Rediscovering a lost life

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In 1942, three-year-old Dori Katz was sent by her mother to live with Franz and Regina Walchot, a Catholic couple, in the village of Belse, Belgium. Her name was to be Astrid Von der Laitz. The resistance paid "Papa Franz" and "Mama Gine" 30 francs per day for her care and, presumably, to fo the risks they took in hiding her. When World War II ended, Dori spent months in an orphanage before reuniting with her mother. "For you, it was nothing," Golda Katz often told her daughter. "You were only a child. You didn't suffer. You don't even remember."

Four decades later, Katz, a professor of modern languages and literature at Trinity College, returned to Belgium to reconnect with her childhood. She decided to write about that experience, her relationship with her mother, and the fate of her father, Moishe Katz, who left home one day to pay someone to ransom his brother from a factory camp in Normandy, France, and never returned.

Written in spare, deceptively simple prose, with the emotion just beneath the surface, Looking for Strangers is a powerful, poignant and painfully honest memoir, and a meditation on laying claim to long-suppressed, dimly understood and conflicted memories and feelings. Looking for Strangers reminds us of the role of chance encounters, individual acts of cruelty and kindness, survival instincts, intelligence and will during the Third Reich's reign in Europe.

In May 1942, Katz indicates, after all Jews were ordered to wear a yellow star on their clothes, a shopkeeper refused to sell bread to her mother. Golda stomped out of the store and complained to a Belgian policeman, who took her arm, marched her back into the bakery, and made it clear that this was not to happen again. Sometime later, when Golda decided to visit friends and family in Antwerp, a lady on the train, whom Golda did not know, named her that the Gestapo would arrest Jews who got off there. Mother and daughter stayed put and returned to Brussels.

Belgian documents indicate that Moishe was arrested on the street on September 10, 1942. Two days later, he was deported on Convoy No. 9, in train car No. 291, to a concentration camp in Poland and then to Auschwitz. The convoy contained 289 men, 333 women and 212 children under 16, 29 of them survived World War II.

The documents describe Moishe as 5'4", with red hair, blue eyes and 16 missing teeth; he spoke Czech, Hungarian, German and Flemish (the Nazis did not count Yiddish or Hebrew as languages). Learning her father was short "made him seem more boyish and vulnerable."

The information gathered, Katz writes, gave her "a strange comfort. She could now believe in the actuality of the man.... Now something hard inside me started to melt; I felt the pain of connecting to what had happened to him.

No photographs of father and daughter exist; no letters addressed from him to her; no toys he purchased for her to play with. Reading those papers "had been a little like being able to hug him."

In Belgium, Katz is also able to speak with André Guelin, the woman who placed her with the Walchofs. After she took Dori into hiding, Guelin recalls, she wrote down next to her name, "a ravishing little gal." Dori hung up the phone, returned to her white art-deco coach, "and cried for a long time."

Katz wanted to recapture her childhood, she emphasizes, but not to be "recaptured by it." To that end, she's remarkably candid about the fear of speaking Yiddish and being identified as a Jew that persisted for years after she was reunited with her mother, her ambivalent feelings toward the Walchofs, to whom she fears she has been insufficiently grateful, perhaps because she cannot shake the conviction that they "had a choice my family never had," and about racing from room to room, kicking the walls, and screaming "I hate you, I hate you," when she returned to what might - or might not - be her orphanage.

As her mother approached the end of her life, Katz "began to feel an overwhelming need to tell these stories." She worried that she did not remember enough to tell them accurately. She discovered, however, that even if some questions can never be answered, putting things on paper "opened doors to rooms she never knew existed." At a time in which the last survivors of the Holocaust are getting older and dying off, we need their help, more than ever, to keep those doors open so that this generation, and the next and the next, will know as much as possible about a past that is ours as well as theirs.

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