

Рпологице



In the Middle of the Night

My life started with a conflagration, a great fire—the Holocaust.

My image of that early time in Brussels “before the war,” a phrase often used in my family as I eventually grew up in America, was of an enchanted flower garden where my mother and I lived alone together and nothing bad could happen to us.

I was three when, in the middle of the night on May 10, 1940, Hitler’s planes started bombing Brussels. I awoke. It was still dark. Scared, all by myself, I managed to lower the side of my bed and step down, thinking, “Anything in this room could turn into a wolf.”

As Hitler invaded Europe, my secular Jewish family fled for our lives. From Brussels, my mother drove my four grandparents, our maid Jeanne, and me sitting beside her on her sister’s lap, across the border into northern France. There, too, German bombs were falling, and the roads were crowded with Jews escaping the invasion.

After Belgium surrendered, my father, in the Belgian army, escaped from Dunkirk to England. He joined us later in France. Through smarts, means, and the kindness of friends and strangers, Father succeeded in getting us visas to Portugal. His parents, however, my Oma and Opa, boarded a Dutch boat from Bordeaux that apparently the next day a German U-boat torpedoed. My grandparents were killed.

The rest of us managed to drive through war-ravaged Spain to Lisbon, where, after six weeks through great good luck, we got visas and took a Japanese luxury liner to America. We landed in New York City in the fall of 1940.

I never saw a Nazi, but fear was stamped into my nervous system by the strangeness of events and the controlled fear of my family. As I grew up, fear manifested in me as a small zing of anxiety that underlay everything.

Looking back, despite writing many plays and much teaching, I think that, like the guy in the Bible given a hundred talents, out of fear I buried most of mine to keep them safe. I have to forgive myself for that. Within each of us, I think, always the creative struggles with the



*my mother, Marthe Levy van Itallie, and me in
Ceroux-Mousty, Belgium about 1939*