

Preface

Brief is the life of man, and of uncertain duration is his handiwork, be it ships, houses, governments or laws. But the echoes from soul to soul will go on as long as human life lasts.

A Dreamer's Journey Morris Raphael Cohen

In 1948, when my aunt Thelma went out to California to visit Carmel (my mother), the two sisters had not met for eleven years. World War II had come and gone. Carmel had been divorced; Thelma had been widowed; their children had grown.

As Carmel was coming in from Santa Barbara at the Los Angeles train station, she noticed that there was still some time before Thelma's train from Chicago was due. A stream of people was heading into a building across the square. She crossed the street to see where they were going and found that a Christian Science Lecture was about to begin. She went in.

When she came out, the train from Chicago had arrived. She was just in time to see Thelma walking up from the platform towards the street, carrying her cello.

"Hello!" said Thelma "Do you know that Schnabel is playing in your town today!"

She had seen the announcement in the Los Angeles Times that she read on the train.

The two sisters hailed a taxi and went directly to the concert hall, where a sign said "SOLD OUT!" Thelma persuaded the person at the box office to let them in as standees. In the intermission they found two seats. After the concert they went backstage, and Schnabel greeted Thelma with a warm embrace. They had played together in Berlin in 1932, and in Palestine in 1935.

Carmel loved to tell this story. She saw in it "a demonstration of Divine Mind." I see it as a vivid demonstration of Bentwich family relationships with their emphasis on music, and devotion to and concern for religion.

Family history can be a list of gravestones, an examination of public offices and/or private crimes, or a litany of legends. This memoir is woven out of letters exchanged among members of the Bentwich family. It is particularly concerned with the diverse visions that Susannah and Herbert Bentwich pursued, and with the consequences of their dreams in their own lives and in the lives of their children.

Herbert Bentwich (1856-1932) and Susannah Solomon (1861-1915) met in the spring of 1880. They began married life as young English Jews in a world that promised fulfillment. They lived in an era of writing, and saving letters, and their children also wrote letters and kept them. In life and in letters the Bentwiches were lively, self-dramatizing personalities, trying to bring to earth their visions of heaven.

Preface

The Bentwich's youngest daughter, my mother, Carmel died on January 1 1998, nine months short of her hundredth birthday. She had spent her last years absorbed in reading and rereading family letters. She began a dozen accounts of her life and her family: In my mother's heart (and correspondingly in my childhood imagination) her mother Susannah Bentwich, who had died when my mother was sixteen, and her sister Nita Lange, who died some weeks before my parents' wedding, lived on as images of womanly perfection -- beautiful in themselves and in their works, spreading an aura of joy to all about them.

In my mother's ideal world she and I would have been like them. We weren't. I was a shy little girl, better connected to books than to the world around me. She was isolated, living in a strange country, with a difficult husband and less than ideal children, without the circumambient family that had provided support in her childhood and youth. My own connections to her, to her stories, and to the vast extended family had a long ambivalent history. For me, her family were shadowy figures, far away.

Her sister Naomi with whom we spent time 1924-25 and again in 1929 lived in England. When she married Jonas Birnberg in 1928, there had been hopes that we would go there and I would be a bridesmaid. We didn't get there, but she sent a pink silk smocked dress which still sits in my mind's eye as the ideal of little girl's clothing. Her sister Hebe, the wife of Eugen Mayer, and mother of Robis, Nita and Jan whom we met in England in 1929, lived in Germany.

The others were in Palestine. My brother and I knew them as names with epithets: Norman the Attorney General, Jose the educator, Lilian, the widow of Israel Friedlander; Margery, the violinist, Budge the archeologist, Thelma the cellist. They lived in mythical cities, Jerusalem or Tel Aviv or Haifa. They often visited "Zichron Yakov" (was that a house or a town?).

Sister Dorothy, was a ghostly presence, seldom mentioned.

Although shadowy, these aunts and uncles had a familiar shape. When my mother's sister Budge, whom I had never seen before, arrived in New York on the Mauretania in the fall of 1933, I picked her out with total confidence from among the crowd of passengers standing at the railing on deck. I could not see her features, but she had the characteristic Bentwich look and eager stance. She caught my eye even from a distance.

All the Bentwich children grew up surrounded by Susannah's devotion to music and need for harmony, and by Herbert's zeal for Jewish life and need for righteousness. In early years they saw themselves, and were seen by others, as a group phenomenon. In later years, despite differences in character and beliefs, they remained a clan, closely connected to each other, devoted to music, and/or art, and/or the pursuit of ethical and religious ideals (diversely construed); notable also for quirky individuality. Perhaps most surprisingly, eight of the children moved to Palestine. There their influence

Preface

on Israeli life continues in the Thelma Yellin School, in the Center for Music at Beit Daniel, and most importantly in the character of their descendants, who are citizens of Israel.

During her last years Carmel told and retold stories of long ago. She desperately wanted to have the family stories known; family ties were the breath of life to her. She maintained an active correspondence with her nieces and nephews, their children, and even their grandchildren. The younger generations loved her as a living link to their own, increasingly misty, family past. When they were visiting the U.S. from England or from Israel, they made special trips to see her.

This memoir is, in some sense, a letter from her, although I am well aware that the voice of the narrator is not hers but mine.