

IRENE

The v-8 engine in that Dodge Polara was plenty powerful to pull our family up over the long incline, after which we would have a view of farm fields softly merging into the blue pacific horizon. Mom and dad sat in the front and I in the back. It was a big car that we jokingly likened to a boat, and my mother said it would protect us in an accident just due to its size. The Ventura freeway gently unrolled as we made the 40 mile trek from Los Angeles to Camarillo to visit my 17 year old sister Irene. I remember driving across its huge campus of Spanish buildings looking to find the right one where she lived now. Being a young boy of 6 or so in 1970, this made quite an adventure for a Sunday morning - at least for the small boy I was then.

What I knew at that time was that my sister was sick with something, but nothing I understood. The sickness made her get really angry and yell at everybody at home. Mom and dad told me that much as they tried to make it work, Irene couldn't live at home anymore and needed special care. That's why we were going to visit her. I remember that momma used to cry a lot, especially on the phone to Auntie Genie, always in her dark kitchen at night, saying over and over, "Hub moirem," - I'm afraid. Momma said Irene got sick because she got mixed up with the wrong group of friends in high school, but I couldn't understand how friends could make her like that.

I remember walking onto the ward where a nurse had to turn a big, clunky lock to let us in, and being terribly frightened by the people. Some were walking around in robes and trying to touch us, some moaning and drooling, some shouting. Eventually we found Irene and spent some time with her in a quieter place. She didn't shout at us anymore, but she wasn't right either. She was mostly just quiet now.

As we began the trip home and traversed that same incline, my thoughts turned to trying to understand what I had experienced. What I could not know then was that my sister was to go on to experience a lifetime of severe mental illness, and I would go to a lifetime of trying, sometimes fruitlessly, to help her. Hers was not an easy case and she was largely resistant to various methods of treatment. She had persistent delusions about nazis attacking her, even that we were nazis. But whatever frustration I experienced must have been nil compared to what our mother felt. Holocaust orphan that she was, with a grand total of a 3rd grade education, she made her way to America as a war refugee with her little sister. A prevalent theory at the time was the so called, "schizophrenogenic mother," - that mothers were to blame for their sick children. How she could have possibly dealt with that cruel accusation, a woman who loved all her children as if they were her whole hope and life, is beyond me.

Many years later, after my mom's death, my aunt confided in me that momma had spent time in a psychiatric ward herself after reaching the shores of America at the age of 18. The burden of the war and the loss of her family had just been too much. I never knew. Irene at 17 and mom at 18. Mom must have recovered to a large extent, as I never saw her to be at that severity

during my life. But in retrospect she clearly had what I would later understand to have been post traumatic depression, and completely untreated in those days.

Irene, though you are gone, I feel closer to you than ever, for I am now able to speak to you in ways that you could not understand before. I long to tell you that it was my own foolish vanity that led me to intervene to try to help you after mom and dad were gone. I thought my own medical knowledge gave me a chance at beating the schizophrenia and making a better life for you. I had good intentions but I was wrong - I was no match for that terrible disease. I mourn you and the life you were robbed of.

Momma, I am that same little boy in the car with you that day. I am still here and I understand all now. I am angry that you had to endure tragedy after tragedy and I love you more than ever.

When the saving remnant of our people emerged from the "Churbn Europa" they were not unscathed. Much though we model our finery and paint pictures of happy domesticity, our wounds refuse to be dressed and covered. They fester and continue to cause pain, even unto later generations.

When the last words of the suffering of the six million are written,

Y'hei shemei rabbah m'vorakh

When the last whispered words of the survivors are spoken,

Y'hei shemei rabbah m'vorakh

When the last remnant trauma of the ensuing generations are finished, and no one is left to remember,

Y'hei shemei rabbah m'vorakh

When all that remains are the words on the page,

Y'hei shemei rabbah m'vorakh

I pray that He who makes peace in His high places make peace in the souls of my beloved mother and sister; and for us the living, may He heal our broken hearts, now and forever more. Amen.