

A Jew from New York... in Melbourne - By Joan Nestle

1970, Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Newly arrived and alone, I took my first walk down the busy Dutch streets on my way to Van Dam Square a hippie gathering place. I had not walked thirty paces before a construction worker, stripped to the waist, called out, “look, another Jew from New York.”

1999, Melbourne, Australia. Anna, a small bent elderly woman whose curved spine forced one shoulder up towards her neck, her blue eyes large with cataracts, a bit of Danish caught at the corner of her mouth. A narrow white tape measure hung around her shoulders like a blessed tallis. I was walking down the center aisle of Victoria Market on a Sunday morning—walking a few paces behind Di and her sister from Adelaide, aware that this would be my last visit to the bustling 19th century market of which I had grown so fond. I loved its lack of decorum, large aproned men shouting out the best buys of lamb and beef, its family-run stalls rich with Italian salamis and Greek cheeses, its Vietnamese and Thai sellers of fruits and vegetables, large white salad onions, baby bok choys green and innocent in the packed stalls, the river of people with their wagons and baby strollers. And then Anna. I had stopped at her sparsely laid out stall, caught by the sight of an ancient woman’s relic: carefully arranged rubber girdles, the old fashioned kind with garters attached in the front and back. Four or five girdles laid out so carefully, solemnly caught at my heart, the way an unexpected reminder of a painful past can do. Anna spotted me from across the aisle where she was talking with another merchant. She had noticed the necklace I wore, my name in Hebrew letters. Through her haze of poor vision, she seized upon those small silver letters and she darted through the traffic of shoppers.

“What is this?” she said, turning her face up towards me, touching the letters.

“Yes,” I began to say, “I am Jewish...”

“Are you Jewish...” she asked. We both ended out sentences on the same word.

“I haven’t seen these in such a long time,” I said stroking the girdles. “My mother worked in the garment district, we called them foundation garments.”

“So where are you from? Why are you here?” Anna leaned on the corner of her stall. Di and Gayle had turned to look for me, and I waved them on. I wanted to spend more time with Anna.

“I am a Jew from New York, I was born in the Bronx...”

“Oh oh, New York,” Anna put down her coffee. “I have never been there. You know there are thousands of us here.”

“But I feel lonely here as a Jew.”

“Have you been to Glicks, you will always find Jews at Glicks.” She laughs. We are standing so close I can see every detail of her face and her worn ribbed blue cardigan. All our time together, she nibbles away at her Danish, sips her coffee, pats my arm. “I’ll tell you a story,” she says, laughing already. “My children, there’re grown, they took me on a trip to Mildura—you know Mildura—and in the middle of every thing, walking in Mildura I smelled something so good, it had to be a bakery so we asked some one and they sent us to this bakery where the people were lined up in the street. From a little machine we got tickets. I stood on

the line and I shouted out to my son, 'Mildura has a Glicks,' and a woman turned and laughed and said, 'Another Jew from Melbourne.'

"Why are you here," she repeats. "My husband and I came from Bialstock in the thirties. My brother went to America and we came here to Australia." I keep being surprised by the twang of her Aussie accent.

"I'm here to be with my ---friend," I say choosing not to say my partner, not wanting to loose the breath of coffee and Danish and Anna.

"How long are you here for? Are you married, how many children?"

I could not tell Anna what had brought me to Melbourne first in 1998, that after a year of chemotherapy, I had been resurrected by the touch of a henna-haired woman from Melbourne, a strong willed woman who had carried me across the ocean to her world, insisting that much life lay ahead of me. I had traveled in small ways before but this four-month stint in another country, so far away from my own, forced me to examine what identifying baggage I carried with me. What was the essential me—knowing that all essential things change. Five worlds of experience survived the paring down: illness, fem-lesbian, writer, archivist, Jew.

Slowly I began to situate myself in this new place, to find the friends and groups that would allow me to have a sense of continuity. Di, of course, was the bridge to all things, but I had to make the connections myself. Earlier in my first visit, I had taken Di to visit the Jewish Museum in Sydney—a ritual of historical exposure I often do with my gentile lovers. Since Di is from a German-Australian background, having grown up in Adelaide, this visit took on an added edge. Once inside the museum I fell into conversation with David, an elderly volunteer with the museum who was a survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto. I let go of Di, allowing her to wander freely amidst the words, images and maps with their blinking lights, showing the Nazification of Europe while I fell into David's story. He was my first oasis of Jewishness—in this most secular of places, a room filled with history, politics, genocide. As with Anna, I found myself in his features, his voice, his roundness, his gestures. And I marveled at the wings of change that had carried him and his surviving family to Australia. I am not naïve about the Jewish Diaspora--in my college years, I met two sisters who had grown up in China, their port of flight. In my building back in Manhattan, I have a neighbor whose family took refuge high in the Bolivian mountains--but still I wonder at the dispersal of a people, who like tormented seeds, take root in new earth.

When David asked me why I was in Sydney, I could not tell him the real reason—to meet with gay people who were going to help me launch my new book at Mardi Gras. I could not find a way to fit that information into his hugs and exclamations. We ended our conversation by sharing our fears about the rising tides of hate in the world, about the suffering of so many others.

As my visit extended itself, I had further moments of Jewish warmth—meeting Karen at Babka's on Brunswick Street, eating in the Kosher fast food restaurant across from Glick's, where I had to announce that I was a Jew from New York to

no big response. The loneliness was mine alone. And then a wondrous thing happened. One hot morning I received a call from a woman who introduced herself as Hinde Ena Burstin. She told me about the Jewish Lesbian group she was a part of and asked if I wanted to have breakfast with her.

We met at Babka's, the heat baking the street-front windows. Hinde's voice was sweet and musical, like a Purim song, I thought. We talked, she told me about the group, her experience with immigration and her Canadian lover's sometime feeling of homesickness. "One of us is always in exile," Hinde said. And then she told me that she speaks and teaches Yiddish, the language of her parents, her language. We spoke about mutual acquaintances in the Peace Now movement, about our physical struggles and about writing. Hinde spoke again of her love for Yiddish, for the living, every day voice of Yiddish. A few moments passed as we talked of other things, but inside of me a hope was growing. Between bites of blintzes, I built up the courage to ask if she would consider translating a piece of mine into Yiddish. The thought of my work, the words of lesbian desire living in this endangered language, a language so full of Jewish history, its suffering and its resistance, overwhelmed me. Hinde said yes, she would try, and we decided on "Our Gift of Touch," a piece I had written in the 1980s for a visit with lesbians in Canada's Prison for Women.

As the days went by, I would get calls from Hinde, asking my advice about choices of Yiddish words and telling me funny stories about her conversations with her parents over the difficulties of translation. She had asked her parents what was the Yiddish equivalent for the word "moan," as in orgasmic pleasure. They didn't know so her father rang all his friends to find out.

The night of my Melbourne book launching arrived, amidst the celebrations of Mid Summa Festival. I had survived my four months in Melbourne. That night in the Barracuda Club, I faced an audience filled with friends and readers. The members of the Jewish Lesbian group were sitting right up front. The sweat dripped down our faces, the fans whirred overhead, Di sat close to the stage, her legs crossed, a glass of red wine in front of her. I was perched on a bar stool. The highlight of the night, of this journey from a known land to an unknown one, was when Hinde joined me on stage. We took turns reading, a paragraph in English, a paragraph in Yiddish. Never before had I heard my words in this language, this old familiar language, spoken so beautifully by Hinde, a language that brought back my childhood, my mother, the world of Anna's girdles and David's kiss while giving new voice to my adult lesbian passion. In this country so far away from where my life was rooted, I had been given the most intimate of gifts: my own language, lost to me, my own history, reconnected to the older story.

So this is how travel works, I now think. How loving someone from a different world works. You take in all the newness and if you are lucky, you discover the larger longings within yourself, the histories that must be touched from time to

time, the intonations, the pat on the hand, the *sheina madelas* that bring you home.

© Joan Nestle