Memoirist Magazine
December 11, 2022

Rendezvous in Bruxelles

She had an exotic name: Floris. And photos of this girl who was my mother's favorite teenage student in Brussels after World War II matched the name: Floris was unusually tall, with far-seeing eyes and torrents of curly black hair. My mother mentioned Floris whenever she talked about her life in Brussels from 1945-1950, after surviving the Holocaust. That striking name seemed to match the country, Belgium, which I discovered in our brown Funk & Wagnall's encyclopedia had three official languages, and it fit with the scant details of my mother's life there that she was willing to discuss.

What my jaunty, often sarcastic mother did share often made her sound as if she was recounting lovely moments from a dream and over time, Belgium was as romantic to me as Camelot.

I knew that she and my father lived over a bakery and woke to the smell of fresh bread each morning—and the echo of a nearby tram rounding a corner. One of her neighbors was an actual streetwalker, which my mother at first found hard to believe given the woman's advanced age and stately elegance. But she did say, "*Je fais les boulevards*"—I walk the streets.

This was also apparently the woman who taught my mother how to cook a perfect omelet and much more, and occasionally babysat my infant older brother. Brussel was a site of transformation in ways large and small. The black fireplace mantel in their first tiny apartment, for instance, was actually covered in soot and after much washing was a gleaming, black-veined white. I couldn't imagine anything that dirty and their "rescue" of it had the feel of a fairy tale.

Adding to the atmosphere of the unexpected, my very rational, straightforward mother actually wrote a romantic-sounding play about the Wind, a play that was performed by her students in Brussels and in London for Jewish audiences. No manuscript of the play survives—not even a program. But Floris played the Wind because she was so tall and striking.

I never thought I'd meet this woman whose family, along with many other Holocaust survivors, had eventually moved to Australia to be as far away from Europe as possible. But I did meet her, in Brussels, and she changed my life.

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Floris and I rendezvoused for the first time in Brussels' ornate fin-de-siècle Hotel Metropole, whose palatial lobby and reception areas were such a riot of gilt decoration, stained glass, mirrors, ornately carved mahogany panels, and chandeliers that I would feel underdressed in anything less than a suit. A new suit.

This was a relic of my childhood, of my mother's complaints that she had nothing to wear, and my own sense that other kids at school always had more money for clothes and toys and trips and summer camp. That shame wasn't paranoia. My Holocaust survivor parents came to the U.S. with very little money and struggled for years to get established.

Floris was a soft-spoken, dark-eyed, slightly round-shouldered woman somewhere around sixty-five, with a shy warm smile who seemed both confident and careful in her choice of words. She punctuated her sentences with a reflective "yes?" that was part-observation, part-question. Nothing flighty there--she planted her feet and herself solidly.

Floris wore a trench coat over her no-nonsense blue suit, white blouse and scarf. I felt instantly at ease with her foursquare unpretentiousness.

She told me later that she was expecting someone chubby, middle-aged and balding. At six feet and only 175 pounds, with shoulder-length reddish blond hair, I was clearly a bit of a surprise.

"But give me time," I said. "I could end up like that."

While I wasn't an archeologist making the discovery of a lifetime at a recalcitrant dig, I felt a quiet sense of wonder penetrating my fatigue and jet lag. "This is one of my mother's students," I thought, "from fifty years ago," as we headed into the hotel bar for coffee and a Croque Monsieur sandwich. I hadn't eaten

since I got off the plane hours ago and my head felt light, light enough to rise to the carved ceiling several stories high. It was a setting for top hats, glistening evening gowns, and jewels. I felt slightly diminished by its magnificence and still not quite attuned to hearing French again--it'd been half a year since I was in Paris, but felt like much longer than that.

We chatted in a start-and-stop way, sheltered by a high-backed brown leather banquette. In some Australians I've met and in movie Australians, the broad accent feels not just exotic but sarcastic or even a put-on. But in Floris, the accent made her seem even more forthright.

It was remarkable that we met, having found each other fifty-plus years after she and my mother left Brussels for such different and distant countries.

By this point, my mother had been dead for two years and the idea of writing something about her was nagging at me. I'd published a prize-winning essay about her illness and decline, but I longed to write something more positive, less painful, and more substantial.

Then the idea of writing a book about my mother and the school she taught in came to me in the spring of 2001. That very April evening I begin searching the web for information about Belgian Jewish organizations, and within days had fired off emails and letters explaining in well-polished French who my mother was and what little I knew of the school.

I had help from a bilingual colleague but I owed the facility I had in French to my mother, who had helped me at home with my homework from 4th grade on and assiduously worked on my accent. She showing me the French "l" with tongue curled back behind one's teeth over and over again--as opposed to the flat-tongued American "l." She was *that* focused, *that* diligent. It paid off. The thrill of winning my high school's French award and getting a beribboned certificate at a ceremony where I shook the French ambassador's hand had worn off long ago, but whenever I was in France and someone commented with surprise, "*Mais vous parlez bien, monsieur*," ("Your French is good") and asked where I learned my French, I felt connected to my mother through this unexpected legacy.

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Replies to my queries started showing up within a few weeks, with offers to help by forwarding my letters elsewhere. As it turned out, many and perhaps most of them went to the same place, the Musée Juive de Belgique, and the crabby head archivist there was rather peeved that people kept turning to him for information. He asked me not to send out so many queries ("*Merci de ne plus envoyer des lettres à tout le monde car elles arrivent pour finir toutes chez moi*.")

His own e-mail to me was a tremendous disappointment. He claimed to have extensive archives related to my mother's school, but as we emailed back and forth

it became clear that the school my mother taught at was not covered by material in his collections--or so it seemed at the time.

The problem was that I didn't know the school's name or address, only that its curriculum was in Yiddish and it was probably connected with the Jewish socialist organization The Workmen's Circle (*Arbeiter Ring* in Yiddish).

The director of the *Institut D'Études du Judaïsme* eventually sent me copies of pages from a French Jewish yearbook listing all the Jewish organizations in Belgium in 1950 and I thought I'd identified the school. The school was listed as the I.L. Peretz School, named after the famous Yiddish writer, so that piece of information made sense, and it had an address in the Anderlecht neighborhood, where I knew my parents had lived. My father couldn't remember the name or address but said my mother had walked to school, so that had to be it. "If you put me down in Brussels, I'll find it," he promised, but that didn't seem as helpful as he thought it was.

If I knew the school, wouldn't that make it easy to locate information about it? Not at all. The correspondence with Belgian Jewish organizations was very amicable and even quite friendly for the most part, and each letter, fax, and e-mail was both exciting and depressing. As days slid into weeks, it was clear that I was not really getting anywhere and it began to feel like a detective story as group after group

was unable to help me, even a group of hidden children ("*L'enfant Caché*."), which struck me as very strange.

I couldn't understand it. Wouldn't there have been some record of this school? Was it so unimportant? Its Jewish students had been survivors and hidden children--wasn't there some trace of them? Had it all been swallowed up by time?

An American contact at YIVO, the Jewish research center in New York that had once been in Poland, suggested I get in touch via the Web with someone at an international organization of child of survivors of the Holocaust. I dutifully posted a query to their bulletin board one evening, and the very next morning found this in my Inbox:

Dear Lev,

I was a pupil at the I.L. Peretz School in Brussels after the war. I was very moved and excited to read your Email. Both the Lererke [Teacher] Katz and your mother - Lererke Klaczko - were my teachers. I enjoyed my years at the Peretz School and I have good memories of both of them. I left Brussels in 1949 and though I saw the Lererke Katz in later years, I always wondered what had happened to your mother. By coincidence I am going to Brussels at the end of this month. I'll be back at the end of June. I'd be delighted to answer your questions as best I can. This is a real "blast from the past" for me.

Best regards, Floris Kalman

I shouted, I whooped, I cried. I couldn't believe it. Though it had only been about a month and a half since I started the research, I had spent so much time on the web, churned out so much correspondence that didn't seem to get me anywhere, and struggled with forgotten nuances of French that I had begun to despair of finding anyone. Now I was surely wrong. There was a future for this book. There were living links to the past I was only beginning to understand.

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Three days later another contact bore more fruit.

Reaching out to YIVO in New York yielded what would turn out to be a major lead. A very helpful archivist there who explained that Workmen's Circle archives were housed at YIVO also gave me names of people to contact in Brussels and Switzerland, people who might be helpful.

Nathan Weinstock, a lawyer who knew the director of a Yiddish school once allied with the Bund and the *Arbeiter Ring*, gave me the name and phone number of a psychiatrist who he believed was the director's daughter: Ida Lounsky. I looked her up on the web and wrote immediately to explain--in rapidly more fluent French--that I was an American writer and journalist, that I believed my mother had taught

with her mother in a school linked to the Bund in Anderlecht until 1950, and that I would like to interview her and any students of the school if they were available.

Her gracious reply reached me by fax on my birthday a few weeks later. My letter had connected her, she said, with a distant past that was still alive, she had contacted a series of people who were former students of the school and they were all completely ready to help me. So there I was in Brussels to meet grey-haired, middle-aged students who had known my mother. When I spent time with them one long lunch where I could hardly eat I was so overwhelmed, they all noted that I had her smile. This was both surprising and wonderful since I had never been told I looked like her and it brought me to tears as well.

The week was a blur of erratic sightseeing and many meals of *moules et frites*, and waffles of course. I interviewed Floris several times at various sidewalk cafes, steeped in the aroma of coffee and the comforting sound of French with occasional Flemish drifting my way. She shared her childhood fears in hiding with different families, having to go to church every Sunday and pretend to be Catholic with one, and work in another family's restaurant even though she was barely in her teens. It was a kind of Holocaust story I was unfamiliar with and struggled to fit into the book I hoped I could write.

But thanks to her, I laughed harder than I had in a very long time, maybe since my mother had died two years before.

Floris wanted me to meet an old family friend of hers, Irène, who picked us both up at the hotel for a ride to the Palais de Justice, home of Brussels' courts. It's a mammoth, ungainly, domed and columned edifice that seems to have been put together in the dark. It bristled with scaffolding. Irène, who was as well-coiffed and chic as a CEO, kept telling jokes about the rather monstrous building, considered the world's largest courthouse, that major symbol of justice in Belgium—and bigger than St. Peter's in Rome. It was by then almost a hundred and fifty years old and falling apart, beset by leaks and mold. Scaffolding had covered it for decades and these are two that I remember:

"What is the Palace of Justice guilty of? Why is it behind bars?"

"Brussels has the only Palace of Scaffolding in the world."

But it wasn't until we were driving off for dinner that I had a series of revelations. We had stopped at a red light with a park on one side of the street and elegant 19th century townhouses on the other the reminded me of exclusives streets in the Upper East Side in Manhattan. Irène was in the middle of a wildly colorful anecdote whose French I understood in a kind of time delay: words kicked in a few seconds after she spoke them. But I knew exactly what she meant when Floris noted that the light had changed and people were honking at us.

With panache, Irene announced, "*J'ai quarante ans des klaxons derrière moi!"*

Loosely, it meant that she had forty years of people honking at her. Subtext: She had survived the Holocaust and slowing down traffic on a sunny afternoon didn't mean much in the grand scheme of things.

It was bold, hilarious and triumphant.

And I could imagine my witty, demanding mother saying the exact same thing. In that moment, I felt my mother's presence in the car as strong as the scent of the Nuits de Paris perfume she adored, and I knew that whatever I discovered (or possibly missed) on this trip, I had a moment of joyous communion that I would never forget.

As for Floris and Irene, they were like some dynamic comedy team, Floris the sober-minded "straight man," Irene the voluble, easy-going jokester. Being entertained was the last thing I had expected on this trip, and it was a relief to feel so relaxed, so much at home—with more surprises ahead.