

*Mother and Child*

To this day, my daughter, Margaret, enjoys speaking of the sudden, electrifying change that came over the household when I began to make art. Before, I had never seemed to know what to do with all my energy. All at once, I became intensely focused and purposeful, but at the same time more different than ever from the other women of the neighborhood.

Margaret still talks about the time she came home after school and found a naked man posing for me in the living room, and how she ran out to tell all her friends. She also tells of my working long past dinnertime or far into the night or being at it when she woke up in the morning. She remembers Nick's great pride that I had found something so obviously gratifying for me. She speaks of how energetic and youthful I looked, and how my clothes and makeup seemed so much more vivid than those of other mothers.

I realize that it was sometimes hard for Margaret, back in the highly conformist Fifties and early Sixties, having a mother who was so unlike a child's conventional notion of what a mother should be. But in time Margaret would discover her own non-conformity, and then I would be the one wishing she could be a little more conventional.

Margaret did not have the easiest time getting through childhood. Children of Holocaust survivors seldom do. She was only about four or so when she began questioning why she didn't have grandparents and cousins, like other children, or why we spoke with an accent, and why her father had a number tattooed on his arm.

### *Mother and Child*

We tried to explain, but how does one explain such things to a child? How can you tell her without destroying her faith in life and people, and without inflicting on her a legacy of rage and fear? Yet how can you not tell, and hide so crucial a part of yourself and of the truth?

Nick and I chose the way of openness. We answered as honestly as we could, without overwhelming her with detail. We could tell she was both troubled and unsatisfied by what we said. But we could think of no answers that would ease her heart, because the truth was such that it could not ease anyone's heart. All we had to offer was an opportunity to share her parents' loss and pain.

For Margaret, the Holocaust was all tied up with being Jewish, which was all tied up with being different, which was a problem in itself in so conservative and self-contained an environment as Seattle's Mercer Island community in the Fifties.

One day when she was seven or eight, she and a girlfriend, whom I'll call Donna, went to a movie. Afterwards, we picked them up. Driving home, Donna remarked to Nick, "Dr. Berman, there was a Jew in that movie."

Something in her tone made my throat close up, but Nick responded neutrally. "Was there?"

"Yes," she nodded. "I never saw a Jew before."

"Sure you have," he smiled. "I'm a Jew."

She seemed astonished. "You are?"

"That's right."

She considered, then asked, "Is Mrs. Berman a Jew, too?"

"Sure she is."

"And is Maggie?"

"Sure. She's our little girl, so she's a Jew, like us."

Donna said no more. But the next day, she came to our house to make an announcement. "I can't play with Maggie anymore. My grandmother says I can't play with Japs, Niggers or Jews."

Margaret was wildly upset. "Why?" she wailed. "Why does this

### *My Third Life*

always have to happen?" A barrier burst within her. Up to now, she had kept certain events hidden. Now they came out.

Donna was not an isolated case. Other children had scoffed at Margaret for "not having Christ." They had told her she was going to hell. They had laughed because her parents "talked funny." Some had called her names which she sensed were very nasty. Some would not play with her at all. Perhaps these were not the majority, but there were enough of them to make an impact and leave her young soul bleeding and bruised.

Now this monstrous hate which had almost killed Nick and me had come to wound our little daughter. We did not know what to do. We only knew that we did not want her to grow up feeling like a victim, or resenting her Jewishness.

So now there were facts to be faced; facts which we had scarcely considered before. At the time, Seattle was still a small, secluded and provincial community; Mercer Island, separated by a lake, was even more small, secluded and provincial. Its population was uniformly white and almost uniformly Protestant. That was how they liked it and how they wanted to keep it. In all innocence, we had asked for trouble. We were only the second Jewish family on the Island, and the very first foreigners. Our neighbors were polite to our faces, but it was obvious that some did not welcome us.

Should we move, for Margaret's sake? Wasn't she likely to find much the same thing somewhere else? Children do not know how to be hypocrites, or socially polite. The words that adults won't say to other adults, they will teach their children and allow them to say to one another.

We knew by this time that there was plenty of prejudice and race hatred in America—and everywhere else. Bigotry was like one of those chronic diseases that express themselves most of the time as a barely perceptible low-grade fever, only to flare up from time to time in a virulent, life-threatening form. There was no country where it was not present. Hate knows no borders.

### *Mother and Child*

Anti-Semitism was one form of that disease. Here in America, Jews were not the primary targets, but, at least in some circles, they were still targets. And we had left our little girl unprepared to meet the attack when it came; unprepared to meet it with a brave heart and a proud spirit, without either hatred or shame.

The answer, we decided, was not to run away, which was in any case impossible. The answer was to be mindful, and to Never Forget. The answer was to teach her that prejudice is wrong, whether directed at her or at anyone else, and that the one who should be ashamed is not the insulted but the insulter. The answer was to show her not to hide, flee or surrender, but to stand fast and be proud; to be sure in her heart that she had as much right to be living where she was living as anyone else.

We found positive ways to reframe what she had considered negative things. Once, when Margaret asked Nick if he couldn't get rid of his accent, he replied, "Why would I want to do that? Don't you know what an accent means? It means a person can speak more than one language. In fact, I speak four. I'll bet none of your friends' parents can do that." Margaret's attitude toward our accents changed on the spot. Instead of being ashamed, she became very proud.

And so we stayed on Mercer Island. Perhaps it might have been easier for Margaret if we had moved elsewhere. I don't know. What I do know is that she grew up to be a proud, feisty woman, afraid of no one, with a powerful empathy for those in difficulty and for those deprived of equal rights. In other words, however difficult some aspects of her childhood might have been, she came through with the values we wanted her to have. Years later, she earned her Ph.D., and held positions in government and private industry.