

A New Beginning



Life had been kind to us in Kansas City, and we had made good friends. Yet we never considered making it our home. We felt no affinity with the flat, dry landscape or the fierce summer heat and winter cold. We had seen quite a bit of America by now, but no place where we could imagine settling down.

Was there no corner in this huge country like the homeland we had left behind? No poetic spot of deep forests and wide waters, balmy summers and mountains crested with snow? No place where we could have access to concerts and theaters, yet also go swimming, boating, berry picking, hiking and skiing?

The more we talked to people about what we wanted, the more we heard the name of Seattle. There seemed only one drawback, but that was serious. Nick had mentioned our plans to a classmate. "Oh, no!" the fellow protested. "You've worked so hard to learn English. Now you'll have to start all over with some Indian language." Remembering the multiplicity of languages in Europe, we accepted his word and were almost ready to cross Seattle off our list. But it went back to first place again, once others reassured us that English was indeed spoken there.

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We left Kansas City in August of 1948, in the midst of a searing, glaring heat wave. We arrived in Seattle to tender warmth and subtle light. Everywhere we turned were green hills and wide stretches of quiet water, with the peaks of the Cascades and the Olympics faintly traced in the distance. We looked around, looked at each other, and knew this would be our home.

Nick began his grueling year of internship. I went to work, first as a nurse's aid, then doing alterations at a department store. One day in April, while I was at work, there was a sudden thumping roar such as I had never heard in my life, while at the same time the floor began to heave and rock. People started chasing around in a

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panic, shouting "Earthquake!" I had no idea what the word meant. Neither did Nick, on his lunch break at the hospital. He made his way to a window to find out what was happening, and looked out to see all of the light poles swaying.

The quake did some damage, but the worst of it was that when it was over it wasn't necessarily over. Nick and I soon learned all about foreshocks and aftershocks and the possibility of a "really big one." Our idyllic Seattle, it seemed, had been built on dangerous ground. It was a place where Nature itself might rise up against you, where the very earth beneath our feet could not be trusted.

After all we'd been through, did Nick and I really want to live in such a place? Yes, we did. We really did not expect life to be safe, but we did want it to be rewarding. The beauty of Seattle and the promise of its lifestyle so far outweighed the small likelihood of harm that we continued with our plans to stay, just as if there never had been a quake at all.

Our friends were no more tempted to leave than we were. They were people whose lives were deeply rooted in Seattle, and the better we got to know them, the more rooted we felt as well.

The first couple we had met, Dutch Jews named Artur and Frieda Lagawier, were cousins of friends we had made in Kansas City. Artur was a brilliant, stimulating, paradoxical sort of person, a Ph.D. and an agnostic, who was also a rabbinical scholar, a theologian, and a lecturer in Biblical subjects at the University. His acquaintanceship was immense, and included Martin Buber, the philosopher, and Chaim Weitzmann, the greatest of all the Zionists. Frieda was also an exceptional person, highly cultivated, with great social skills.

The Lagawiers were acquainted with many of Seattle's civic and cultural leaders, and were active in the Jewish community. They introduced us into their circle of interesting and successful people, who accepted us without question. By the time Nick was qualified to practice, he already had a very wide acquaintanceship. As a

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result, he was a success from the day he opened his office. He was soon doing original research in the field of dental implants and his name became very well known.

What followed were, in many ways, magical years, yet sometimes bleakly shadowed. Now that I was safe, secure and beginning to have money again, the dark forces I had been suppressing began to surface.

I quit my last job as soon as Nick opened his practice. On the fifth of December, 1950, our daughter, Margaret, was born. I was in superb health and it was an easy birth. I remember taking a little green pill, and the next thing I knew, Nick was telling me that we had a beautiful daughter.

We had both wanted a girl. Girls tend to stay closer to their parents, and we wanted a child who would stay close. Looking back, I can see we asked a very great deal of Margaret. Without quite realizing it, we expected her to make up for all the family we had lost.

Her birth brought me very great joy but also very great sadness. Nick and I had marvelous friends by now, in some ways as close as family. Yet to have borne this child and have no grandparents or aunts or uncles to rejoice in her, and to remember why this was so, was sometimes more than I could bear.

My extended family had been my world, my life. So long as I had been preoccupied with the struggle for survival, I could almost forget that. But to find myself suddenly with security, a child, and leisure, brought it all back. Never until now had I felt so keenly the extent of my loss or the precariousness of life.

Morbid thoughts assailed me. What if Nick and I should die? What would become of Margaret? She was so little, so vulnerable, so alone in the world except for us. How could she be protected? Who would take care of her? Should I give up skiing, horseback riding, and all the other risky sports I loved so much? Should I refuse to fly? How, in such a dangerous world, could I keep myself safe, and Nick safe, in order to keep her safe?

At home alone with the baby, without the distraction of a job,

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I began to realize that something strange had happened to my memory. So much of the past was vague to me, and much of it was missing. I could not remember things that are supposed to be unforgettable, such as my wedding day. I vaguely understood that I must have forgotten because remembering would have been too painful. How could I have lived with clear memories of my wedding, with everyone I loved alive and near me and so happy, when I would know the fate that lay in store for them all?

Even so, I wanted my memory back. No matter what the price, I wanted full possession of my life and identity. My past was precious. It was myself. It was mine. It belonged to me. I decided to go into therapy, and with my doctor's help, my memory was gradually restored.

To my later regret, Nick and I allowed my distress to make decisions for us. I was already in my 30s, and Nick was in his 40s. For Margaret's sake, we decided, we would not have another child. Our reasoning might seem strange to anyone who had not lived so long in the shadow of death. We had no relatives close enough to take in a child. Some friend might be willing to take in one child, but surely not two. So Margaret would stand a better chance of going into a good home if we didn't have another child.

In fact, it turned out to be hard on Margaret growing up without a brother or sister. It was also hard being the sole focus of our attention and concern. But during her early years, her father and I could not look far down the road. Our minds were still too focussed on providing for immediate survival.

There was a second source of fear throughout this period. At just about the time Margaret was born, the rabble-rousing Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin launched his vicious anti-Communist campaign. Although my politics were liberal, no one could possibly have been a more vehement anti-Communist. Yet I lived in terror of McCarthy.

My panic was about as rational as the fear Nick and I had gone through at the Canadian border after visiting Niagara Falls.

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Somehow, I imagined that the Red-baiting Senator would learn about my teenage ideas and have us thrown out of the country. This time Nick was the calm one, gently trying to reassure me. "Come on," he would say. "Why should McCarthy bother with some obscure doctor and his wife from Seattle?" "Don't ask me," I would reply. "Why did Hitler bother with an obscure doctor and his wife from Uzhorod?"

Fortunately, McCarthy did not have the staying power of Hitler. Within a couple of years, he was censured by Congress, then became ill.

McCarthy got out of politics and Margaret got out of diapers at about the same time. My anxiety began to diminish, shrinking to the proportions of one dark cloud in a blue sky. As I emerged from the worst of it, I started to swim, ski, ride and travel again, although Nick and I usually took separate planes. Even so, I never could enjoy these pleasures without at least a twinge of guilt, a shadow of dread as to what it would do to Margaret if something happened to me.

These slight twinges aside, my life seemed almost enchanted. I had warm and interesting friends, a wonderful social life, a lovable child, growing financial security, and a husband whose commitment to me had been forged in the fires of hell.

I loved people. That was my secret, as it had always been. Despite everything, I remained open to life, with a deep, underlying sense of trust in the worth of existence and of humanity. I also had boundless health and energy, more than I knew how to use. It was as if now I was waiting to discover how to use them.

Around 1960, I became close friends with the owner of the Otto Seligman Art Gallery, the only really important Seattle gallery at that time. It was a time when he had three paintings by the famed artist, Mark Tobey, and I bought one of them for \$140. Later that same day, Otto phoned to say that Tobey had just won First Prize at Venice, and that his piece would double in value overnight.

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As a favor, he offered me the other two pieces at the same price I had just paid. I thanked him, but declined. Art meant too much to me. I couldn't bring myself to play the art stock market. At the risk of sounding naïve or smug, it seemed to me contrary to the purpose of art to deal or speculate.

And then—unexpectedly, almost by accident—I found that I, too, had become a maker of art. In 1960, I was in my early forties, and Margaret was about nine. At that time, a craze for ceramics suddenly hit Seattle. As I looked at the delightful things people were making of clay, I thought of what fun it would be to make them. I had been keeping my hands busy through the years making clothes and drapes and bedspreads and upholstering our furniture and the like, but now I wanted to get them into clay.

From the very first day, it became a passion. I took a class, mastered the potter's wheel, and began turning out vases and jars and bowls. It gave me tremendous satisfaction, though I thought of it merely as play.

One day, I had a little clay left over; not enough to start a new pot. I found myself shaping a human figure a few inches tall. Making a human figure was a totally different sensation, a powerful sensation, a spiritual sensation. I found myself thinking, *"I'm making people. I want to make people. All sorts of people."* After that, I entirely lost interest in pottery. My teacher was upset. He thought I had serious potential as a potter. But it no longer interested me. I bought my own clay and went on making people. I felt an emotional need to take some inert substance into my hands and manipulate it into life.

So, I began making comic figures, religious figures, erotic figures, and sometimes family portraits from life or memory. Soon I had a whole shelf full of them. One was of Nick and myself, both in the nude, reading—intimately close, yet each absorbed in a separate experience. When I had enough, I asked a sculptor friend for his opinion. "These are wonderful," he said. I asked if I didn't need

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lessons, and he said, “No. Just keep on doing what you’re doing. When you have enough, you can have a show.”

I was amazed at the idea of having a show. I felt there was too much I didn’t know, too much I needed to learn. I signed up for a class with a metal sculptor who used wax, in what is known as the “lost-wax process.” I learned his techniques, but he warned me against letting anyone influence my style. “Just keep on working,” he said.

That was all I wanted to do—to “keep on working.” All my driving energy, without direction for so many years, suddenly had an outlet and a purpose. Every day I was discovering something exciting and new.

By this time, Margaret’s basement playroom had been converted into an art studio. I went on making people. Then, using the lost-wax process, I started having them cast in bronze. People heard of my pieces and started asking to see them. I began to sell. Suddenly, this was not a hobby anymore. I showed my work to Otto Seligman, and he scheduled a show for me. My show consisted of thirty bronzes, mainly human figures, many with Jewish themes. I had not deliberately chosen this subject. It was more as if it had chosen me. I portrayed figures I remembered from the Jewish life of my childhood. Somehow, I was giving physical form back to the dead.

I was very nervous about the show, but it was a great success and I sold many pieces. What astonished me was the numbers of Gentiles who bought the works on Jewish themes. My work felt so personal it was hard for me to believe that it could possibly interest strangers, especially strangers who did not share the Jewish experience.

By now I craved to create. Everything inspired me. It was not only the human figure, but whatever I saw, whatever came to mind. I loved both natural shapes and abstract shapes. I went to Alaska and came back frantic to create glaciers. Using white bronze, I constructed gleaming masses and mounted them on mirrors that



► “REMEMBRANCE OF
THE HOLOCAUST”
cast bronze 32” x 9”

*“Two of the Holocaust figures are
without hope, but the third does
have hope. Even at the worst
times, there was always hope”*

— Berman

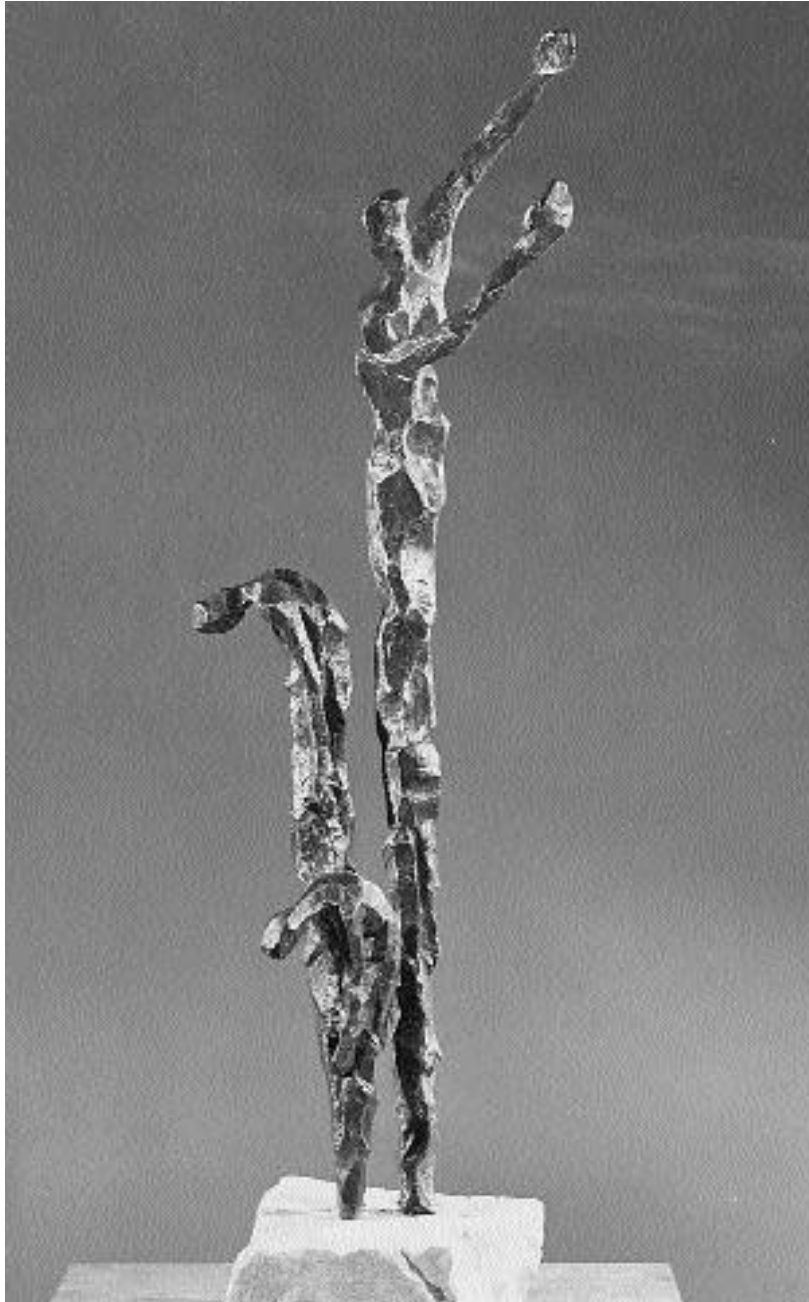
▲ “TENDERNESS”
cast bronze female figure,
approx. 76” x 36”

► “BIRD WITH ONE WING”
cast bronze, approx. 48”x12”

*“After what I went through
in the war, I never felt like a
complete person. To this day,
I am like a bird with one wing.”*

— Berman





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reflected like the sea.

Suddenly I discovered that I loved to draw. Everything I saw was miraculous and beautiful and I wanted to get it down, whether in pencil, clay or bronze. I wanted to memorialize every moment, to make preservations in memory. I felt blessed and honored that I had been given this awareness, this capacity. Many of my pieces portrayed man-and-woman or mother-and-child. My feelings for my husband and daughter went into these.

It was fortunate that my work was so spiritually rewarding, and that Nick could support me. Although my pieces sold for good prices, there was little profit in them. The gallery took 40 per cent; the foundry took half of what was left. By the time I had paid for materials, I would have made more by the hour if I had been taking orders at McDonalds.

But it was not money I was after, nor was it fame. I had no interest in making a name by limiting myself to a signature subject or style that would scream, "Look at me! I'm a Gizel Berman!" I had no interest in power either, in starting a school or leading a movement or being an authority. There was no ego involved either, no wish to enhance my name or identity. I did it all for love, in a state of glad surrender to the creative urge that swept through me. I let myself be driven, carried away by the intensity and joy of the moment.

I had learned by that time that many artists have enormous egos and are driven by a hunger for fame, power and wealth. They feel that because they are artists, they are special and have the right to many things other people have not. I'd certainly met plenty of that kind, but they never impressed me, only amused me. One famous fellow had lured three women away from their husbands and never married any of them. He virtually announced that I was to be his next conquest. This fate didn't tempt me in the slightest and I let him know it. I simply laughed and told him, "Sorry, but you know what I have."

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Egos that are too small are no better than egos that are too big. People whose egos are too small are always desperately trying to prove themselves. I like to think that my own ego is just the right size for me and my needs. I feel comfortable with myself, without the need to prove anything to anyone.

Fortunately, not all the great or famous artists are egotists. Of the outstanding artists I came to know, Jacques Lipschitz was perhaps the most acclaimed, yet he seemed without vanity or arrogance. On a trip to New York, I had been introduced to his foundryman, who arranged a meeting. I went to Lipschitz's home up the Hudson, and found him to be a wonderfully courtly old gentleman. After an hour or two of delightful talk, he said, "Aren't you a sculptor? So, what have you brought for me?" I showed him my portfolio, and he asked if I wanted him to be honest.

"Of course," I said.

He went on very seriously. "I like what I see. My advice to you is to do nothing but drawing for one year, then come back to me."

I went home, intending to take his advice. I enrolled in a Life Drawing class at Seattle University, taught by Nick Damascus, an outstanding teacher.

I showed him my portfolio and told him what Lipschitz had suggested. Damascus shook his head. "Keep your money. You don't need this class. You're too advanced for it. Just go home, draw, and bring me your work any time you want to talk about it. Come to my home. Any time at all."

This was not what I wanted. "The money is not the issue," I told him. "I want the stimulus of a teacher and other students."

So he permitted me to enroll and I got an ulcer out of it. Never before had I dealt with such a demanding, hypercritical perfectionist. Yet, thanks to him, I improved immeasurably as a draftsman.

One of his suggestions was that I take a pad and pencil everywhere, even to concerts and the theatre. "Draw," he said. "Draw in the dark. Don't look. Just draw." I was astonished to learn