

Launch speech. *Journeys with my Mother*: Halinka Rubin

By Arnold Zable: November 2015.

A. It is a pleasure to have been invited to launch this wonderful book.

Our personal connection:

I got to know Halinka as one of an extra-ordinary group of advocates based at the FLN: working alongside Anne Horrigan Dixon ... she was an integral part of the 'party therapy' approach to the work ...

Halinka's work as a refugee advocate is intricately linked to this book.

- In reading this book we come to understand also why she is able so easily empathize with contemporary asylum seekers, and why she taken up their cause.
- As this book reveals Halinka has undergone the refugee journey in all its phases and has experienced first hand, its key moments.

– Halinka was born just on the outbreak of war, 4 days before the German invasion, born into days of fire and chaos, an extraordinary introduction to the world.

– In first 5 years of her life, Halinka was always on the move. She lived a nomadic existence – in a time of war, atrocity, hunger, bombardment, and RESISTANCE.

– She experienced separation, and then reunion with a father who'd become a stranger and again on the move. And in 1968: After years of stability and approaching 30, overnight she became a leper, a pariah, an outcast, lost livelihood, and yet again on the move. She experienced sudden statelessness and loss of homeland:

No one chooses to be a refugee ... As Halinka writes: *One would imagine I have been banished from paradise.*

– Halinka migrated to Australia and had to ADJUST, to a new country, and culture, and new language.

What she writes about her mother, OLA, can be said of Halinka:

... I admired her uncomplicated humanity in her ability to put herself in other people's shoes; nothing human was alien to her ...

In her work with asylum seekers, Halinka exemplified these qualities.

B. *Journeys with my mother* is an extraordinary book.

- The narrative is driven by an impulse TO BEAR WITNESS to courageous lives, faced with perilous circumstances – relentlessly over a period of years.
- To do justice to the story, to the memories, to family, and to the history, requires great skill, craft and artistry ...
- Halinka demonstrates these skills:

– The memoir moves fluidly backwards and forwards in **time** ... it is EPIC ... it encompasses the length and breadth of 20th century and beyond ...

– Halinka pulls off a complex juggling act: Moving to and from the present day, to 1968, the time of the anti-Semitic purges, back to recent journeys in towns and cities, vital in family history, while all the while holding to a central thread, a central story ...

woven around the lives and families of her father Wladek and mother Ola.

- David *Malouf* has spoken of many writers' fascination with the immediate decades before one's birth ... and the time of their conception. Halinka certainly has explored that time in great depth.
- Geographically – Halinka's narrative moves far and wide, between Melbourne, pre-war Palestine, Poland, Soviet Russia, and within both countries, numerous places connected to family history ...
- In her geographical reach there is, for me, a deeply personal connection:

– Halinka's sojourn in Bialystok, and the journey from Warsaw to Bialystok which Halinka undertakes with her daughter Annette in 2009 – parallels journeys I have made first alone, 1986, and then twenty years later, 2006, this time with my son Alexander, about to turn 13. Halinka writes of the town clock where my grandfather stood for 40 years – *Heint, Moment, Express*.

– She writes of the BIALYSTOK GHETTO where her beloved aunt Eva and other family members perished, as did my grandparents and many of my uncles and aunts ...

– Halinka's searches for the remnants of Jewish life, and Jewish cemeteries hidden in forests, disappearing into fields, sinking into oblivion...are all so familiar to me ...

– Bialowieza forest is another point of contact: that brooding forest on the Polish-Soviet border as it was back in 1986 ...

C. It is clear from reading this book, that Halinka has a natural talent as a writer ...

It is an extraordinarily moving book, written with

Great clarity

- With compassion and a kind of grace.
- With intelligence
- And an undercurrent of gentle humour.
- Informed by a vast knowledge and understanding of history
- With an eye for telling detail... and so many searing images:

A woman dressed in something resembling a nightgown, child in her arms, following cart of wounded soldiers, begging Ola to take her.

Halinka's searing first memory as a child, surviving the fording of an ice-cold river, standing naked on the riverbank as her mother rubs spirits into her body before wrapping her in bandages...

- And written with an instinct for the significance of the small things, the objects and mementos, such as:
 - Fragment of green blanket Halinka was wrapped in on the day of liberation
 - The sprigs of flower her mother brought to various transient places they lived in, and the precious surviving photos.
- And pursued with the fierce determination of the detective, hunting down the

story, doing all that could be done it to life...

- And written with a deep feeling for the natural world – sensual descriptions of landscape, even in the midst of tragic and emotional charged circumstances...including those brooding ancient FORESTS on the Russian-Polish border...One of the many mini tales within tales that I loved is of Grycko, the Ukrainian wood carver, and teller of fairytales. Beautiful scenes of Grycko carving toys for infant Halinka, and telling his tales during her sojourn among the partisans...
- Written also, around a **central tale within many central tales**, of a NOMADIC HOSPITAL – forever moving on the cusp of the frontline, an ever-advancing enemy, yet all the while remaining true to its central mission of HEALING... This alone would make an extraordinary film.
- It is a book, which takes the reader. As Halinka writes at one point, to – I paraphrase, to... *unspeakable events...mirrored in the landscape: ruined cities, charred villages, freshly dug graves and barely covered sites of massacres. Europe's heart of darkness.* H Rubin p 179

D. At the HEART OF this BOOK: are 3 women.

Halinka and OLA, MOTHER AND DAUGHTER...and as a more subtle, but elemental presence, Annette, Halinka's daughter, for whom Ola is a beloved BABCIA.

It was Annette's questions about the past, her hunger to know, that finally motivated Halinka's to take on the daunting task of writing the book...

Halinka writes: *Suddenly I grasped that if I wanted my mother's life to be remembered, I was the one who had to write about*

At its core, this is a book by a daughter, honouring an extraordinary mother, OLA...a woman who somehow balanced her devotion to, and love of her daughter, with her loyalty to her patients, wounded soldiers and civilians. THE ESSENCE of OLA...is the TIGHT ROPE SHE WALKED...balancing DUTY OF CARE TO FAMILY WITH DUTY OF CARE TO WIDER COMMUNITY... nursing her DAUGHTER through bombardment, chaos, separation, daring escapes...while at the same time NURSING countless others, anyone who needed tending...in the most primitive of medical circumstances...

* The enduring and most stunning image in the book, amongst hundreds of startling images, it is of OLA running, carrying Halinka in her arms, whilst under bombardment, or from hospitals literally on fire, shielding her in underground forest hideouts, confronted always by life and death decisions, forever thinking, which turn, do i make, which route to follow...and the companion image of Ola tending the sick, the traumatised and wounded...

She was made of tough stuff, my mother, writes Halinka with characteristic understatement...*resourceful, dependable, courageous...*

* Hence: at the deepest level: This in a way is a story of women in times of war...the more untold story, an epic tale of a woman's courage and bravery...and the bravery of many women.

So much more can be said about the book: we do not have time so read it.

I conclude by saying – Halinka, your extraordinary mother was a midwife, and a nurse, and you have become the MIDWIFE of this tale, and you have tracked down the fragments, the details, unearthed and excavated the photos and shards of memory, and you have NURSED them into a wonderful book.

Like mother, like daughter...OLA, HALINKA...and the two of you, for ANNETTE.

It ends perfectly: In scenes of extraordinary grace and serenity, here, in distant Melbourne, the great southern city by the sea, where Ola spent her final years... firmly present in the moment...firmly established, as the very last word has it – in love.

It gives me great pleasure to declare this beautiful book launched.

Comments for cover

Arnold Zable

Journeys with my mother is a riveting book informed by compassion, intelligence, and a profound understanding of history. Rubin takes the reader on an intimate journey, moving deftly between past and present, and weaving together memory, documents, letters, and compelling return journeys to key scenes of her tumultuous childhood at the heart of Europe's darkness. Rubin writes with clarity, integrity and an endearing light touch despite the devastating events recounted. Centre stage always, is her immediate family, their lived experience, and their lives of love, endurance and courage, and, above all, Rubin's brave and beautiful mother, a woman of valour, resilience, daring, independence and finally, a life-affirming serenity.

Arnold Zable

Award-winning writer, novelist and human rights advocate