My Father – a Song
Kresha Richman Warnock

The lilt of Judy Collins' voice echoed in my head as my husband and I walked off the plane at Charles DeGaulle Airport, as we went through passport control, as our taxi dropped us off at our little Paris boutique hotel. In the 1968 song, "My Father", the singer recounted her father's dreams: one day he would take his lovely little girl to live in France where they would boat on the Seine, and she would learn to dance. My own father introduced me to that song long ago, on our living room stereo. I'm sure he even had a little crush on the beautiful young chanteuse with the clear, nearly vibrato-less voice, perfectly designed to sing the melodious songs of Leonard

Cohen or Joni Mitchell or even Stephen Sondheim. Her version of "Send in the Clowns" won her a Grammy nomination in 1976 and scored Sondheim the best song award.

I still heard "My Father" as my husband and I wandered down to the Seine the next day. We nearly stumbled on the Memorial des Martyrs de la Deportation at the foot of the Isle de la Cite. A little later, we would step into the nearby Sainte-Chappelle, and stand in wonder as we viewed the thousands of panes of richly colored stained-glass in the medieval church, deeply moved by its beauty. The art would dazzle me. Who wouldn't want to raise their child in a city where you could visit this treasure?

But the Memorial of the Martyrs was bleak. Built in the 1960's to memorialize the 200,000 French, 75,000 of them Jews, who were sent to the Nazi concentration camps, it was partially underground. We moved through a tunnel, exhibiting images from the Nazi occupation of France. The entrance was narrow, marked by two cement blocks. I felt closed in by the walls as I walked through, passing a crypt where the remains of an unknown victim of the deportation is buried.

My own father was in France once. In 1944,in the U.S. Army, a twenty-one-year-old son of Jewish immigrants to America, a philosophy student at the University of Chicago. Because he did not believe he could kill another human, his draft board let him enlist as a medic. He wore a red cross on his armband and helmet; carried no weapon. He was shipped to France. I never knew what the War, let along France was like for him.

When I was growing up, Dad had a stock story or two he repeated about those days. One went like this:

"*After the camps were open, we treated the survivors. There was this one guy, he was a barber, he was so grateful to be liberated that he gave me an old-fashioned shave with a hot towel and a straight razor. Best shave of my life*."

In the Memorial, we passed by the wall of pictures of the concentration camps, the trains, the torture chambers. There is a sketch an inmate drew of three women whispering together, planning to collaborate in collecting food so all of them could have enough to eat to survive. They probably didn't.

There was the photo we've seen before in old *Life* magazines of a group of men, in tattered, long shirts. Bare legs. They are bone-thin, ribs exposed, their eyes begging and amazed at the same time. Their bodies have been freed from the camps. In the photograph, a sunbeam, a ray of light, focuses on one man's face. His dark brown eyes are especially intense; if he weren't so gaunt, if his head weren't shaven, his eyes would have been those of a handsome, lively young man. Maybe someday, they even flirted again.

Why did I never ask my father, "Dad, you took care of the survivors of a concentration camp? Tell me about it."

I didn't, and he didn't. At the Memorial, in my seventies, in my first visit to France, I wondered how I might see that photograph through my dad's eyes. Were those men staring with wonder and relief into my own father's face? Did he understand their broken words as he tried to talk to them with his high school French and German, a little Yiddish from home? Did some die in his care because they were too physically or mentally destroyed to live on?

When Dad came home, he finished his philosophy Ph.D., taught young people in the university for years. My folks always talked about visiting Europe when they retired., could have. They had enough money, good health for most of their old age. But they didn't. Maybe Europe, and especially France, was still a war zone in my father's memories.

I had found Paris more enchanting than I had even imagined, but I wondered, "If we'd taken my father here, would we have been content to tour the Louvre, walk by the still scaffolded walls of the Cathedrale de Notre Dame and then visit the glorious Sainte-Chapelle? My husband loves military history; we visited some sites from the world wars. Surely, if Dad had been with us, he wouldn't have wanted to relive those memories. He loved good cheese, good bread, wine. Maybe if he'd been here, we could have sat at a little café in Montmartre. He could have gone deeper into his own emotional memories of France. Or maybe he would just have told us bad jokes in his gravelly voice and enjoyed the Paris ambiance.

I don't imagine that my father's dreams for his children, spoken or unspoken, involved moving to Paris. He would have been delighted if I, his guitar-playing, folk singer daughter could have made the big time, but that was never in the stars. He opened up the wide world of music through that living room stereo and that was a great gift. I hope, when he died, he knew he had given enough to his children that we could lead lives, if not Parisian dream-like, at least what we would call "good".

Biography:

Kresha Richman Warnock is a writer living in the Pacific Northwest with her husband. Her first grandchild was born in 2024! She is writing a memoir contrasting her days as a campus radical to her current role as the mother of a police officer. Her essays have been published in The

Brevity Blog, Amethyst Review, Remington Review, Persimmon Tree, Moss Piglet, Jewish Women of Words, Fahmiddan, Instant Noodles, and the anthologies Pure Slush and American Writer's Review 2022. For a complete list of her writing, please visit her website, www.https://kresharwarnock.com/. Follow her on Instagram @kresharwarnock or Twitter/X @krwwriter.