

Mir Zenen Do: Montreal Memories

Rona Altrows

I'm 6 years old. It's the middle of the night, I'm feverish and headachey with measles. My mother, sitting by the bedside, sings me a Yiddish lullaby. She carries me far from home with the story of a gambler's wife calming her crying child. "It's nearly four in the morning," the song-mother complains, "and your daddy's still not here." I picture the daddy, a lazy brute, staggering into the house dead drunk, cursing his luck and his worthless poker cronies. This is an exciting image. My own daddy, a soft-spoken accountant, spends his spare time reading philosophy, playing Scrabble with my brother and me, and fishing.

It's Sunday morning eight years later. The coffeepot is perking and the kitchen table is covered with the weekend brunch spread — tomato juice, pumpernickel, sweet butter, blue cheese. My mother turns on the radio; it's time for The Jewish Hour. The host has a rich, warm speaking voice. I've heard he's a rabbi. He introduces every song enthusiastically, often adding biographical tidbits about the performers and writers. "Mordecai Gebertig, who wrote 'Yankele', was the Stephen Foster of Polish Jewry.... The beloved author Sholom Aleichem gave songwriter Morris Warshavsky his big break." Between songs, the host makes community announcements. This week, Myrna Frymel graduates from Macdonald College, Joel Rabinovitch marries a girl from New Brunswick, the Shermans return from Israel, and Mr. Rome starts another classical music appreciation course at the YMHA.

It's a year later. I'm with a group of teens attending a Holocaust memorial ceremony in the Y auditorium. About 200 people are here. Many lived through concentration camps. A choir begins to sing "Zog Nit Kaynmol," the hymn of the Jewish patriots' underground. "Zog nit kaynmol az du gayst dem letstn veg": "Never say that you're at the end of the road." People are singing good and loud. I feel this song of hope and resistance bringing us together — the ones who survived, the ones who perished, the ones who came before and after. I feel the bond of humanity more deeply than ever before in my 15 years. "Mir zenen do," we sing together. "We are here. We survive."



I can remember that mother and dad were the only musicians in the area and were much in demand.... When the threshers came to our house at harvest time the men insisted on washing the dishes and cleaning up the kitchen after their supper, while mother and dad entertained with their music — a Real Night Club.... Any time we were invited to a neighbour's home for the evening they were expected to entertain. Dad was getting a bit tired of playing and [once] refused to take his violin. Mother put his violin case in the wagon, unknown to him, and proceeded with the family to this neighbour's home. When asked to play, he said that he did not bring the instrument, at which time mother went out to the wagon, picked up the case, and to her embarrassment found that dad had removed the violin. Guess there were some angry words exchanged.

Elizabeth Soper, *Lengthening Shadows of the Neutrals* (Brownfield, Alberta)