

JULIE WITTES SCHLACK

Signs

Many of my grandmother's errands on Saturday afternoons involved visits to frightening people.

My eleven-year-old brother and I would climb on to the massive, marshmallowy front seat of her 1959 yellow-and-white Plymouth with the push-button transmission and head downtown. The first stop was usually at the newspaper and tobacco store run by my great uncle, who took a tender, devoted interest in my grandmother after my grandfather's early and sudden death a few years before I was born. One-armed since the age of six when he was hit by a streetcar in Winnipeg, Uncle Charlie wasn't dashing, nor did his eyes twinkle from behind his thick black electrical-taped glasses. He and my grandmother would chat, and before we left, he'd press a damp nickel into my hand, direct me to pick a treat from one of the big, dusty penny candy jars on the counter, giving me a quick, surprisingly firm squeeze around my shoulders with his stump. The contact ended like a cruel joke, as if his elbow and lower arm had been yanked away like a chair someone was about to sit in. Much as I loved candy, in every visit I dreaded that moment, ashamed of my squeamishness.

But more disturbing than Uncle Charlie's stump were the arms of some of the other people we visited, arms that had blue numbers tattooed on the insides of their white wrists.

"Don't stare at them," my grandmother warned my brother and me, thereby guaranteeing that we would. Why did they have these numbers, we'd ask. What did they stand for?

"They got them in concentration camps," she told us.

This was an answer, but not an explanation, so we continued to stare. We'd sum the numbers, look for patterns in the sequence of digits. (Were they always odd, even, odd?) There was little else to do in these small, stuffy apartments on the east side of Montreal, as my petite, stylishly coiffed grandmother, with her tinkling voice, strained to make conversation with these pale people in faded housedresses and lumpy suits, immigrants whose speech was guttural and thick.

These visits melded, but I remember one distinctly. My grandmother, as usual, came bearing food. Carefully climbing the circular, external wrought-iron steps that adorned the front of every building in this neighborhood, I carried the bag with the kimmel bread and the still-warm cheese and cherry Danish. Behind me, my brother gripped a casserole full of my grandmother's stuffed cabbage, while my grandmother led the way, one hand on the winding banister, the other clutching a bag of store-bought smoked meat and several pounds of homemade brisket, baked for hours and still steaming in its foil girdle.

In a square living room stood a couple in their sixties with pale blue eyes that matched the room's pale blue walls. They smiled as their daughter opened the door for us, excitedly gestured us in to come in and sit on their plastic-covered couch. They spoke to their daughter or to my grandmother in short, loud bursts of Yiddish, their speech forced out of exaggeratedly shaped mouths, their words largely lacking in consonants and difficult to understand. The food smelled wonderful, they seemed to be saying with a mix of signs and sounds; we needn't have come but they were so glad we did; would we stay and have lunch with them? I was afraid that my grandmother would say yes. She declined, but the twenty minutes that we were probably there felt like hours. I was terrified of this perfectly friendly couple with their strangled voices and wildly waving hands. Just as the occasional sighting of a kid with misaligned eyes confirmed that we shouldn't cross ours even for a minute because they might get stuck, these people and those other grim ones with the numbers on their wrists seemed to have been placed in my path as a warning that terrible things could happen to innocent people.

Years later my mother explained that the deaf couple were the in-laws of someone who had worked for my grandfather in his vending machine business. The concentration camp survivors were probably receiving aid from the Combined Jewish Philanthropies, for which my grandmother volunteered. These visits were nothing more than my grandmother's acts of kindness toward people who were on the periphery of her daily life.

But for me, my brother, my cousins—for most of us born in the early 1950s to Jewish families in Montreal—they were living, breathing evidence that bad

things happened, really bad things. We could walk and talk freely in our cloistered suburban neighborhood, but there was danger surrounding our anglophile, Semitic island in a province where, fueled by general anti-English sentiment, support for the pro-Nazi Vichy regime in France lived on well after the war had ended. We knew from snatches of overheard adult conversation, and from the war movies and spy movies that alternated with the Westerns on TV, that Nazis and Communist spies could still be walking among us.

Until my family moved to the United States, we shared a summer house on a lake in the Laurentian Mountains north of Montreal with my Auntie Anne, Uncle Herbie, and three cousins. While the fathers worked in the city during the week, my mother and aunt would take the five of us kids on explorations, driving down previously untraveled dirt roads just to see where they led.

The drive from Montreal to our house on Lac La Croix took a few hours. My brother and I sat in the backseat, playing Ghost and Geography and willing the car to break clear of the rush-hour traffic and out onto the first newly completed stretch of highway. Where the city stopped, the autoroute started. We'd look for cars like ours and count the tollbooths, where my father, distressingly careless about rules, would casually flip the coins into the bin without even looking, his eyes still on the road in front of him.

At Val-David the highway turned to a paved strip bordered by gas stations and hot dog stands. We always stopped at Marcel's, an asbestos-shingled hut with a huge red-and-white sign out front. On it, the words *Chien Chaud* formed two arcs joined in the shape of a giant hot dog. *Frites*, painted like long, thin French fries, jumped out from each end like hot, spitting oil. These and a few other French words—translations for *please*, *thank you*, *help*, *God*, *pie* (and the name of every kind of berry that was put in pie), *milk*, and *lake*—were all my brother and I needed to know. They were the words on the signs, on the delivery vans that drove up to our house, the substance of our lives during these summer days. At home, in our neighborhood, we needed no French. And if we were outside the English neighborhoods, our parents were usually with us.

At Marcel's we'd sit down at the picnic table and eat hot dogs in the pink dusk. Then back in the car, my brother and I would pull the blanket up from the floor and curl up, our feet doggedly bumping together. As our parents' voices became softer and more directed to each other, I'd lie with my head on the armrest, looking out the back window, focusing on a single star and trying to figure out how it stayed in the same place no matter how far and fast we drove.

I'd check off the milestones: the beaver dam, the huge silhouetted billboard for Santa's Village, and the arrow pointing toward *Au Petit Poucette – Jambon Fumée* (smoked ham—I knew that too). Then came the sign for Mont Gabriel, and next to it, a neon cross, bigger even than the one in Montreal on top of Mount Royal. I wondered about the crosses that were everywhere but in our neighborhood (except for the one on Beth Bailey's lawn). I understood they were symbols, that they stood for the crucifixion of Christ, who, if you were a Christian, you thought was God's son. But so what? How did the crosses help anyone? They seemed to me to be like those little air-raid shelter signs that had recently sprung up on phone poles and building walls, that told you there was a shelter somewhere in the neighborhood, but didn't tell you exactly where, or how to get to it, or guarantee that they'd even protect you when the Russians dropped the bomb.

After a spiraling climb up the mountain, we could look down at the sign tiled into the hill below us. It lay like a giant mosaic—*Camp Val-David*, each letter on its own big wooden square. My brother and cousins and I had heard our parents refer to it as an “adult camp,” which we'd interpreted to mean that it was a nudist colony. We would imagine naked people playing volleyball and frying eggs for breakfast.

But on one trip past the sign, my mother said to my father, “Bryna told me that a Realtor up here told her that it's some kind of right-wing retreat.”

“I've been hearing that since the war,” he answered. “Rumor had it that somewhere around Saint-Sauveur there was a colony of Nazi sympathizers just waiting for their chance to—well, I don't know what they wanted to do. But I wouldn't be surprised if they're still there.”

“Nazis?” my brother asked. “Like Hitler?”

“Probably not Hitler,” my father answered, “but anti-Semites who agreed with the Nazis about some things, people who've never met a Jew in their lives and have all kinds of crazy ideas.”

“But it could be Hitler,” my brother insisted. “I heard he was hiding out in the mountains of Argentina. But it could have been the mountains of Quebec. Or he could have come here because he was about to be discovered in Argentina.”

“Hitler's dead, hon,” my mother said. “It's just that they couldn't kill his ideas with him, and some people—not many, but a few—still believe in them.”

Hitler. I'd heard him once. Some World War II-related anniversary and one of his speeches was being broadcast. My father had turned up the radio and called my brother and me over to listen.

“This is what I heard,” he said, “sitting in my parents’ kitchen when I was sixteen. I didn’t know German, but I knew this man was a maniac, that he was filled with hate.”

And I heard the same thing in this harsh and horrible voice screaming out of the radio. The sound felt like it was bruising my skin. The rough fabric stretched over the radio’s speaker trembled. I lay my fingers on it and felt the vibration as millions of people cheered. Hitler got more and more wound up, yelling and pounding the podium. And I felt like I *was* my father twenty years earlier, sitting in his Outremont kitchen with the Yiddish-speaking grandparents I never knew and hearing this voice broadcasting to the whole world.

I looked back at Mont Gabriel, so busy and glistening in the winter but now bereft, sitting muddy and bald except for the tufts of trees around the edges, its ski lifts small and frail. I scanned the hills. These mountains were the oldest in the Appalachian chain, probably the oldest in North America and the world. They’d survived dinosaurs and the Ice Age. Hitler could easily be hiding there. He was an army guy—I had always seen him in uniform. He’d know how to make campfires no one else could see, how to travel by night, how to lie on one of the dull gray rocks and aim his rifle at the passing cars below.

But how would he know which cars to shoot at? Ours wasn’t a Jewish car; it was a Rambler. He needed spies, informers. Maybe the people hiding under the Camp Val-David sign kept track. Every weekend they could see who drove on this road, who stopped at a house with a cross, and who kept going, farther into the mountains, to finally turn into a house with a little mezuzah on the door frame. They would get to know all the cars, follow people. They could. None of the year-round people were Jewish. It was only the weekend people they had to watch.

It was late when we pulled into the driveway of our house on Lac La Croix, but the house was dark. My aunt and uncle and cousins weren’t arriving until the next day. I remember my parents unlocking the door and unloading the luggage while we waited in the car. I kept them fixed in my sight, watching lights turn on one after another as they walked through the house. Then my father reappeared, opened the car door, and we followed him into the house, our feet crunching the gravel. The stars were very bright and the air was cold and blue. I wondered if there was an animal—a raccoon or a mink—in the milk crate trap we kids had put in the gully last weekend before we left.

We went straight to bed, but I couldn’t sleep. I lay there, listening. My parents were upstairs. My brother was on the top bunk, breathing just loudly enough for me to hear him. There was only me to guard the house through this endless night.

Here, with the family asleep out in the middle of nowhere, Hitler wouldn't need a rifle. He could sneak up with a knife. I listened hard for the sound of footsteps. If he came, I would stand behind the kitchen door with the cast-iron frying pan and hit him on the head as he came in. But what if he didn't come in the kitchen door? There were four other entrances to this jumbled house.

There was no choice. I would have to go out after him, not wait inside. But still I lay in my bed. I tried to imagine slipping out into the dark, sneaking up behind someone—even Hitler—and hitting him on the head or thrusting a knife into his back.

But I knew I couldn't force a knife through anyone's flesh. I lay there thinking, *This is how it happened*. This is how all those people let themselves be dragged out of their houses and put on trains and sent to concentration camps. Would I be any different from them?

The next morning, I was the first one up. I slid quietly out of bed and out the kitchen door. I walked outside barefoot, around the house, then down the gully, sliding but not falling in the tangled roots and scattered rocks. The milk crate trap was empty. But the biggest frog I'd ever seen was sitting on the rock we tied the boat to. I picked up a stick and tapped it against the base of the big spruce that held our tree house, feeling it bounce back gently in my hand. In my pink-and-turquoise flannel pajamas, I threw it into the lake, as far out as I could. At dawn, in the valley of mountains that enclosed my world like stadium walls, I lay one foot in front of the other, heel to toe, heel to toe, and paced the perimeter of our property.

JULIE WITTES SCHLACK writes essays, short stories, and articles for the business press. Her essays regularly appear in National Public Radio's affiliated blog, *Cognoscenti*, and her work has been published or is forthcoming in numerous publications, including *Shenandoah*, *Writer's Chronicle*, *The Louisville Review*, *Eleven Eleven*, *Ninth Letter*, and *Tampa Review*. Julie received her MFA from Lesley University's low-residency program.