden with clothing, a blanket, and food for the baby. She sat next to Yona, a skilled driver. Eliezer wasn't on the exhilarating ride, as there was only one available seat in the car.

Those were tense times. The War of Independence, which began in response to the UN General Assembly's resolution to partition the Land of Israel (November 29, 1947), was being waged in full force. The Arabs' goal was to cripple the Jewish settlement and disrupt the lives of its residents. They cut off towns and agricultural settlements from food and weapons supplies, and they damaged transportation, electricity, and the water infrastructure. The Haifa and Tel Aviv ports were subjected to attacks as well. In the Jezreel Valley there had been many years of susceptibility to damage to Jewish fields and property perpetrated by Arab gangs. Most of the Arab villages in the vicinity were situated on mountain ranges and hills, and had a strategic advantage to control the highways. The road to Haifa was known to be particularly dangerous, and attacks there had claimed many victims since the outbreak of hostilities. The Arabs could unexpectedly ambush any moving target, particularly near Haifa, that had both Jew and Arab residents.

Hulda was apprehensive during the whole journey. Yonah tried to keep a conversation going and spiced things up with sarcasm mixed with his characteristic sense of humor. They'd become good friends since Hulda arrived at the kibbutz. Near Ramat Yishai they found themselves stuck in a convoy of cars that weren't moving. British soldiers lined the sides of the road. Hulda was nervous, afraid that they would be late for the meeting. Yona's inquisitive, assertive nature prompted him to get out

of the vehicle to find out the reason for the delay. He learned that just before they arrived, shots were fired at the road, and an intensive search was being carried out in the area. No one could say when the checkpoint would open and the cars could start moving again. This news was too much for Hulda to take. She looked frantically at her watch and realized that they would be late. She asked Yona if there was some way to get around the checkpoint, and when the answer was no, she sat down on the side of the road, wiping away her tears. Yonah approached her, stroked her head gently and said not to worry, it would be unthinkable that someone would take the baby away before she could get there. She calmed down a bit, took out a few sandwiches, a bottle of water and some fruit. Yona sat down next to her and thanked her for the refreshments.

Three hours went by…the sun was about to set in the west when they heard a sharp whistle. In the distance a policeman was directing the traffic towards the finally re-opened checkpoint. They were only halfway to Haifa and would arrive after dark. Hulda had an anxiety attack and was tormented with worry. What if we don't find the baby? What will happen if there is no one in the port's offices when we get there? What if someone else takes her? The slowly moving traffic added to her extreme tension. Only when they caught sight of the minaret of the mosque that heralds the entry to the lower city of Haifa was she able to breathe a sigh of relief.

At the entrance to the port she showed the guards the official letter she had received from the Jewish Agency. The guards moved the barrier aside and showed them how to reach the waiting room. Yona didn't have time to come to a full stop before Hulda jumped out. Silence greeted her. She opened door after door and found no one and nothing. Behind the third door was a woman who asked her name. As soon as she identified herself, she couldn't hold back any longer and cried out, "Where's my baby?"

Seeing her distress, the woman answered, "We didn't know what happened to you so we sent the companions with the girl to spend the night at the nearest hotel – at the

Agency’s expense,” she answered apologetically. She handed Hulda a piece of paper with the address of the hotel written on it, and suggested that she hurry there to receive the baby.

Hulda left quickly, found Yona, who was waiting by the car, and gave him the note. “Go there as fast as you can. I told you I wouldn’t find her if we were late! Now get me to the hotel! We have to find her and see who is with her and if she’s being taken care of!” she said in obvious anguish.

Upon entering the hotel, she noticed a group of men and women who were in the middle of a heated argument that was accompanied by loud, angry voices. When she got closer, she was able to pick up words and fragments of sentences. From what she heard, she understood that it was an argument about monetary payment ? such as who offered to pay more, and who had the right to take the child. As soon as Hulda realized what was happening, she didn’t hesitate and made her way while pushing everyone out of the way, until she stood in front of the person at whom the shouts were directed. At the center of the commotion in the hotel lobby sat a young man. His palms rested on his knees, his straight elbows supporting his upright back; his posture exuded strength and determination in front of the crowd that surrounded him in a buzzing ring like a swarm of disturbed bees. His eyes were closed, his facial muscles were tight, and he shook his head to the right and to the left ? a negative sign.

Hulda touched his shoulder and at the same time pulled out the summons letter from her pocket. She waved it at him with her raised hand and called out, “Which of you has proof ? in writing ? that the girl belongs to him and that he can come and take her? Aren’t you ashamed to try to buy a baby girl who doesn’t belong to you?” Then she turned towards the person sitting on the chair and asked, “Who are you?”

“My wife and I brought the babies with us ? one blonde and one with dark hair. The black-haired baby was handed over to her parents, but you didn’t come. We waited until the evening and didn’t know what to do with her...”

Hulda didn’t let him finish his sentence and snapped at him, “Where is she? Bring her to me. N ow!”

The man got up and she began to follow him. Behind her, the commotion continued even more fiercely. Huldah stopped for a moment, turned around, and shouted, “If you don’t all get out of here, I’ll call the police!” Her voice was menacing, authoritative, and convincing. The tension that had been building up in her all day finally erupted when she realized what was happening. She had been waiting for that moment for years and wouldn’t let it slip away.

The continued delay seemed to put the couple in an unplanned, stressful, anxious situation. The rumor that there was an unwanted baby girl in the hotel spread throughout the city, and many couples flocked to the hotel, hoping to try their luck and take her in. The man went up the stairs and Hulda followed him, trying to calm herself from the shocking scene. The noise from downstairs died down and the hotel’s corridor was quiet. The man stopped in front of one of the doors and opened it; Hulda hurried in after him, ignored the woman sitting by the bed, and went straight to the sleeping baby. She bent down and looked into the baby’s face, lifted a tip of the hat, and a curl of light-colored hair fell over the baby’s forehead. A happy smile spread over her face because she knew: It was her baby! Hulda wrapped her in the blanket she’d brought from the kibbutz and adopted her into her heart. Tears ran down her cheeks, and a thrill, the likes of which she had never before felt, shot through her body. At the age of 37, Huldah Rosenfeld née Steinbach finally became a mother.

The woman got up, walked over to Hulda, and handed her a sealed envelope. “Leah Laufer from the Agency, the caregiver who brought the baby, asked us to give it to you.”

Hulda took the letter, turned, and left the room with the baby in her arms. In the meantime, the couples waiting in the lobby had dispersed. Huldah found Yona, who

greeted her with a wide smile. Next, they went to Hulda's relatives: Shunio Graf, her cousin from Yaroslav and his wife Ella, a pediatrician. Ella greeted them with love and warmth and asked them to sit down to dinner. Hulda gently put the baby down on the sofa. She couldn't take her eyes off her and kept on stroking her hair. When she woke up, the baby eagerly gulped down the bottle of milk that Ella had prepared; her big eyes opened and she looked at Hulda for the first time. Happiness and tenderness enveloped the new mother, as she skillfully and confidently bathed the baby in the tub.

Dr. Ella conducted a meticulous examination of the baby girl: length, head circumference, weight, pulse; she also listened to her lungs, tested her reflexes by tapping a rubber hammer on her joints, checked her throat and tonsils...and pronounced the girl to be in excellent condition. "Everything is normal and you can make a toast," Ella told them.

Ella and Shunio's son, 11-year-old Giora, joined them at the table. Giora asked my mother, "Who is she? What's her name?"

"This is my new daughter, and her name is Helena," Hulda replied proudly.

"What kind of name is Helena? When was she born?" Giora continued to make it difficult. "She was born on January 17 th ," Hulda answered. "Then why Helena? She should be called Ilana after 'Ilan' (Hebrew for 'tree'), because she was born close to the 15 th of Shvat, the new year of the trees," he stated with conviction.

Together with her daughter Elana, Hulda arrived in Merhavia the following morning. In Hulda's absence, Lushka, the babysitter ? with her customary conscientiousness ? had readied the parents' room. She brought a small iron bed and diapers, clothing, bottles, and everything else needed to take care of the baby. Eliezer didn't go to work that day and kept busy in the garden, waiting impatiently for his wife to arrive with the baby. The house was clean and tidy, a vase of fresh flowers was on the table, and

next to it was a cake specially baked for the occasion. Everyone knew that Eliezer and Huldah were going to be parents from that day on. The kibbutz decided to deviate from the rigid, accepted procedure and allow the parents and the baby an intimate reception in their room for a month. The meeting was exciting, and quite a few tears flowed down their cheeks during the first three-way hug. It was love at first sight.

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T he day after receiving the copy of my birth certificate, we picked up the children in the afternoon as usual and went to my parents' house. Since the birth of our first daughter, I felt more comfortable addressing my parents as "Grandma and Grandpa" rather than "Mom and Dad." The letter from Austria felt like it was burning a hole in my pocket. During the daily ritual of refreshments and coffee, I sat and told them that I'd received a letter with details of my birth. I took it out of my pocket and handed it to my father. He looked down, his hands trembling as he scrutinized the printed document. "It seems genuine," he finally said, and asked me, "How did you get this?"

I put my hand on his knee and turned to my husband. "Dubi can tell you."

My parents listened attentively to Dubi's explanation of how we obtained it. When he finished, my father turned to me and asked, "And…what do you plan to do now?"

"I don't know. If only I knew where she lived, it would be easier. She could be anywhere, even here in Israel. What's clear to me, however, is that I'll keep looking until I find her." I finished talking and studied their body language, afraid that the news had shocked them.

My father saw my discomfort. "I promised you that we'll support every decision and every step you choose to take in your search." My mother was silent. I thanked them and asked if there was anything else they wanted to tell me, and if they knew anything else that I didn't know. My mother shook her head and remained silent. My father said that from now on I would be the one who updated them, and that I should feel at ease in doing so. I was relieved, and promised that I'd keep them informed. It seemed that the passage of time since the adoption had blunted the anxiety and feeling of threat that had accompanied them for so many years.

The day after the revelatory meeting with my parents, I wrote to Dr. Friedrich, asking him to contact the Ministry of the Interior in Germany for details about the Lewinsky family. Friedrich answered that he was investigating every avenue he knew of and he promised to keep me up to date on his findings.

I resisted for a week and then again started checking the post office every day, always with hope in my heart. Finally, at the beginning of August, in the cool dark of the mail room, the long-awaited envelope appeared in my mailbox. Dr. Friedrich attached a reply from a Mr. Reinhard from the registry office in Bergen. His search in Germany for the names Lewinsky or Lewinska had turned up nothing, so he recommended contacting the Arolsen Archives (the International Center on Nazi Persecution), which was responsible for tracing relatives located in Germany. Formerly called the “International Tracing Service” (ITS), it is the center for the documentation of crimes perpetrated by the Nazis and information as to the fate of the survivors after the liberation of Europe. It holds more than 30,000,000 preserved documents and is a source of valuable information for the victims of persecution and their relatives.

Waiting for a reply from Germany was nerve-wracking, to put it mildly. After obtaining my birth certificate relatively easily, I expected that continuing the search would be as easy and that I would get results quickly, but I realized that there was still a very long way to go. Two months had passed since I sent my request to the Arolsen Archives, and I hadn’t heard back from them. The frequency of my visits to the mail room depended on my mood. In optimistic times there were daily visits, but when I felt low, they were less frequent ? almost as though I were forcing myself to ignore my urgent need for the long-awaited reply.

A new, exhilarating challenge was added to our routine on the kibbutz. Along with raising the children, work, commitment to duty and the community, hobbies and social life, there began a chain of correspondence with various parties, investigations, requests, and queries that went on for years. Very few people on the kibbutz were

involved in my search, which was spearheaded by Nina, the English teacher, who went over the letters I wrote in English, corrected them if necessary, and always gave me support and positive feedback. I wrote to Dr. Friedrich in English, but his answers were in German ? translated for me by Nehemiah or my father. Day and night I thought about what else I could do, what other questions to ask, and I shared my musings with Dubi, attempting to set forth on a course of action…What else could be done? Where else could I search for answers?

My parents, after all, repeatedly maintained that they had no information other than what they'd already told me. Was there another avenue to explore? While I waited for an answer, I realized that I could take the one basic step that every adopted child tracing their origin can take – I would open my adoption file. If I were legally adopted, the Israeli welfare authorities would have a detailed file on the adoption. Could I possibly glean more pertinent information there? In October 1977, I went to the District Court in Tel Aviv and requested that my adoption file be opened; however, I had no idea what kind of trouble I was getting myself into. To this day, it's not clear to me whether the procrastination and negligence were standard bureaucracy, or were deliberate.

While I was waiting for an official answer from the court ? which should have been a simple procedure ? in December 1977 I received a letter from the Child Welfare Department in Haifa. The letter came from a social worker named Rebecca Sorek, who wrote: "After consultation, I was told that we require your file number and from which court it was issued so that we can move forward in your case." I read these words over and over and couldn't understand. Why were they asking me ? I was the one applying to the authorities for details of the adoption file. How could I possibly provide them with the information?

What was clear from her letter was that the court would not take any action without the approval of the Child Welfare Department. So where did that leave me? Two more months passed and I finally received the court's answer: "We confirm receipt of

your letter for the opening of the adoption file. Your request has been forwarded to Ms. Aviva Leon at the Ministry of Labor and Welfare in Jerusalem. Through her, you will receive the requested details." I hurriedly wrote to Mrs. Leon, who was the director of Child Services at the Ministry, hoping that by then my request would have reached senior management level and I would benefit from reliable, direct, rapid service to open the file. I attached the ludicrous answer of the social worker from Haifa in my letter, and sent it off. Then…nothing! No adoption file, and not even permission to open it.

The thought that my biological mother might be in Israel didn't leave me. I decided to do what many kibbutz pioneers did when World War II ended: I contacted the Search Bureau for Missing Relatives at The Jewish Agency for Israel and asked for help in locating Francesca Lewinska. (The section was established after World War II to help Holocaust survivors locate family members and friends; it ceased operating in 2002.) In less than two weeks I received a reply that they were sorry, but their efforts bore no results. If there were any changes, they would update me. They also promised to publicize my search on the radio in the Yiddish language.

While things on the Israeli side continued to disappoint, on May 9, 1978, I received a resoundingly moving reply from the Arolsen Archives in Germany. They had located a birth certificate in the name of Danka (her other names were Danuta and Salla), born in Helmstadt, Germany, on July 1, 1945. The names of my parents and Danka's were the same…I had a sister! Additional details were no less amazing: Danka Lewinska immigrated to Israel in 1949. At Arolsen they believed that my mother had come to Israel with her. The name of my biological father on the birth certificate did not appear in any other document. They had no credible evidence that he was ever in Germany. In addition, they wrote that they sent a summation of their investigation to the Jewish Agency, and that they recommended that I contact them to help in my search for relatives in Israel... At the end of the letter was a poignant line stating that they wished me success in contacting any surviving members of my family…

If they had immigrated to Israel, then why hadn't the relatives' search agency been able to find them? I turned to them again, attaching the document I received from the Arolsen people. I requested information on what actions had been taken to locate my mother. Their answer was not long in coming: They had checked the lists of residents of the country at the Ministry of the Interior, searched the immigrant records of the Jewish Agency, and even broadcast the name on the radio many times. No Francesca Lewinska…nor her daughter Danka. Greatly disappointed, I decided to contact the child adoption service again. Maybe this time I would be able to elicit some information from them, or at least receive approval to open my adoption file. Ten days later I received an answer. It had not come from the main office in Jerusalem that I had written to, but again from Rebecca Sorek, the social worker in Haifa. "Aviva Leon is my supervisor, so she is not actually a new contact. Contacting me or her is the same thing. I would be happy to meet with you and hear what your adoptive parents know about your past. Perhaps that can lead us to another source. Unfortunately, I do not know of any other institution that can be contacted at this point with the data you provided. If you can, please come to my office on Monday, May 29, 1978, at 12:00 noon. Rebecca Sorek."

Once again, more was hidden than was known… She had no idea about another organization to turn to? After all, the law allows any person over 18 to consult the adoption registry and they are even entitled to assistance in locating their biological parents. Why is she tossing the ball back to my court? I was beginning to understand that it was more likely that I would find my biological mother by myself before they would allow me to open the adoption file! This was excruciatingly unfair stalling on their part, and I didn't understand why. My last contact with the welfare system amounted to a letter that ended my hopes of ever receiving concrete information, wherein they urged me to formally contact the Registry of Adoptions at the District Court in Tel Aviv. I was overwhelmed with frustration – the court was my initial point of contact and they were the ones who sent me to the Welfare Department! With great effort, I gave up on the idea of going to Jerusalem to battle the bureaucracy. I realized that I would get nothing from the welfare system except more

frustration. I wrote to the district court again, asking them to locate my adoption file and invite me in to open it. I didn't idly wait for an answer, but instead I was strengthened by my determination to continue to act, trusting my instincts to find those who would want to help me.

Summer vacation in Jerusalem in 1978 opened the door to new horizons. We stayed with our three children at the home of Danny and Margola, my maternal cousin. Her mother, Rivka, was one of the nine children of the Graf family with whom Hulda had grown up in Yaroslavl. Rivka was older than my mother and came to Israel a short time before her. After a few years in the country, Rivka Graf married Moshe Kelner. Margola, their only daughter, studied at the Beit Hakerem elementary school and the local high school. At one point during the War of Independence, children from downtown Jerusalem ? which was being bombed ? were sent to study in Beit Hakerem. Among them was Danny Rubinstein, later to become Margola's husband. After the 1967 Six-Day War, Danny began working as a journalist for Arab affairs at Davar, the daily newspaper of Histadrut, Israel's General Federation of Labor. His press credentials gave him easy access to government offices as well as to the various institutions of the Jewish Agency and the Aliyah (Immigration) offices.

While on vacation, we decided to ask for Danny's help in searching for my birth mother. At first I was opposed to the idea because I thought I didn't want to involve any more people in my personal quest. But I changed my mind; after all, Dubi and I were kibbutznikim who didn't even have our own telephone, so maybe we could make some progress with Danny's help. That evening, Dubi put the idea to Danny, who immediately gave his consent. I filled him in with all I knew, and together we sketched out a possible scenario: Franka had left Germany and immigrated to Israel in 1949 with her eldest daughter. If she couldn't be located in the relatives' search section at the Ministry of the Interior, it was very likely that she entered the country under a different name. It was also possible that she had gotten married just before entering the country, despite being the mother of a four-year-old girl. But whose daughter was she? Francesca listed the child's name as Danka Lewinska, which

would be different than her newly married name.

Armed with this information, Danny started out by searching the records of the Population and Immigration Authority. They would have the names of everyone who entered and left Israel. He found no evidence of a Franziska Lewinska who had left Germany for Israel. A tip from an official at the Ministry of the Interior led Danny to the German Embassy. If Franziska had lived through the war years in Europe and had arrived in Israel at some point, she would most likely be eligible for post-war German reparations.

The embassy staff was willing to help, but they explained to Danny that there wasn't just one unified list. There were different categories of recipients, and funds were distributed by the various federal states within Germany. Danny persisted, however, and met with the official responsible for the lists of those entitled to compensation. The name "Lewinsky" can be spelled in various ways, and they considered every possibility. After coming up empty-handed, they began to focus on first names (Danka and Franziska), but even those names can be spelled in several ways. The search at the embassy ended in another dead end. When he returned home, Danny shared his frustration with Margola, and they again scrutinized the photocopy of the birth certificate that I had left with them.

Staring at the document, Margola remarked, "It doesn't matter under what name Franziska entered the country, as she would have looked for relatives here with the surname 'Syten,' her maiden name on the birth certificate." At that exact moment, despair became a spark of hope.

The next morning, Danny went back to the Ministry of the Interior. This time he searched for the name Syten. He located five people with that name, who lived in Haifa, Herzliya, and Tel Aviv-Jaffa. Margola and Danny searched the various phone books. The first number they found was that of Ada and Simcha Syten in Jaffa. Danny dialed. At the other end of the line, a woman in her 30s answered – the

daughter of the Syten couple. She was hesitant and confused by the call, wary of answering Danny's questions about relatives on her father's side. The only details she agreed to give were that her father, a taxi driver, had recently succumbed to a fatal illness and her mother wasn't home. They agreed that Danny would call later, when the mother would be back. He called again, and the daughter, Margalit, answered. The mother hadn't yet come home.

In the hours between the calls, Margalit had managed to remember that years ago, when she was a young girl, they went to visit a cousin of her father's in Herzliya. She also remembered another relative named Gujski in Ashdod, but she wasn't sure that the connection was on her father's side of the family. They weren't in close contact and rarely got together. Margalit also said that her father, who had arrived in Israel in 1939, was always interested in being in touch with relatives who came to Israel after him. In answer to Danny's question about whether she knew of any relatives who didn't live in Israel, Margalit told him she had a cousin in Paris and one in America, but she didn't really remember them well, and added, somewhat perplexed, "Anyway, why do you need to know?"

"Building a family tree," Danny replied. "Looking for relatives. Do you remember the names of the ones in America?"

After a short pause, Margalit answered, "I remember a cousin in Canada named Franka Bursztajn."

"Does she have any children?" Danny pressed her.

"She had a son named Moishele…and a daughter named Danka."

"And…how old is Danka?"

"My age, born in 1946."

“Is it possible that it was 1945?” he urged.

Margalit didn’t understand his insistence on knowing Danka’s exact year of birth or what caused the intense excitement in Danny’s voice over the phone. The fact was that Danny was actually trembling from the realization that there was a real chance that “Franka Bursztajn” was none other than Franziska Lewinska… my birth mother!

“Margalit, where are you now? Can I come and meet you today?” Danny asked.

Baffled, Margalit told him, “Are you crazy? What good will that do? Why is it so important?”

Danny explained that it was an imperative personal matter, and if today wasn’t suitable, he could come tomorrow. “Does it have something to do with an inheritance?” Margalit asked, trying to understand. Danny replied that the issue had nothing to do with inheritance, and that he would fill her in tomorrow when they met. Margalit evaded the topic of the meeting and cut short the conversation. Danny hung up, trying to absorb what had just happened.

For a moment he debated whether to look for me immediately at the kibbutz or to wait for more details, but realizing that he couldn’t let Margalit slip away, he called her a third time. She agreed to a meeting the next day and asked him to pick her up from where she worked as a law clerk at an attorney’s office. She suggested that they go together to her Aunt Doba in Herzliya, who would surely know more than she did.

On the way there, Margalit told Danny that her father was among the first Jews to enter Jaffa after the War of Independence, and that he took possession of a beautiful, spacious Arab house for himself. She also said that after their conversations she began rummaging through her father’s things and found the address and phone number of her Aunt Franka; she also remembered that she’d once played with Danka in the yard of their house. Just before they went into Aunt Tova’s house in Herzliya,

Margalit explained to Danny that the aunt spoke mainly Yiddish, that the relationship between the families was not a close one, and that Doba didn't even attend her father's funeral.

Margalit was welcomed with a shout of appreciation. The two hadn't seen each other for 10 years, and her aunt was quick to apologize for not coming to her cousin's funeral. Meanwhile, Danny was completely ignored. Margalit introduced him as a friend who was interested in Aunt Franka Lewinska. Doba didn't know the name Lewinska, only Bursztajn. "Why is he asking?" Danny answered her directly that there were relatives on Franka's husband's side who were looking to make contact. At that point, they were invited inside.

Doba went into the living room, sat down on the couch and began talking. She said that during the war she had been in several concentration camps and somehow managed to escape. At the end of the war, she was in a DP camp in Austria, and in 1947 immigrated to Eretz Israel. She met Franka for the first time in 1949 through Margalit's father, Simcha Syten. It turned out that immediately after arriving in Israel, Franka looked for relatives and located her cousin in Jaffa. Simcha invited Franka and her family to stay with him in Jaffa for several weeks. From there, Franka, her husband Yosef Bursztajn, and her daughter Danka moved to the beginnings of the settlement of Kibbutz Hahotrim. Communal life wasn't at all to their liking; they felt ill at ease with the concept based on sharing and the power of the many over the individual. Franka soon made contact with another cousin of hers, Yitzhak Syten, who was already a "veteran" in Haifa. Yitzhak arranged accommodation for them and got Yosef a job as a stonemason for the Haifa Municipality.

Doba also said that Franka had come to Israel from the Bergen-Belsen DP camp, and that her son Moishele was born in Israel. Danny listened intently; so far, the details fit Elana's story.

“Is Yosef Danka’s father?” he asked apprehensively.

“No,” replied Doba firmly, and added that she and Franka became friends and had several intimate conversations about their past. Doba settled herself more comfortably on the couch and continued, telling him everything she knew about Franka.

During the war, young Franka was hidden by a Polish gentile who was probably Danka’s father. When the war ended, she wanted to move west with the liberation army, cross the border into Germany, and look for her relatives in Bergen-Belsen. The man didn’t want to leave Poland, his homeland. Rescue organizations in the area offered to help Franka on her way west, and she decided to leave the Polish man. One night, she pretended that she was going to a party; a few hours later she returned and quietly picked up baby Danka and took with her the bag that she had packed ahead of time. A car was waiting for them and they made their way to Germany.

The details fit. Danny asked more questions, but Doba, by then, stopped cooperating. She wanted to know exactly what he was after, why he was insisting. Danny dodged the question and asked again about the name “Lewinsky,” wanting to know if Franka had ever mentioned that name. Doba gave in and answered that Levinsky sounds like a Jewish name, and she knew that Danka’s father was a gentile who saved Franka’s life during the war, and that she had never heard that name from Franka. In the meantime, Doba’s son, Yehoshua, came home and joined them in the living room. After Margalit said that she had Franka’s phone number in Canada, the son suggested that Danny immediately call and ask her directly for all the details he so desperately sought. Danny tried to avoid it, but the son insisted that the call take place before Shabbat. “Leave us 100 lira and call her,” he repeated. Danny realized that he had no choice and he divulged the reason.

“Franka had another daughter…and she wants to know details,” said Danny.

There was suddenly complete silence in the room. Doba looked at Danny pensively for a moment and said, “Listen, in war there are all kinds of things. People were in the kinds of places that we don’t ask about, and everyone only tells what they want to. I didn’t ask her too much about where she was and who Danka was, so why should we go into that again today?”

Danny persisted. “Look, the mother has the right to choose not to open a locked box, because she may not be interested in doing that, but the daughter also has a right ? the right to know about her origins. And in this case, the daughter wants to know and is determined not to give up.”

Even before the words were out of his mouth, Doba burst into tears: “Yes, a daughter has a right and she’s allowed to know who her mother is – a mother is a mother! But don’t call her! Franka is a sick woman and this could kill her!” Doba managed to catch her breath and continued, agitated and confused. “And…we still don’t know if it is her. Maybe it’s a mistake and it’s not possible to know what really happened, and if it’s true, then no, you shouldn’t call. But yet, this is a daughter and a daughter needs to know who her mother is …”

Doba’s partner and her son quickly intervened. The partner said that they should leave for synagogue, and her son suggested that they stop now. He didn’t understand what Danny wanted from his mother. Doba, on the other hand, calmed down and the wrinkles in her face softened. She stood up, went to a closet at the end of the room and took out an envelope with photos. On her way back to the sofa, she told them that Yosef and Franka didn’t do very well in Israel.

“As I already told you, Yosef worked paving sidewalks and paths in Haifa, very hard physical work that wasn’t enough to support the family, so he also worked as a cleaner. In 1952 they decided to emigrate to Canada. Franka didn’t even come to say goodbye to me,” Doba recalled. “She just sent regards.” After they settled in Montreal, Doba and Franka kept in touch with occasional letters.

Removing the first photo from the envelope, Doba held it up. “Here you see Franka leaving Rambam Hospital after Moishele was born. Danka is next to her.”

Doba took out more photos, some in color. “This is from Danka’s wedding. Franka wrote to me and sent pictures.” She gave the photos to Danny, who was sitting next to her.

The second Danny saw them, he knew! There was no more doubt. The resemblance between Elana and Franka was striking: the same cheekbones, high forehead, fair skin, and bright, shimmering eyes. The names that he had been searching out for the past months had suddenly taken on life…

Seeing Danny’s exhilarating reaction, everyone began to display wonder and excitement. Doba suggested Danny call her cousin in Ashdod. Her daughter Ella had married a Canadian Jewish man; she lives in Montreal and was in close contact with Franka. At his mother’s request, Doba’s son brought her a phone book from the table at the entrance. Danny copied the number and asked all those present not to spread the story and to allow Elana to decide what would be the best way for her to contact Franka.

Danny drove Margalit back to Jaffa and hurried to Jerusalem in order to make contact with us. He called the public phone at the kibbutz. One of the kibbutz members answered and promised to pass on the message to me: to call Danny at 9:30 in the evening. A few minutes before the agreed-upon time, Danny was already by the telephone, waiting. I was sure that this was an update about another failed investigation. We had Friday night dinner in the kibbutz dining room, leisurely put the children to bed, and only then did I go out, armed with telephone tokens to call Jerusalem. The phone barely rang once when Danny was already on the line.

“I found her!” He gave me a more details about Margalit, Duba, and the photos, but I was indifferent. When he went silent, I had only one question: “Do you know why

she gave me up?”

Danny was surprised that I didn’t ask how she was living and where. He didn’t understand why I didn’t bombard him with questions. Later he told me that only after he continued to reflect, he realized that at the heart of my search was the question of abandonment that burned within me even more strongly than my desire to locate my “lost” mother. At that stage, Franka’s life story was not the main point of the story for me ? it was the question of why she had given me up for adoption. Danny and I agreed to speak again soon and we hung up.

I went back to our room on the hill, opened the door, and immediately saw Dubi’s inquisitive look. I told him. He jumped up and came over to hug me.

“We’ll go to Jerusalem tomorrow and hear the whole story,” he said and left the room to arrange for a car from the kibbutz.

I got back on the phone to tell Danny that we’d be there the next morning. When Dubi came back, he told me that he’d stopped by at his parents’ and asked them to come to our room early in the morning, before the children came to the parents’ room, and to spend Shabbat with the grandchildren. My head was continually processing the extraordinary news I had been waiting for my entire life. I tossed and turned in bed that night. I knew that this was only the simplest part of the search. Until then, we had lived a normal family life with two sets of parents/grandparents, and suddenly there was another mother/grandmother that I didn’t know, who lived in Canada with a family that were strangers to me and my family in Israel. Whom would I meet? Would she even want to meet me and acknowledge me as her daughter – or refuse to do so? What would she tell me about the hidden facts between us? Why didn’t she keep me? Why did she give me up? Would the moment come when I’d get answers to all my questions from this woman – my birth mother? Just before I finally closed my eyes to go to sleep, it was clear: I would give my parents the earth-shattering news only after we met with Danny and had gotten a detailed description

of his meeting with Margalit and Tova.

We set out for Jerusalem early in the morning. Contrary to my usual behavior, I didn't sing along with the radio, just stared out at the passing landscape. As usual, Danny and Margola welcomed us warmly. We sat in the living room, and Danny began to describe the turn of events from the past month. Then he handed me two photos: one was in color, of a smiling crowd at a wedding. Everyone was dressed in fancy clothing, glamorous and all made up, yet the image conveyed something sterile, polished, and distant. The other photo was black and white; it showed Franka in a 1950s-style dress, her hair pulled back to reveal a wide forehead that made her small, narrow eyes stand out. She had a restrained smile on her face. The baby on her lap was wrapped in a blanket, and next to her stood a little girl who was also smiling. When I was five years old, I looked exactly like the girl in the picture – the same hairstyle, with a large bow in her hair that accentuated the part on the side. I always parted my hair on the same side.

My body quivered with an excitement too powerful for words. In an unforgettable moment of encounter, at the point of connection with the imagination that had plagued me for years, the same imagination that had clothed and unclothed my mother's figure in countless shapes and colors, was now met with reality. These were real people – with faces and bodies, living, breathing creatures. And they were my flesh and blood. I examined my own feelings at the moment; warmth and affection were not the sentiments that I felt. The people in the photos were strangers to me. Was that normal? Wasn't I supposed to be bursting with exhilaration and love? This was not how I'd imagined the moment of discovery. My thoughts went to Hulda and Eliezer, to my childhood – full and rich with activity in the company of other children, and in the background there was always my parents' room – a warm, loving refuge. The photos in my hands reflected the distance and the stark differences between the two worlds and between the two families. A strange "split" feeling ran through me, but the confusion didn't cloud my curiosity and determination to continue my search to the end.

When I regained my composure from the thoughts that haunted me, I asked Danny, “What do we do now? How do we get to her?” We sat for hours discussing this in the small living room of their Beit Hakerem apartment. What would be better ? to call her directly or wait? Maybe it was even more correct to search for a contact in Montreal, someone who could tell her about me, taking the state of her health into consideration. It might be worth getting in touch with the rabbi of the synagogue she belongs to. Does she even take part in the life of the Jewish community there? Each scenario had its advantages and disadvantages. We finally agreed to think about it more and to meet again.

A few days passed. I felt that I was running on automatic; thinking and digesting things. When I met with my parents the next day, I told them that I had news. I sat on the edge of the sofa next to my mother; my father was in the armchair next to me ? an intimate setting that allowed for an intimate conversation and enabled me to make eye contact with them alternately. I looked from one to the other and then told them that Danny met relatives who had been in contact with Franka during her time in Israel with her new husband, Yosef Bursztajn, her daughter Danka, and their baby son Moshe (Michael) until they left for Canada after three years in Israel.

“Where did they live when they were here?” asked my mother.

“In Haifa.”

My parents exchanged quick glances. “There was some talk about that at the time,” said my mother in a cracking, trembling voice. My father looked serious and calm, while my mother’s tension was apparent. I took out the photos and showed them to my parents, who, after looking at them, stared at each other for a long time.

“Where was the picture with the young children taken?” my father asked. We looked at the photos together and recognized background inscriptions, indicating different shops on a street built on a slope, most probably in Haifa. I shared with them the first

thoughts that came to mind when I saw the photos ? among them, my reflections on childhood, on the love I received in my parents' room, and growing up with the other children. I wanted to reassure them (and myself) again and again that nothing and no one can take away or diminish the bond between us. My father repeated his position, that from now on the reins were in my hands, and they would stand behind my every decision, fully understanding my curiosity and my right to meet my biological mother. I felt at peace. I knew I had support and that my parents were ready for any and all information on the subject.

One day I returned late in the evening from a professional training course and found Danny having coffee with Dubi. As soon as I came in, Dubi jumped out of his chair and offered to make me a cup as well. I immediately understood that something out of the ordinary was going on. It turned out that a few days after the visit to Doba in Herzliya, Margalit Syten called Danny and invited him to visit the family home in Jaffa. Her mother had heard about everything that happened and said that she had additional information about Franka to share. This time the meeting was cordial, and Danny spoke with Margalit and her mother, Ada. An educated, intelligent woman, she was a language arts teacher at the Christian mission school in Jaffa, where classes were conducted in both English and French. Firstly, Ada sought to correct a mistaken impression; it was she who had initiated the search for her husband's relatives, not he. "When I met Franka," she said, "she was an energetic, lively, sociable, cheerful, active woman." Danny smiled at Dubi. "Sounds just like Elana, doesn't it?"

Franka and Yosef lived in Haifa's Lower City, in a dilapidated hovel with a rudimentary kitchen and the toilets outside the apartment. Many Holocaust survivors lived in the area. Simcha Syten, Ada's husband, and his cousin Yitzhak helped them as much as they could to move to a more suitable apartment at 3 Rehov Tzion Street and to renovate it. Everyday life was difficult. The young state of Israel instituted a strict austerity policy to help absorb the large influx of immigrants. Franka was forced to shop on the black market to survive, even bartering goods for goods. Her husband barely made a living and they had two children, Danka-Sarah and Moishele.

After three years in Israel, Yosef didn't want to stay any longer; he hated the poverty, and he hated Israel and Ben-Gurion. Franka was optimistic and wanted to stay and build their lives here, but Yosef insisted, so in 1952 the Bursztajn family left Israel for Canada.

Danny was silent for a moment, took a sip of his lukewarm coffee, and continued. In the heat of the conversation, Margalit had decided to call Franka on the pretext that she wanted to move to North America, to New York ? and maybe even go to Montreal. Ada dialed the number. On the other end of the phone came a deep voice, raspy from cigarettes. Ada identified herself as Simcha's widow; she asked about her health and how her family was doing. Franka was happy to hear from her. She apologized for not having been in touch regarding Simcha's death, explaining that she found out about it too late. Franka continued talking and said that Yosef was fine, still working as an independent supplier of dairy products and eggs directly to the rich of Montreal. She also said that Michael – Moishele – had graduated from a teachers' seminary and had a position in Toronto, and that Diane-Danka – was divorced and living with her two sons in the New York City Borough of Queens. Franka was silent for a moment and said that last year she considered visiting Israel on their way back from a Holocaust trial in Majdanek, where Yosef was invited to testify. Yosef flatly refused to visit, so she dropped the idea. Towards the end of the call, Ada handed the phone to Margalit and Franka gave her Danka's address in Queens and asked her to come see her in Montreal as well.

The conversation with Franca shed light on her life in Montreal and her general condition. I was going to ask what she would tell that distant relative about me, but Danny cut me off. "She still doesn't know about your existence," he said gently. We had Danny stay the night with us and avoid driving back to Jerusalem so late. We talked until very late, trying to assess the situation. First option: Franka knows she gave birth to a daughter named Helena, but she doesn't necessarily know that I'm still alive. And even if she did, it's unlikely that her family members know of my existence. Would it be right to reveal her secret in front of her family and friends? To

cause her terrible embarrassment about a daughter who appeared out of nowhere? It would be possible that in such a situation, Franka would prefer to deny everything, to say that I never existed, and shield herself from dealing with the disgrace and the shame. A second option, which might increase the possibility of her cooperation, was to find someone who had known Franka for many years, perhaps someone who was in the DP camp and knew about life there. Maybe if such a person reveals my existence to her, she would feel safe and be candid with them. We all agreed that Danny would look for such a person among the survivors and displaced persons from Bergen-Belsen.

Danny devoted himself to the task and within a few days arranged a meeting with the chairman of the Bergen-Belsen Survivors Organization, Rafael Olewski. Olewski told him about life in the camp, and how it had taken in thousands of survivors who had lived through hell on earth. He spoke about the casual encounters there between men and women, pregnancies without marriage, without forethought and sometimes without it being clear who the father was. Rafael emphasized to Danny that the thirst for life and survival had motivated the behavior of all of the survivors. The number of births kept increasing, although there was often no intention of starting a family and raising the children. The human urge to “Be fruitful and multiply” was compensation for the millions of families that had been wiped out. The instinct for life was stronger than sober judgment, beyond logic and self-control, and in most cases without a thought to the future.

Danny told Rafael that he had managed to locate Elana’s mother in Montreal and it was important for him to find someone close to her who would tell her about Elana’s existence. During their conversation, Rafael realized that Franka had left the country during the early days of austerity, and he went on to explain, “It took great effort to get to Israel! At first the British were determined to return us to the rule of the Poles, Hungarians, and Czechs. We had a strong central committee in the camp headed by a leader, a man of great stature named Yossele Rosensaft, who used everything in his power to obtain immigration permits for sought-after destinations.” Rafael pulled out

a photo album and began to point out the people who were with him in the block, and who was with him on the camp committee that was organized immediately after the liberation. In another photo, a crowd of people were seen sitting around a festively arranged table. “Every year on April 15 we celebrated the liberation of Bergen-Belsen with a stirring ceremony in one of the halls in Tel Aviv. Many hundreds of survivors participated, but there were also families who had left. You have to understand that life in Israel was very, very difficult. We came from camps, initially from detention camps, extermination camps, and concentration camps and then we were in a DP camp. At the end of our journey, we arrived here and were sent to the ma’abarot (refugee absorption camps). You have to understand: We were people who wanted to get back to being human beings. We didn’t want food stamps again, or standing in long lines. My wife told me she wanted to live like all free people, and she wasn’t the only one. No one wanted to go back to Germany, to remember the shame, the killings, the pain and degradation. Thousands of survivors from the DP camp in Bergen-Belsen emigrated to North America, mainly to Canada and New York and its surroundings.”

“Are you in touch with any of them?” Danny asked.

“Yes, I’m in contact with many,” replied Rafael and they started to go through a list of people who lived near Franka and who might be suitable for the task of contacting her.

The question of how she would react occupied our minds. Days of deliberation ended with a direct phone call that Danny received from Montreal. On the line was Franka ? who began the conversation with a stormy “Danny, hello. Where is the girl?”

Startled, Danny responded: “What girl?”

“Don’t pretend with me! I know from Helen and from Ada. They told me about her. Her name is Elana. Tell her to write me a long, detailed letter.”

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:53 am

Warsaw 1939

F or many weeks after her marriage to Henrik (in her own words), the smile didn't leave Franka's lips. Twenty-one years old, shapely and attractive, Franka's golden hair reached her shoulders and her blue eyes sparkled with joy. The young couple didn't know where life would lead them, but they had confidence in the future and a zest for life enveloped them. Franka's parents, Sara and Moshe, were on edge; the political situation in Warsaw, and in Poland as a whole, was unstable. Henrik had trouble finding a job, his young wife did not bring in any income either, and they survived with the Syten family's support.

One evening Henrik announced that he had finally managed to find a job. Franka immediately envisioned the beautiful apartment they would move into, the family they would raise, and how her mother would help her take care of the children. She saw herself going to dine at her parents' house every Friday evening, her little boy sitting on her father's lap – a warm, loving family scene. But Henrik's words cut short her fantasy: The work wasn't in Warsaw ? not even in Poland. They would have to relocate to a town in the Ukraine, where he would work in the family business of his friend Vladek. Franka quickly objected. "What's wrong with us being here?" She was certain that with a bit more effort, Henrik would find work in Warsaw. Her father was more clearheaded and convinced her to take advantage of the opportunity to try a different life. Franka trusted her father's judgment and listened to him, despite her reluctance to live so far away – about 650 km – from everything she was familiar with and accustomed to.

Franka's mother helped her pack. "Take the beautiful towels from the closet, the ones I bought for Passover on Yerushalayim Boulevard. And take two dish towels and a

set of bed sheets from the closet," she said hurriedly. "I'll go make something to eat."

Franka and Henrik would be leaving soon. Vladek offered to drive them there in his car so that they could pack at their own pace.

"Maybe I'll join you? And help you acclimate?" her anxious mother offered again.

Franca rejected the offer. In recent years, her mother had been suffering from severe back pain; every wrong movement caused great pain in her left leg and made it hard for her to walk. How would she be able to tolerate the twists and turns in the road?

Their last evening in Warsaw arrived, and the family sat down to dinner as usual.

"I'll come visit you when I'm less tied up at work. The store is very busy, as everyone is looking for bargains for the coming spring," said her father.

Franka tried to catch his eye but was unsuccessful. Her father stared intently at the edge of the table, a shadow of sorrow on his face. He rested his chin on his palm, with his elbow on the table. Franka and her father were extremely close, even though they didn't see each other very much. Her father worked long hours in the family clothing store on Stavky Street, leaving early in the morning before she got up. Every day before he left, he would go into the children's room and whisper in their ears " zey gezunt " (be healthy). More than once, Franka woke up just to kiss her father and listen to his receding footsteps.

Franka and Henrik set out early in the morning. The parting was difficult and emotional. Franka consoled herself with the thought that she would soon return. Tonya, her 14-year-old sister, and Shlemik, her 19-year-old brother, ran after the speeding car until they couldn't keep up.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:53 am

Bergen-Belsen, 1947

T he first day in the Bergen-Belsen camp was one that Franka would never forget. She entered the camp exhausted, with Danka in her arms and pushing Helena's stroller. Her eyes darted about everywhere, searching for people she had spotted from the entrance gate, hoping to see someone familiar. She was astonished to discover that the place was teeming with life – people walking the paths, chatting away peacefully. In the distance she saw a short woman with a big smile coming towards her. "Do I know her?" she asked herself. They approached each other and stopped. The woman greeted her with a friendly "hello."

"Mrs. Butter is my name. Did you come alone with the babies?"

"Yes," answered Franka in Yiddish, the language of her questioner.

Mrs. Butter immediately offered her help and took the suitcase.

"Have you been assigned to a residence? We have space available in the apartment and I would be happy to have you stay with my husband and me. We've been waiting a long time for a woman with children with whom we can share our lives," she said, as if she had known ahead of time that Franka would arrive with her two daughters. We don't have children of our own and we can help you with the babies...What are their names?" she asked directly.

"The older one is Danka and the baby is Helena," replied Franka, "but about your question, I just arrived and haven't yet gone to the registration office with my documents. I'd been waiting for this approval for a very long time."

“How old are the girls?” The woman continued her questioning.

“Danka is almost two and Helena is four months,” she quickly answered.

“Are you breastfeeding?”

“Yes,” answered Franka.

“It’s not easy to find dairy products here every day, but don’t worry. I know someone from whom we can get milk and cheese for you. It’s good and it’s important for you,” she said in a mother’s warm and caring tone.

Franka followed her to the registry office. On the way, Mrs. Butter asked to see the entry permit. She looked it over quickly, as someone who knows the forms well and is acquainted with the registration procedure. She promised Franka that she would help her with all the paperwork and that she had nothing to be concerned about. When they reached the office, Mrs. Butter went in with her and exchanged a few words with the clerk. Franka was assigned to live in the apartment with Mrs. Butter and her husband. All Franka wanted by then was to reach a place where she could put her head down and get some sleep.

They walked between the rows of identical buildings until Mrs. Butter motioned her to the entrance of one of them. They went up to the first floor. As they approached the end of the corridor, the door of one of the apartments opened and a man appeared in on the threshold.

“Hello. My name is Yanek,” he said, holding out his hand for a hearty shake. Franka held out her hand and they stepped inside together.

Mrs. Butter went in after her, put Franka’s suitcase in the center of the room and turned to welcome Franka, as befitting an invited guest. “I’m glad you’re with us.

We'll share our apartment with you and help you get used to the camp. None of us knows how long we'll be here, but we'll do all we can to make you feel comfortable. Remind me of your last name."

"My name is Franka..." she began to say… and got stuck. What should she say this time? Krotenberg? Syten? Yejon? Lewinska? After a short pause she said, "Franka Lewinska. Do you know anyone named Syten or Krotenberg in the camp?"

Mrs. Butter answered without hesitation, "Unfortunately, I haven't come across those names yet, but we'll expand the inquiry later. Come in, sit here on the chair. Would you like some tea?"

Franka nodded. She felt affection for this woman and thanked fate for bringing them together. A short time later, Franka went up on the loft bed feeling relieved, but her rest was soon interrupted by trying to calm Danka, whose sleep that first night in the camp was a restless one.

The tension and anxiety didn't dissipate, and Franka didn't get any sleep. She reflected again on the moment she decided to take her fate in her own hands, return to her real identity and Judaism, and leave Marian. If there's a chance to find someone, it's there in Bergen, she thought at the time. After a long wait at the camp in Hirte, she finally reached her destination. Will she find what she's looking for here?

On Franka's first morning as a camp resident, Mrs. Butter suggested that she come with her to help get a number of things ready for a wedding that evening. "That way you can get familiar with the camp and meet some of the people," she said.

Franka eagerly agreed. Weddings were common in the camp, an almost everyday occurrence. The format was fixed: A rabbi officiated in a makeshift synagogue under the wedding canopy, and after the ceremony, everyone sat down to a meal around a long wooden table. Afterwards, everyone danced and danced. A wedding day was all

celebration and elation. Many new loves blossomed in the camp; young couples got married and children were born even less than a year after their parents had married.

These young people found solace in the new families they created. Feelings of renewal and hope for a new life stirred within them after the heartbreaking despair and depression they suffered when they realized that the chances of being reunited with their families were almost nil. It was most difficult right after the liberation. They were weak and listless, and harbored feelings of loneliness, grief, and sorrow – along with feelings of shame and guilt for having survived. Grievous anguish came over them each time they asked themselves how it was possible that they'd remained alive. They had very little information about the fate of their loved ones, or where each of them had taken their last steps in this life ? and there were so many questions. Their hearts were filled with fear and apprehension for the future. Now, in the DP camp, the will to live was reignited and they were quick to build new, trusting, and loving relationships. However, these weren't always successful relationships, and didn't always last after the children were born. Many of the survivors weren't really ready to start families. Some were taken by surprise when the woman got pregnant, as they hadn't planned to start a family at this stage and didn't commit in advance to continue caring for the child after it was born. As a result, many of the babies were given up for adoption.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:53 am

November 1979

N ovember 2, 1979. JFK Airport, New York

A tall young man bumped into my shoulder at a busy moment in the crowded passengers hall. He held the cup of coffee in his hand steady so it wouldn’t spill and apologized. “Sorry. I’m in a hurry. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. It’s nothing,” I answered. It was my fault. I had slowed my steps and interfered with the rapid rhythm of the crowd.

The place was really packed with people rushing to catch their flights, their eyes fixed on the Arrivals and Departures board. A solid, sturdy-looking man with swarthy skin approaches me with a wide smile that reveals pearly white teeth. “You need any help?” he asks as he reaches out to take my suitcase from me.

“No, no, thank you. I’m fine,” I hasten to answer, not wanting to find myself in the situation that I was warned about: porters trying to fill their daily quotas with a tourist who, without intending to, would wind up paying an exorbitant fee for his service when her foreign accent exposed her as easy prey. I rushed to the flight schedule board, looking for “Montreal” to see the departure gate number. At the check-in counter I put my suitcase on the conveyor belt and got my boarding pass. The flight from New York to Montreal was scheduled to leave at 10:30 a.m.

This was the second time in my life outside the borders of the State of Israel. I was headed to meet the woman who had given birth to me 32 years earlier in Germany, to piece things together and close a circle that was broken. Today, as an adult, I’ll be

meeting her for the first time ? in Canada. Twenty-six years of doubts and anxiety, of wondering and unanswered questions, years of secrets and things unspoken, had gone by since the day the “big secret” was revealed to me. I was six years old at the time. Now only three hours are left until I am before her. Excited and tense, I sit in front of Gate 11 for a long time before boarding, and in my mind I retrace the path that led me here.

I recalled the moment I saw the photos in Margola and Danny’s home. I was amazed by the realization that they were of my sister Danka, her mother, and her brother. This was my “old-new” family, my flesh and blood. Danny, my husband Dubi and I engaged in an intense, exhaustive brainstorming session on how to let Franka know about my existence and how to make the initial connection without causing her a seizure that could be harmful to her health. I hoped that the family members involved in the story – Ada, Margalit, Tova and her family – would respect my request to hold their tongues to enable me to find the best way to establish contact. We narrowed down the possibilities to two: The first was contacting the rabbi of the Jewish community in Montreal, who would possibly be able to shed light on Franka’s health and family situation, and maybe even agree to tell her about my existence. The second possibility was for Danny to call Franka directly and see if she was willing to be in contact with me. In retrospect, these discussions turned out to be unnecessary.

While we were debating, the rumor about the lost daughter took wings and had already reached Montreal. Apparently it was her cousin Tova Gujski from Ashdod who shared the information with Franka’s son and daughter, who had been living in Canada for years. Ella, Tova’s eldest daughter, invited Franka to her home and told her about the rumor. Soon after, on September 12, 1979, Franka called Ada and Margalit Syten in Jaffa and asked them what they knew: my name and date of birth. During the conversation with them, she confirmed that I was indeed her daughter and asked for Danny’s phone number in Jerusalem and my number at Kibbutz Merhavia.

Franka spoke with Danny the same day and wanted details about me; she left her

address and home phone number with him. Later, Franka called the kibbutz. The phone was answered by an employee of the technical secretariat, the “beating heart” of the kibbutz. Franka asked to speak with me, and at the secretariat they told her to call again in the early evening. That day I was studying in Tel Aviv and came back late at night. Dubi got the message about the expected phone call and showed up at the appointed time to talk to Franka ? who didn’t conceal her disappointment when he answered the call. She told him briefly that she had learned about me from Kuba and Ella, Tova Gujski’s children, and that she needed to talk to me and hear how I had found her and what I knew. She also asked that I write to her as soon as possible and tell her about myself and my family, and to attach photos. Dubi and Franka agreed that the next day Franka would call again at the same time.

The next day I couldn’t stop thinking about what it would be like when I’d actually hear her voice. I also began to think about what I would write to her and wondered if I would break the rules of politeness and have the courage to ask her the piercing question that had been in my mind all my life: What was the reason that she decided to say goodbye to me when I was a baby, and how it happened that my sister remained with her and I didn’t.

That day I felt that time was standing still. Finally it was evening, and time for the talk. I went down the hill to the dining room while Dubi stayed with the kids because I wanted to be by myself for the first conversation with her. Alert and tense, I stood near the only public phone in the kibbutz, waiting for the ring that would come from far away. The phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Hello, is that you Helena?” came a shrill-sounding voice on the other end of the line.

“Yes. It’s me, Elana.”

“There are no words to describe to you how many years I have waited for this moment. I always knew it would come.”

“That makes both of us. It took a little more than three decades. I’m very glad you called and I really want us to meet so I can hear how it happened that we parted ways,” I said, but before I got out the last syllable, Franka interrupted me.

“Yes, I asked your husband to write me a long letter about how you found me and what you know. Write and I will answer immediately. Of course we’ll meet. We’ll correspond and you’ll send me pictures and...” The conversation was unexpectedly cut off.

I waited by the pay phone for a few more minutes but it didn’t ring again. I went back to our room on the hill, replaying her voice over and over in my head. At home I continued writing the letter I had begun the previous evening, in which I described our life on the kibbutz and invited her to visit. I didn’t forget to attach several photos.

I received a reply within a short time, in which she expressed the desire to meet immediately. She offered to come to Israel and begged me to tell her exactly what gifts to bring for my parents, the children, for Dubi, and for me. Hinting politely, she also invited me to visit her, if I wanted, before she came to see me.

I told my parents about locating Franka and resuming contact with her after the phone call. Until then, during all the months of deliberation and doubt, I preferred that Dubi and I keep the discoveries to ourselves. I continued to teach as usual, and in the after-school hours I was with the children. But every evening after putting the kids to bed in the children’s homes, I spent the time almost exclusively talking with Dubi, Danny, and Margola about the projected meeting. These conversations added to the pressure and curiosity I felt in those days. As my tension grew, I made the decision not to wait for Franka’s visit, but to go to see her first, so I told my parents everything. Carefully and gently, I tested their willingness to allow me to have a

relationship with her, asking for their consent to a meeting and getting to know each other. My mother was restrained, while my father gave me a copy of the T'filat Haderech blessing (the Traveler's Prayer in Hebrew) with an encouraging "Nanchik, you know that what's good for you is good for us."

Less than two months later, at a general assembly of the kibbutz members, I asked for permission to fly to Canada to meet my biological mother there. In those days, travel outside of Israel, by sea or air, was rare, and was approved according to criteria set by the kibbutz. On November 1st I received the approval and I flew, as mentioned, to Montreal via New York. As I continued waiting near the boarding gate, I went over the events of the previous night, when Danny and I sat on the edge of the hotel bed impatiently waiting for Franka to pick up the phone. I held the receiver close to my ear and listened apprehensively to the unanswered ringing. I anxiously debated what to say to her, how to start the conversation... and then I heard her voice. I gave in to the pressure and handed the phone to Danny to speak first.

"Hello, Franka? It's me, Danny. Remember? I told Margalit and Ada about Elana. We're both here in New York, and tomorrow Elana will meet you at Mirabel Airport. Here she is." Danny handed me the phone. Now I had no choice.

"Hello! I'm so excited and can't wait, but how will I recognize you tomorrow?" she asked in her thick, tough voice.

"Don't worry. I'll know it's you," I answered confidently.

"How will you know me? Maybe I should wear red?" she offered.

"I've seen your picture. It'll be fine."

"But the picture was taken years ago and I've changed. So maybe you can wave a handkerchief?"

“I’ll find you, I’m sure. Just be there at 12:00 noon. We’ll meet, don’t worry…See you soon.”

I quickly hung up. Trembling, embarrassed, and distant, I abruptly ended the conversation. I wanted to keep the moment we met a special one, the first face-to-face meeting between us, and not cheapen it with forced, casual talk on the phone. The entire conversation had seemed merely about logistics and unnecessary to me. Of course I would recognize her! Franka’s voice echoed in my ears, and it seemed that she wanted to add something but I cut her off and said to Danny, “She’s so afraid. She doesn’t think she’ll recognize me and she wanted me to wave a handkerchief as a sign, like in the movies.”

I wanted to stay alone with the echo of her voice in my memory and lie down to sleep after the long flight from Israel, but Danny suggested we go out for something to eat and walk around New York a bit. I went to take a shower and probably took too long because when I came out, Danny was sprawled on the bed, half asleep. I woke him and we headed out to the “City of Lights,” which was getting ready for Christmas with glittering decorations. We got a chilly welcome from the cold air of an early November evening.

Soon we found ourselves at the ice skating rink at Rockefeller Center, with people of all ages skating to background music that already heralded the holiday season that would culminate in the New Year at the end of the next month. Giant spotlights illuminated the rink, and chains of decorations and lights sparkled with a glowing array of hues and shades. The building and streets were adorned with myriad colors flickering from all around. The skyscrapers amazed me with their looming power from above. I suddenly felt so small and foreign to these sights and sounds, the sights, from the cold weather, my breath diffusing into the air; a trail of steam on a foggy screen. I felt like an actress on the set of a Hollywood movie in a foreign land.

A little while later I found myself in a seafood restaurant, sitting with a menu that

detailed – in English, of course – a variety of foods that I wasn't familiar with. I had no idea what to order because I couldn't imagine what the names of the dishes meant and what I would be putting into my mouth. Luckily for me, Danny began reading it out loud and explaining what they consisted of, almost none of which I'd ever heard. Danny had no difficulty ordering from the menu. This would be a feast commemorating the end of a period of being immersed in searching and investigating. For about a year, Danny had tirelessly tracked down Franka's relatives who might have kept in touch with her. He inquired, researched, and interviewed dozens of people until he finally unraveled the mystery. It was thanks to him that we were sitting together in a restaurant in New York the evening before the long-awaited encounter.

Danny was a journalist, author, and senior commentator on Arab affairs. He'd suggested that I arrive in New York to coincide with the dates of a conference he was invited to as a writer for The New Outlook, an Israeli English-language political magazine. That way, he could be with me right up until the moment before my flight to Montreal. He paid for my hotel room in New York and took me out to dinner. That evening, he was just as curious as I was about the meeting scheduled for the following day. I felt bad that I couldn't repay him with money, and I had a difficult time thinking of a way to thank him for everything he had done for me. He was very dear to me – kind-hearted, honest, and genuine, and with a sense of humor to boot. At the end of the meal, we parted at the entrance of the hotel where I was staying and Danny went to the one where he was staying for the duration of the conference. The next morning, he came to the airport with me, and there we parted with a hug and my promise to let him know how things went with Franka.

An announcement in a pleasant voice woke me from my reverie on the previous night, inviting passengers for Montreal to Gate 10. As soon as the engines warmed up and the plane taxied to take-off position, I interlaced my fingers, and placed my elbows on my thighs and uttered my own version of the Hebrew Prayer for Travelers – a custom I continue to this day. When the announcement was made to unfasten the

seat belts, I stared out at the sky and pondered the coming meeting. “What do I say? What do I ask her? I want to know everything! Where can I start? I want to know about her past, how she survived, under what circumstances I was born, who my father was, what separated us, why she raised my sister but not me.” I wondered what kind of woman I would find – would she be warm and affectionate, open and direct – or resentful, calculating, secretive? Will there be chemistry between us, and will there be a connection, an openness…or will it not be possible to bridge the gap of years and I’ll feel distant and a stranger with her? One thing was clear: I intended to be careful with my questions and carefully examine her responses, her body language, and the limits of her ability to take it all in. I don’t want our meeting to have a negative effect on her health. After all, I’m the one who came to investigate and pry into the hidden recesses of the past, to scratch at the scabs.

What do I know about the wounds she carries, her ancient scars, about a bleeding residue under an outer layer of deceptive pretense? She’s the one who needs to expose and unfold a life story that opens a dark and painful period, which probably includes shady sides that must have remained secret and buried deep within her subconscious. What will she be willing to tell, and what will she hide? What will she distort, and what will she make clear? I thought about how the other members of her family didn’t interest me at that moment: her husband Yosef (Mike’s father), my sister Danka-Sarah, and my brother Moshe-Mike. My only concern was with her and me.

“What can I give you to drink?” asked the flight attendant in a polite, pleading tone, arousing me from my thoughts.

“Orange juice and a cup of coffee with milk, please,” I politely replied.

I have always looked in amazement and admiration at well-groomed, smiling flight attendants with their pulled back hair revealing round, shiny foreheads and smooth faces made up with the best cosmetics, like models who have just come out of the

beauty salon ready to saunter down the narrow aisle of a jetliner. They move gracefully among the passengers whose eyes turn to them, leaving a scented trail of perfume that becomes a dream purchase for every passenger unfamiliar with the perfume brands that beckon from the “Duty Free” cart – for me, for example, the kibbutznik from the valley, whose only feminine fragrance she put on in her youth was the “Anuga” hand cream, available at the minimarket on the kibbutz.

Fifteen minutes left until landing! I hurriedly fill in my details and the address of where in Canada I’ll be staying for the month. As a tourist, I must describe the purpose of the visit. Is it a family visit? A moment of embarrassment: Franka Bursztajn – Mother? Helena’s mother (was that really the name she chose for me when I was born?) Franka Bursztajn, born in Warsaw, meets her daughter for the first time since she gave her away as a baby. Today her daughter is the mother of three children whom Franka doesn’t know… they’re her grandchildren ? but are we family?

My legs carried me along the streaming path of arriving passengers towards border control. From there I was directed to the immigration counter for foreign residents. The clerk looked at the form I’d filled out and began the questioning: “First visit to Canada? What’s the purpose of your visit? Your mother has lived in Canada for many years and you’ve never seen her before? Will you be staying with her? When are you leaving Canada?” A nosy welcome, a sort of promo foretelling the further interrogations and questioning that will accompany me all during my visit…

When I finally get permission to continue on my way, I wait quite a while for my baggage – my dawdling suitcase. It took over an hour after landing until I found myself moving towards the exit, expecting to see a multitude of people in the Arrivals Hall beyond the door. I quickly surveyed the heads of the packed crowd and I easily spotted a short woman whose fair hair tended to red with a puffed hairstyle pulled back, accentuating her high forehead, and her complexion extremely pale. She squinted, so that her eyes ran from side to side through a narrow slit, and her forehead

wrinkled from the effort as she rose on her toes and fell back down. My eyes locked on her as I confidently advanced towards her and stood right in front of her.

“Hi. It’s me,” I said (this, after debating with myself for a long time what to say at the moment of meeting: Hi, Mother? Hi, Franka? I chose neither). She looked worried and surprised. Words tumbled from her mouth. She gave me a quick hug and kept her hands on my upper arms. A sudden shiver went through me. A few seconds of silence passed as we awkwardly scrutinized each other.

“What took you so long? I thought you might have missed your flight. Is everything all right?” She came to her senses and broke the silence.

“It took me a long time to get my suitcase and I was asked a lot of questions at the immigration counter...”

“What did they ask?” she interrupted my words with concern.

“They wanted to know if this was my first time visiting Canada, where I’ll be staying, and when I’ll be going back to Israel.”

“I really thought something had happened. The main thing is they didn’t cause you any trouble because they know how to cause trouble. Let’s go. I’ve been waiting for two hours.”

“Did you come to pick me up alone? Do you drive?” I asked.

“Yes, I got my license five years ago. I got tired of waiting for someone to drive me and bring me back... If everyone else can drive, so can I. I waited for Yosel. He said he’s coming home early from work to pick me up in his car. I lost my patience, was waiting anxiously, so I took my own car and came alone.” Her voice was firm. She spoke excellent English, but with an accent that betrayed her country of origin. In my

heart, I was thankful that we'd avoided a potentially pathetic reunion melodrama. It seems we were both endowed with the same degree of practicality and restraint that helped us skip the sentimental phase of the story in public.

"Let's go to the car. It's not far. I have a blue Chevy Nova, second-hand. I take good care of it and it serves me faithfully." We walked towards the car in silence, attentive to each other. Franka opened the trunk and helped me put the suitcase in it. I laid my handbag on the back seat, sat next to her in the passenger seat, and we set out. For a moment I thought you could cut the frozen air with a knife, so I filled the space with a statement and a question that could be interpreted ambiguously. I was curious to hear what she would choose to answer.

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1980

“ A ttention, passengers: In 20 minutes we’ll be landing at Ben Gurion Airport, Tel Aviv,” the flight attendant announced, waking me from my sleep. I looked at my watch and was surprised to see that I had slept during the entire flight. The last thing I remembered was covering my eyes with the coverlet and settling comfortably with it pulled up to my neck. It turned out that I fell into a deep sleep. I put my hand in my bag and checked that the Belgian chocolates and Toblerone chocolates I’d bought at the airport in Brussels were there. I prayed that the children would make it to the airport. Due to Dubi’s stay with the National Volleyball Team in Europe, I wasn’t sure who was going to pick me up from the airport and take me back to Merhavia.

Heading into the Arrivals Hall, I heard a sharp cry that pierced the space: “Ema!” I immediately saw the blond head of eight-year-old Shafi running towards me; behind him was three-year-old Shahar holding Shani’s hand. Hanna’le, Dubi’s sister, and Yakov, her husband, had come for me with my three children. Indescribable happiness came over me. This was the first time I’d left the children for so long – 34 consecutive days. We had spoken on the phone only four times. Shahar hung onto my neck and wouldn’t let go, kissing and hugging me tightly. He stared at me for a long time and asked, “Mommy, where is your hair?” Shafi settled for a hug and a kiss and asked if I brought him a Lakers jersey. I replied in the affirmative and pointed to my suitcase. He immediately volunteered to drag the luggage to the car that awaited us in the parking lot. I hugged my daughter and asked how she was doing. She gently touched the gold earrings in my pierced ears and said I looked different with my short hair. I also hugged my brother-in-law and sister-in-law and thanked them profusely for coming to take me home. I put Shahar down, and opened the suitcase to take out some delicious chocolate for everyone.

On the way home, I told them all about the flight, the pilot, and what it was like in the plane. Shahar insisted on hearing every detail, his gaze shifting back and forth to the postcard I sent him with a picture of an airplane. He wanted to know where my seat was, what kind of food they served, and how the plane stayed up in the air for so long without falling. What happiness to come home to hugs and kisses from my loved ones!

Another surprise awaited me: Our little house on the kibbutz was decorated, clean, and sparkling. There were flowers and a cake on the table, alongside greeting cards and balloons. We all sat down together in exalted euphoria. I brought out the gifts for the children, and then the ones for Yakov (a bottle of good whiskey) and Hanna'le (face cream). I hugged my eleven-year-old daughter and told her about her new cousins and aunt and uncle, and the third grandmother I'd met. To my great disappointment, I couldn't find the camera in my bag. An irretrievable loss that apparently disappeared somewhere between Belgium and Israel, but I was comforted by Diane's promise that she would send me the pictures she took. We said goodbye to Hanna'le and Yakov, who returned to their home at Kibbutz Beit HaShita.

Shahar asked to sleep in our room that night, while his older siblings preferred to sleep in their beds in the children's home. We all went together to put them to bed. The little one was overjoyed at the privilege of sleeping with me – just the two of us. All the way back home on the kibbutz path, I carried him curled up against me, his arms wrapped around my neck. His breathing matched my heartbeats, his eyes were closed; the heat of his body and his breath gave off the aroma of warm, calming innocence – another happy moment of relaxed connection between mother and son, free of worry, liberating me from the over-zealous vigilance I had grown used to during the entire journey. I was finally home with my precious loved ones.

Sleep didn't come quickly that night. I spent hours replaying the events of the journey in my head, one after the other. The question of what would happen now gnawed at me and prevented me from enjoying an uninterrupted night's sleep. Thankfully, I was

able to rest for a few days, as the kibbutz let me take three days off, allowing me to adjust to being back. In the afternoon I invited the two sets of grandparents to our house and we had a good time together. I gave everyone the gifts that Franka had sent; she'd thought of everyone in the family, including Dubi's parents. The children showed off their new clothes and loved their games and the chocolate.

At the end of the week, I was already assigned to Saturday duty. Life goes on. Dubi came back the following week, so I also was finally able to inaugurate the nightgown I'd bought with Diane in New York. In the evenings we filled in the gaps from our brief, hurried conversations in Germany. I spent the week of Hanukkah on duty as night guardian at the children's house..

As I promised my parents after our first meeting, I went to their house the first full day back to tell them about Franka. They were anxious to know what I had learned and what had changed in me on my visit abroad. I told them that I chose to open with the crucial question of why she gave me up. "Franka said that I got very sick in the camp and was put in the hospital there. She also got very sick and lay in her room in the DP camp, weak and unable to visit me. Her partner, Yosef, came to the hospital every day to check on me. One morning he couldn't find me there. He said that the Jewish Agency people told him that they had taken me to Israel. Later they said that the ship I was on never made it, that it had sunk on the way. Franka, however, believed that I was alive and she came to Israel to look for me. When I was with her in Montreal, she thanked me for turning out to be the person I am and asked me especially to thank you for that with all her heart."

My parents were silent and then spoke cautiously, trying their best to ignore the sensitive parts of the story. "How did she receive you?" my father asked.

"Is she nice? Is she pretty? Do you look like her? Who else did you meet? Where was she during the war? What about her husband?" My mother continued the sequence of questions.

“Franka is a good-looking, energetic, smart woman,” I answered them, “and she received me very nicely. I met her children – my brother Mike and my sister Diane, and Diane’s two sons. I look more like Diane than her brother Mike.” My parents took in my words with eager curiosity. “She was born in Warsaw. During the war she hid on the Aryan side of the city with a fake ID and was constantly afraid that she would be found out. She worked as a housekeeper for wealthy Polish women, frequently changing places of residence and managing to survive. At the end of the war she went to the Bergen-Belsen DP camp, hoping to find relatives who might still be alive. That’s where I was born. She also told me that Diane and I are from the same father.”

“Nanchik, how do you feel after the visit? What do you say about all this?” my father gently asked, focusing the conversation on me and not on Franka’s story.

“What do you mean?”

“You know, meeting a woman you don’t know... who gave birth to you, meddling in her life story and everything…”

“There were moments when I felt that she was a stranger. I listened to her stories with great curiosity and found contradictions in them. Do I want to continue the relationship? I will certainly continue to hear from her and she will hear from me, but my home is here and hers is there. She said she wants to visit very soon to see where I live, to meet the grandchildren and you. It’s important for me to know how you feel about that. Would you be willing to meet her?”

I didn’t get an answer.

“What do you say, Dad?” I asked again.

“If she wants to visit, I don’t see any reason why she shouldn’t come to meet us,” he

finally said.

“What about you, Mom? I want your honest opinion,” I said as I turned to my mother.

“I don’t know how I’ll feel when I meet her, but if it’s important to you, then it’s fine with me. I don’t need to go anywhere; she’ll come to me, not me to her.” I went over to her and hugged her.

“You know we’ll do whatever is best for you,” continued my mother. “You’re the mother of three children, and it may be important for them to know who the mother who gave birth to you is. The day that I realized that it was so burning inside you, I immediately told you the name that I had kept secret all those years.” My father added, “True, there was no point in keeping it from you anymore. After so many years, we realized that it was tormenting you. I remember your telling me about the book you read and about that mother’s conscience regarding the hereditary genome. I’m happy for you that you found her.” he added.

“I knew that you’d react like this. It’s really important for me to have an open, candid relationship with you, especially in anticipation of Franka’s possible visit, if she decides to come. Thank you. I’m really grateful to you,” I told them excitedly.

Since I’ve been back, I’ve felt a change in me. Dubi’s felt it, too. I was more relaxed and freer to analyze what I’d gone through on the trip to North America. For me, the spotlight on the basic event was split into two separate aspects that were related to each other: emotional involvement in the lives of two families. I’m the daughter of two “mothers” – Franka the biological mother, and Huldah and Eliezer, the parents. I thought about the two concepts of belonging: motherhood and parenthood. Franka is my mother, but not my parent; Huldah is both parent and mother. But does the definition also dictate an emotional advantage? This question had recently arisen in me. It hadn’t existed until my visit to Canada, and as long as Franka was just a

figment of my imagination. Now, after meeting her, and when questions were asked and answers given (many of which raised additional, unresolved questions), I continued to process a blurry connection, tentatively groping and checking: Who is this “new” mother whom I so resemble, and what are my feelings towards her?

The children didn’t express any particular interest in the new grandmother in our lives. Everything returned to a familiar, well-worn routine. I was busy rehearsing the school children for the Passover performances, Dubi continued as the CTO at the Plassim factory, and the days were long and full. After work, and especially in the evenings and on weekends, we were engrossed in feverish preparations for moving to our new home in the “Lego” housing complex, a new neighborhood built for our age group at the eastern end of the kibbutz, adjacent to Moshav Merhavia. We received a 40 square meter apartment, which had a living room attached to the kitchen, a dining area, a bedroom, and a bath/shower room. In the narrow passage between the bedroom and the shower, Dubi installed a folding wooden ladder to climb up to the attic, which would be a room for the children. Happily, the apartment was ready to move into a week before Passover.

The connection between Franka and me was via occasional phone calls and letters, in which my birth mother expressed her longing for me from the day I left, and she constantly reminded me how lucky she was. She also wrote that she had a strong love for me and the four souls dear to her and shared with me her great pain that all her children lived far away from her and she felt isolated. In one letter, she expressed the wish that all her children would live happy, healthy, prosperous lives, and said that at the end of February she was going to New York with Yosef to look after the grandchildren while Diane vacationed in Florida. In another letter, she said that she was seriously thinking of coming to Israel in the spring for a month-long visit. In response, I invited her to stay at our house, but she said no because she believed that the accommodation would be difficult for us and that “the kibbutz would go wild from the situation.” “Ha-ha,” she added sarcastically and wrote that she realized that a kibbutz is a small community where everyone knows everything about everyone

else. She repeated her complaint that when she calls the kibbutz secretariat phone, there is no answer. “Maybe they’re on strike?” she asked.

At the beginning of March, Franka wrote that she and Yosef would be coming at the end of April or the beginning of May, and asked me what to bring for everyone. I wrote that we didn’t need anything, but that the kids would love sneakers. I didn’t know how to translate the shoe sizes into American sizes, so I attached three drawings of their feet to the letter.

At the end of March, I received exciting news: She and Yosef would land in Israel on May 1st, and stay with us for four weeks. Joy mixed with worry filled me. I was very glad that we had been able to move into the new house before they came, and planned to have then stay in our bedroom and we would sleep in the attic. However, I was afraid that our tiny apartment and the rural kibbutz – without streets and shops – would be depressing for her and make her feel stifled. Mainly, I thought about the long hours they would be forced to spend by themselves when Dubi and I were working from morning until late afternoon. I excitedly got ready for the visit. I called my relatives from Givat Nesher, Haifa, Herzliya, Ashdod, and Jaffa, and informed them of their arrival. We arranged for trips for them around the country, including a whole day dedicated to a visit to Jerusalem that would include meeting Margola and Danny Rubinstein at their home.

I imagined what Franka and Yosef’s “triumphal march” into the kibbutz dining room would be like when the kibbutz members learned the details of my adoption story. A quick check of her letter showed that they were arriving on a Thursday morning, so their “debut” would coincide with the “welcoming” of Shabbat ritual on Friday evening, when all the Haverim (members), their friends and families gathered for a festive meal around tables covered with white tablecloths and decorated with flowers. The Friday night dinner would be served after a short artistic performance and singing, a perfect welcome befitting a first encounter with the kibbutz community.

I spoke with my parents and asked if they would be interested in getting them together with their close Polish-speaking friends, and they had no intention of organizing a meeting for Franka with their friends, unless it happened by chance. We signed up for a car for the dates of the trips we planned and I asked for several days off to be with them during their first few days in Israel. We prepared the children so that everything would go on as usual in the after-hours when they come from the children's homes to be with us; we also told them that communication will be in English and that we'd translate for them.

The big day arrived. Dubi and I got up and drove to the airport to pick them up. The meeting was full of emotion. Yosef was a bit restrained and Franka looked happy. On our way to the Jezreel Valley, she kept looking out the window trying to recognize familiar places, but with no success. To try to reset her orientation, Franka asked in which direction Haifa was. She was helped by the names of towns that she remembered, such as Nazareth and Afula, and she tried to link landmarks that emerged from the recesses of her memory. Towards 11:00 we arrived at the kibbutz. I showed them the room, and they went in to freshen up in the shower. In the meantime, I prepared a table of delicacies that I know they'd like, remembering from when we dined in Montreal – herring, a plate of cut-up vegetables, fresh bread and butter, cheeses, and soda. Franka was uncomfortable with the fact that we had given them our bedroom, as she had only seen one bedroom in the apartment.

"Where will you sleep?"

"In the attic. We were able to move into the apartment exactly a month ago and we're happy that we finally have two bedrooms," I answered.

Franka wasn't satisfied with just my answer and insisted on going up to see the attic with her own eyes. She climbed the wooden ladder with Dubi behind her. "It's the size of a pantry, not a bedroom," she said, surprised.

“For us, this apartment is a significant improvement. Our previous apartment had one room, a living room and a pull-out bed in the passage to the bathroom,” I said, putting things in proper perspective.

Franka walked out on the porch and marveled at the view of the valley that stretched from the foothills of the Gilboa Mountains that rose several kilometers to the southeast, and all the way to Givat Hamoreh to the northeast.

Yosef sat at the table and smiled when he saw his favorite foods. “You set the table so nicely,” he praised me. “To tell you the truth? I’m really hungry. The food on the plane wasn’t very good.”

“How wonderful this is,” Franka added. “Besides the fact that we’re sitting around your table, it’s like we are sitting down to a light lunch at home in Chomedey,” she said after looking around our small living room and seeing the decorations hanging on the walls. “I love your nice, cozy home. I feel so good to be here together with you.”

“Have you thought about which relatives you want to see in Israel?” I asked.

“Of course. First of all, Avraham and Topka in Givat Nesher, Hania from Herzliya, Rachel from Haifa, Doba from Herzliya, Ada and Margalit from Jaffa, and Tova Gujski from Ashdod,” she replied, mentioning all the relatives I had spoken with ahead of time.

“Your cousins Avraham, Topka, and Hania and her husband will be here this coming Saturday. We’ll also arrange another get-together in Herzliya. Doba and Tova from Ashdod will be there and we’ll see who else. We’ll go to see Rachel in Haifa because she can’t get around,” I told her. Franka’s eyes sparkled with joy.

“It’s important for us to know where you would like to go in Israel in the coming

month, besides meeting with family," Dubi said, joining the conversation. "We've prepared an outline. Let's see what suits you. On Sunday we'll order a car for the days of the trip," he concluded.

"What does it mean to 'order a car?'" Franka asked.

"We don't have our own car. The kibbutz has a fleet of cars, and you have to reserve one in advance for a certain date to make sure that one will be available. They're in great demand and it's first-come, first-serve," said Dubi. Franka and Yosef had surprised looks on their faces.

When they went to take a short nap, I went to get Shahar from his preschool; his brother and sister came later. We sat outside and waited for Franka and Yosef to wake up.

Just as I finished getting the "four o'clock snack" ready in the kitchen – coffee and pastries – Franka came out of the bedroom. "Who's outside?" she asked me curiously. She peeked through the window and hurried to get the bag with the gifts so as not to meet her grandson empty-handed. We went out on the porch and Franka sat next to me. After first asking me how to say "grandma" in Hebrew, she said to her young grandson, "Hello, I'm Franka – Savta Franka." He was shy and embarrassed and clung to me. He looked at her and asked, "Is that Grandma Franka? Is she also your mother?"

"Yes, I have two mothers. Grandma Huldah, who raised me here in the kibbutz, and Grandma Franka, who gave birth to me and lives in a far-away country," I answered.

"Why didn't I ever see her before?" he continued.

"She couldn't come before. Now she's here with us."

He looked directly at Franka, who put the gifts on the table and handed him his. Franka looked at him for a long time. “He looks so much like you!” she said in amazement. “The top part of his face, the forehead, and the swirl of hair on the right side – they’re all from you!”

The bigger kids arrived. Franka hugged them and spoke to them in English. Embarrassed as she handed them the gifts, they thanked her and quickly went inside. I suggested they join us for a short time and then we’d take a short tour of the kibbutz. Shahar got on a tricycle, his brother on a bicycle, and together we all went along the path that surrounds the farm. After a short time, Shani went back to the children’s house. Yosef and Franka were very impressed by the serene, pastoral landscape of the Jezreel Valley.

In the evening, after we put the children to bed in the children’s homes, Dubi went back home and I went by my parents’ house to ask how they were and find out how they felt, knowing that the time to meet had come.

“Has she seen the children yet?” my mother asked as soon as I went into the room.

“Nanchik, how do you feel about having her in your house?” my father asked, almost at the same time.

“It’s strange and somewhat stressful. I hope they’ll be all right with the lack of room and manage with things they’ll have to get used to. They live in a big house, there’s a shopping center within walking distance, and they live comfortably. The meeting with the children was subdued, but what else could we expect?”

“What are you going to do with them while they’re here this month?” asked my father.

“Basically – visiting her cousins and trips to important sites in the country. I’ll need

your help on long working days when we'll get home only in the evening. We'll also coordinate with Nehemiah and Miriam. We won't be taking the children with us on all the trips."

"No problem! It'll be a great pleasure for us," they answered in unison.

"She really wants to meet you. I think that tomorrow we'll have lunch with them at our house and I thought that maybe afterwards we could come to your place for coffee and cake with the children." My father had a smile on his face and immediately agreed.

"I don't know what to say. The situation seems to be a bit strange to me," my mother mused aloud.

"You can just speak to them in Polish or Yiddish," I hastened to respond.

"I think there's no other way anyway. We don't speak English, and they don't speak Hebrew."

"Right," I confirmed.

I breathed a sigh of relief and I felt so proud of them. I understood that they had crossed the barrier of apprehension and uncertainty that had plagued them all these years, from the moment they gave me Franka's name. My mother's feelings today mainly reflected overexcitement rather than anxiety. For the first time, I clearly separated in my mind the word "mother" – full of emotion and love – and "the mother," which to me became an expression solely of a biological relationship. I had no doubt that Huldah understood her advantage over Franka, whom she was about to meet face to face for the first time. It was strange to think about how the conversation between Franka and my mother Hulda would go the first time she met with a foreign woman who is "the mother."

Zero hour was approaching. Franka wore her favorite blue suit, put on makeup, and organized the gifts she brought for my parents. Yosef wore a gray jacket and matching tie, ready to go. Our older children arrived from the children's home and together we all walked to my parents' house, five minutes away. My father greeted us at the front door and my mother invited Franka and Yosef to sit in the living room. I saw that Father was very excited. I was familiar with his habitual taking short breaths between sentences when he welcomes guests. My mother had apparently taken a pill to relax her, as she seemed quiet and unemotional. She often uses pills in stressful situations, and under their influence her look becomes a little frozen and glassy and her reaction time is slow during a conversation. I gave her a hug and whispered, "Everything will be fine."

Franka and Yosef sat down on the armchairs opposite my parents on the sofa, a table of treats between them. My father bragged about his homemade wine and poured a glass for each of us. He gave alcohol-free grape juice to the children, which he'd also made. The atmosphere was festive, and soon we began to relax a bit. The conversation flowed among them in Polish; an active dialogue between Franka and my father understood without difficulty. Yosef was silent most of the time, enjoying my mother's chocolate nut cake, and even praising her and the wine. My mother didn't talk much and served tea and coffee. The children were treated to their favorite milk chocolate bars.

Franka took advantage of a moment of silence and opened with a dignified and moving speech. At the beginning, she took out a long, rectangular gift box and handed it to my mother, who was surprised to see that it contained a fancy wristwatch. She gave my father a light blue silk tie. Franka chose to speak English so that both Dubi and I would understand, and asked me to translate for my parents. I sat Shahar on my lap and asked his older siblings to pay attention to her words. Her voice was trembling and she looked directly into the eyes of my mother and father:

"I thank you both for raising Elana so wonderfully. It's very easy to see that you've

given her a great deal of love and raised her with good values. As I was able to see in less than two days, I know that your love for her has no limit, and I can only regret that I wasn't the one who got to raise her. I have no words to thank you. I'm lucky that Elana was able to find me, and thanks to this we've reached this moment when we meet in the place where Elana grew up and today is raising her own children. I have been blessed with the best and most wonderful family one could ask for. You deserve much more than the symbolic gifts we've given you. I hope we continue to keep in touch."

Her voice broke towards the end. I translated into Hebrew; my father's eyes filled with tears, and my mother smiled slightly and thanked Franka for the kind words.

It was Dubi who responded to Franka: "I'm very happy with what we achieved in our long, difficult search. It wasn't easy. Several years have passed since the first piece of information fell into our hands. Seeing you here with us shows me that we succeeded. We followed a loose trail of facts, investigations, and retrieval of documents from the past that led to today, to this moment when we're all sitting here together. We're glad you're with us, and with Elana's parents."

I translated Dubi's words for my parents. Now it was my turn. I chose to speak Hebrew: "Years of wondering and questions, inquiries and searches, could not have ended better than what is happening here right now: Both sets of my parents are alive and well, sitting with their three grandchildren. This scene could not have taken place without Dubi, who uncovered the first link and urged me to keep on searching at times when I almost gave up. My parents gave me endless support, amazing and unbelievable. They encouraged me and supported me with a clear statement: 'What is good for you is good for us too. Do what your heart tells you. We won't stop you from choosing your path.' For that I thank you and respect you so very much. I know that a lot of who I am today is thanks to you and the environment I lived in here on the kibbutz. Yes, I had some tough years as a teenager ? I was rebellious and made things hard for you. I wasn't approachable, and it was difficult for you to

communicate with me. I didn't always behave towards you with patience and respect, and for that I apologize. I had many unresolved questions that angered me. Today I look back and am able to admit this clearly, as a mother of my own children. I can also understand Franka's conscience and sorrow in her life, and the longing to one day find me, that was no less than my longing to know who I belonged to and from where I came. So let's raise a toast in honor of our children and grandchildren, who now have a third set of grandparents, a special gift of its own!" I finished on a solemn note.

My father was already completely broken up and went to the bathroom to calm down. My mother thanked me. I preferred not to intensify the emotional scene with hugs that might leave anyone of them in an awkward position of priority and I immediately began translating what I had said for Franka and Yosef. My mother joined my father in the kitchen. When I finished, Franka hugged me and said, "I have always waited for this moment!"

We allowed the two pairs of grandparents to talk to each other in Yiddish and went out to play with the children on the grass in front of my parents' house. We went to Friday night dinner as an extended family of three generations: six adults and three children. I walked behind the rest of the family with Shahar and asked him, "How many grandfathers do you have?"

"Two," he said.

"Who else isn't here that's waiting for us in the dining room?" I continued.

"Miriam and Nehemiah," he replied.

"Who else is walking ahead of you?"

"The uncles," he answered.

“What are their names? Do you remember?”

“Franka and Yosef,” he answered.

“What is Franka to me?”

“Mom, too,” he said.

“What is she to you?” I made it difficult.

“I don’t know,” the boy answered honestly. I hugged and kissed him and said, “I still don’t know what she is for me either, even though she’s the mother who gave birth to me.”

At the top of the spiral stairs leading from the ground floor to the dining hall, Miriam and Nehemiah were waiting for us, leaning against the railing watching us coming up. Our young son ran to Nehemiah, who picked him up while excitedly shaking the hands of the invited guests with his free hand. We walked together to the east wing, which was filled with those who come early for dinner. We pushed three tables together and made it one large family table as we all took our places around the Sabbath evening tables set with white tablecloths and flowers. The dining room began to fill up. Lots of people approached us with a “Shabbat Shalom” greeting and expressed their excitement on the special status of the united family.

Some of the founders of the kibbutz who came over to greet Franka and Yosef were born in Poland. Each of them announced his place of birth: Sejny, Rzeszów, Brody, Sambir, Drohovich, Sosnovich, Jaroslavl, Lviv, and Krakow. A special aura of excitement arose around the table when Wanda, the mother of Yoel, one of my classmates, introduced herself as a Warsaw native. Franka got up from her chair and hugged her warmly. The conversation between them went smoothly in Polish and they made arrangements to see each other on Saturday night.

When the announcement was made for quiet and for everyone to sit down, I stood next to Uchma the accompanist and got ready to sing the Sabbath song “Yarda Ha’Shabbat.” I held the microphone in my hand and went over all the words in my head to be certain I wouldn’t make a mistake. My youngest son stood next to me, I patted his head and asked him to stay quiet until I finished singing. The piano introduction got the audience’s attention and finally there was silence. Two lines in this song, written by Yehoshua Rabinov, particularly moved me that evening: “And girls go out into the evening / singing psalms of longing.” I thought of the two mothers sitting there listening to me, their daughter. I also thought about my own daughter, who completed the three-generation female lineage. When I returned to the table, Franka stood up and hugged me happily and proudly.

The first baptism of fire in the dining room went smoothly. The “house did not catch on fire.” Close friends of my parents came to shake Franka’s hand and have a short conversation with her in Polish, as if they were meeting a familiar city girl from days gone by. If I were part of the soundtrack running backwards in their minds, I reflected to myself, I would surely have met each and every one of them at the same intersection they left, the moment they saw their families there for the last time, before the Holocaust slaughter on Polish soil. Today none of them wants to return to visit there.

On Saturday, after a leisurely breakfast in the arbor in front of our house, we went to the children’s farm, a route we particularly like. We continued to the “big” yard where the first stone houses on the kibbutz were built in 1911. Franka was impressed by the buildings and the story about the hardships of the pioneers. Her ears perked up when I mentioned Golda Meir, a figure she admired. Golda was one of the pioneers in that first group and I tried to expand on the conversation about her. We returned home via the children’s homes. We all went into our older son’s children’s home, and he gave us a tour. He proudly showed us the bedrooms and the adjoining classroom and said that he really liked being there in the company of other children and his classmates, who were his best friends. We hurried home to get ready to greet the

guests who would be arriving in the afternoon. It was a meeting filled with laughter and tears, with Avraham, Franka's beloved cousin, and his wife Tova, from Givat Nesher.

At the end of the visit, I took Franka to see Wanda – who was also from Warsaw – and Kalman's house. When we got back, she excitedly told me Wanda's story and what they had in common with their strength to survive in Warsaw during those terrible years. Wanda was born there; her family lived in a prestigious area among gentiles (her mother was a well-known physician). When the Jews were rounded up, the family moved into the ghetto. Wanda's father was murdered and she was sent to Majdanek and from there to Auschwitz. Twice she was saved from the furnaces and managed to survive with four of her friends. They were sent to a transit camp in Austria and from there they made it to Israel.

Franka was silent for a moment and looked at me pensively. "During the years that I pretended to be a goya, a gentile," she added, "I worked for those wealthy ladies and I was very familiar with the prestigious Aryan area that Wanda came from. Every time I meet someone from there, it seems to me that we were in the same place where the fear of death was always with us. People just disappear, and death is never satisfied. Our ability to stay alive is the magic of survival," she said as she put her hand in mine. "The choice of the immediate over what we expect to happen, the intuition to instinctively choose the present moment over the unknown, is why we choose life over worrying about future problems because of the path we choose. All of these decided my fate, as well as Wanda's, in those nightmarish moments of fear."

It was a defining moment that reflected a profound insight into her character; her understanding of what life is about deserves to be instilled in future generations.

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O ur parents' generation disappeared from our lives in pairs: Dubi's mother died first, and soon after her, Franka's husband Yosef passed away. Five months apart, my father Eliezer and my mother Franka, two dear, key people in my life, left this world. Apart from me, very little connected them – both were born in Poland and shared a common mother tongue. The circumstances of life bound their fates together. Two families … one gives up, and the other adopts. On July 5, 1997, my mother Hulda passed away on Kibbutz Merhavia, and less than three months later, on September 29, 1997, Dubi's father, Nehemiah, passed away. In 2009 my sister Diane died…

Those dear to us yet do not continue to live among us, are burned into our consciousness, as living mosaics, floating and ever present. To this day, I miss my father, who is embedded in the landscape of my childhood, my youth, and my adulthood. He is part of who I am ? in behavior, skills, sensitivity, and inclinations of the heart. My mother Huldah connects me to the tastes and smells of tall, airy cakes baked in the "wonder pot" over a burner on the stove top, and scrambled eggs cooked in a tin cup over a steaming kettle. Her box of wooden sewing tools, which opens to three levels, brings me back to the times when we sat close to each other on winter evenings when my mother taught me to knit and mend holes in socks. My mother Franka put a mirror before me, revealing our genetic closeness with outward resemblance and dominant character traits. In a short period of four reunions over seven years, a special and powerful bond was formed between us; it was a connection built thanks to a gripping journey of investigation, examination, and the discovery of an abandoned child's unknown identity.

Franka wove for me a life, some parts true, some of it wishful thinking. In the process, I learned that a layer of fiction is found in the hearts of many Jewish immigrants whose lives were turned upside down by that horrific war. They live in

the here and now, although the past is in their minds, in the corner, within the folds of memory. Of the flashes of past memories constantly present between the “here” and “there,” some of them build a wall to protect themselves from the past, while others promote the present and breathe new life into it. Such was the case with my mother Franka, and with my father Eliezer. I am blessed to have both of them within my heart.

It’s hard for me to say that I loved Franka as a mother. The meaning of the word “mother” lost a bit of its meaning, as far as I was concerned, on that night at the kibbutz when I realized that my father and mother weren’t my birth parents. “You only have one mother,” the saying goes, but my reality was different. I had two mothers: one gave birth to me, and the other raised me. I didn’t resemble the one who raised me, and instead I closely resembled the mother – in appearance and in character – who gave me up when I was a year old. The blood relationship connected us in a close, respectful relationship with sensitivity, compassion, and forgiveness.

In the years that have passed since Franka’s death, I have continued to try to uncover the truth, or at least obtain a broader perspective on the early life of the mother who gave birth to me and the precise circumstances of my birth and abandonment.

Franka passed away, taking her secrets to the grave. She never admitted to giving me up and never told me who my father was. I visited the hospital where I was born, as well as the children’s home from which I was sent for adoption. My understanding of the complex relationship between me and the houses of my two mothers has deepened. I realized that the craving to find out what and how things happened was replaced by an intense longing to belong ? which is the title of my Master’s thesis: “A Longing to Belong.”

In the possessions my mother left in her estate, I found photos and documents that helped Mike and me decrypt the course of her life until she arrived in Canada.

Towards the end of the writing of this book, I took a DNA test. The findings weren’t

surprising: my genome indicates about 50% Ashkenazi/Jewish origin. My closest match, besides that of Wayne (my sister's son), was found in a Christian woman named Ola Dolinski, who was born in Warsaw. Her family tree includes a person named Marian Dolinsky. Sound familiar? After all, Marian Lewinsky was one of the fathers' names Franka gave at one time or another. While this opens a window for further inquiry, I believe it is time to stop and say, "This far and no more." This is now where I leave things by choice, my own free choice. I have found my truth. Enough.

The writing of Franka's story (Part Three) was based on things she spoke about. Some of them appear in the book in their original wording, and others were written after a selection from among a plethora of versions and stories that she recounted. I chose the most plausible biographical narrative for the events, and I filled in the gaps, even if what I wrote wasn't backed up with conclusive evidence. There were times when I chose to write what my heart told me to: the abandoned child who wants to believe that her mother was tormented by the separation and abandonment, and the grown woman who discovered in the confession of Morris, who had listened at the door and heard his mother Helen discussing with Franka her secret about being raped, and that she wasn't certain who Elana's father really was. The writing process was accompanied by many difficult, painful moments of sorrow on the one hand, and on the other, an abundance of gratitude for the privilege of growing up as someone from two "mother homes" ? one on Kibbutz Merhavia in Israel, and the other in Canada. Both contributed to making me who I am.

In the eighth decade of my life, I no longer deal with the questions that tormented me for years. I know that my identity is the result of a nebulous life journey influenced by events and questions of time and place. My "belonging" is in my soul, in the connection between different aspects and influences. I belong to the family I founded, to my parents, and to the legacy instilled in me.

I knew that to continue to dream, to want to know the truth, and to believe it is possible and a privilege, when one is armed with courage, determination, and

optimism, you know that there will be sorrow along with the joy.

“The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain. Is not the cup that holds your wine the very cup that was burned in the potter’s oven? And is not the lute that soothes your spirit, the very wood that was hollowed with knives? When you are joyous, look deep into your heart and you shall find it is only that which has given you sorrow that is giving you joy.”

Khalil Gibran, “On Joy and Sorrow”