

A black and white photograph of a European town viewed from a high vantage point, with a decorative metal railing in the foreground. The town features a prominent church with a tall bell tower and is surrounded by rolling hills. The railing in the foreground is ornate, with a circular design at the top.

Ruth Ellen Gruber

Letters
from
Europe

(and
Elsewhere)

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Austeria

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*To my father, Jacob W. Gruber, and to the blessed memory
of my mother, Shirley Moskowitz Gruber*

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FOREWORD

EPISTOLARY JOURNALISM is a time-honored form — for good reasons: Unlike straight reporting, it gives a skilled practitioner the opportunity to bring his or her own experiences into play in a positive way; the reader, meanwhile, feels a sense of intimacy with the writer that is the underlying strength of a personal letter. The symbiosis will quickly become clear, I think, as you enjoy this collection of missives from Ruth Ellen Gruber that originally appeared in *The New Leader*.

The NL was launched on January 19, 1924, as a weekly newspaper “devoted to the interests of the Democratic Socialist and Labor movements” in the United States. Before long it was taken over by the Mensheviks, who had fled from Russia after the Bolshevik Revolution. In 1950 it switched to a magazine format, and by the very early ’60s began describing itself as a “small ‘i’ independent, small ‘d’ democratic, small ‘l’ liberal” journal of news analysis and opinion.”

Throughout its history, however, the NL has remained firmly focused on international affairs. So it is not surprising that a decade ago when we met Gruber, an American correspondent

admired for her keen perceptions of European political, social and cultural developments, we asked her to write a “Letter” for alternate issues of the magazine. Happily, she agreed.

Since January 2007, the NL has only been publishing online. Anyone who wants to continue receiving “Letters” from Ruth Ellen Gruber, or is curious to see the rest of the magazine, can simply click on www.thenewleader.com (without charge).

Myron Kolatch
Executive Editor, The New Leader



A LETTER FROM HOME

IN SANTA MONICA this past spring, a week after my mother's funeral, I found myself on a pavement paralleling the Pacific Ocean, unconsciously avoiding the lines between the concrete squares as I walked along. "Step on a crack, break your mother's back." The old schoolyard rhyme ran through my head, over and over; it was insistent, unavoidable, something absorbed in childhood, reflecting the instinctive fear children have that their parents, particularly their mother, could be taken away from them — and that they should, they must, do everything in their power to prevent it, even if it means walking funny down the sidewalk.

My mother died at the end of April, just three months after being diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. I am not a child, except in the sense that I'm a child of my parents, and there was nothing any of us could have done this time to save her. She went into hospice care and died at home, in her bedroom, surrounded by her family. "Serenamente, nell'abbraccio della sua famiglia" is the way I phrased it on the poster I had put up in the village in central Italy where my parents and I both have houses and, for

the past two decades, have spent much of the year. That's what they do in Italy; they broadcast the loss of a loved one in stark black on white, big clear posters that are affixed on village notice boards so that everyone can get the news.

Mom's death was, in fact, a natural process; grievous for our family and friends, devastating to my father, but a passing that we consciously try not to call a tragedy. It was Mom in her way who set the tone. "I'm 86, I knew that one day or another something would happen," she told me on the phone in January, when she informed me of the diagnosis. "But I never expected it would be THIS." After all, her own mother had lived to be 96 and had had a sister who made it past 100.

All her life, my mother was an artist, and, even as she slipped away, her art remained the clearest focus of her thinking. She was concerned at what would happen to her art works, which span more than 70 years of creativity and encompass a variety of media, from simple line drawings and sketches to sculpture and oils and the joyously complex, multi-layered collages that had become her signature style.

Mom began working in collage in the early 1960s, first focusing on subjects that were of interest to her intellectually, but not on an intimate level — landscapes and cityscapes, for example, of Prague, Rome, Israel, even Egypt, where she had never been. From the late 1970s, however, she became more and more immersed in her subjects, using her collages to project a richly textured vision of life as she lived and perceived it, among her family, friends, neighbors, and local landscapes. Many of them were set in Italy, and particularly in rural Umbria, where she spent so much time; bustling with activity and always exuding

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a touch of whimsy, they mixed dreams and reality but were never sentimental or clichéd.

I guess Mom saw the world differently from most people. Outwardly, she was one of the calmest people I ever knew, but her inner vision was dazzling. Her works were based, she once said, “on personal experience and are a controlled mixture of a variety of textures and media, composed in such a way as to affect the viewer from a distance while at the same time inviting him to participate in the action — to experience through color, dynamic contrasts of light and dark, textures and techniques, a reality that may seem fantastic but is still real.”

To achieve this, she used a complex process that combined her own sketches, photographs and monotype prints with ink, paint, and scraps of paper, textile and other materials. Almost all are densely populated with real people, drawn from and elaborated from the photographs that she took incessantly at every social occasion. Whether the overall subject was a grape harvest or the ruins of Pompeii, or a wedding, or a family reunion, they burgeoned with life; almost all seemed like parties, where everyone and everything had no trouble mixing or mingling.

Mom’s last really articulate conversation was a lively, and sharp, critique of the invitation design for an upcoming exhibition of her work in Los Angeles, an exhibition that we — and she — knew full well would be posthumous and which the curators had decided to call a Celebration. Mom felt that the invitation, which utilized an uncharacteristically dour self-portrait that none of us really liked, was not representative of either the style or attitude inherent in her work. It looked so gloomy, she said, who ever would want to go to an exhibit of that! I am the artist, she said, tell them that the artist objects to this design.

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“Mom, you haven’t lost any of your marbles,” I told her, as I wheeled her the few feet back to bed from the living room.

“Yes, that’s the problem,” she replied.

“What do you mean,” I asked.

“Well,” she said, “how would you feel if you knew you were going to die in a few days?”

“Are you afraid?” I asked.

“No,” she answered. “But I’m not happy.”

Mom lived a long, creative, fulfilled and happy life. Her final illness was also really her first. She was born in Houston and spent half a century in Philadelphia; since the mid-1980s she and my father had divided their time between Philly and their farmhouse in Italy — their arrival in the village each May, neighbors told me, was regarded as a welcome sign of spring. We have always been a close family, my parents, myself, my brothers and now their own wives and children. But, growing up, we were never into to what one calls public displays of affection. That we all like, respect, and trust each other were givens, as was the given of love. On her deathbed, Mom cut off one of my brothers when he tried to voice his feelings. “Frank, don’t be sentimental,” she admonished.

Outside the family, Mom touched people in ways that I didn’t really comprehend until she got sick and the letters, cards, emails and telephone calls began to arrive. Acquaintances she hadn’t seen in more than 20 years wrote about how they would never forget her. Friends of my own generation, and younger, described how she had set an example or been a source of strength in times of trouble. Villagers in Italy with minimal education wrote beautiful notes in careful, schoolchild script. Dad read everything to

her; he printed out the emails and put them all, with the cards, in a special box. In the brief months of her illness, he barely left the apartment.

Mom and Dad moved to Santa Monica a few years ago, and that's where she's buried, in the town's Woodlawn Memorial Cemetery. She chose the place — the cemetery, if not the plot itself. As someone whose research and career over the past 20 years has involved visits to Jewish cemeteries all over central and eastern Europe, I think she couldn't have made a better choice.

Woodlawn is eclectic, and, for southern California, it's historic, the final resting place of a full, wide range of settlers drawn from around the world by the California dream. There are romantic monuments from the late 19th century, and the simple graves of unknown John Does. The city's founding families have their tombs here, and there are monuments with epitaphs in Japanese, Persian, Spanish. Memorials honor anonymous Civil War dead and the pioneers of California. One stone marks the grave of a woman with the uncompromising name of Sarah J. Death; she died in 1912 at the age of 81.

Mom chose the cemetery, but Dad chose the plot. It's next to a little bench and a newly planted sapling, where tall, graceful palm trees cast stripey shadows in the late afternoon.

Doug McClure, the brash blond actor who played Tramps on the old TV show *The Virginian*, is buried a few yards away from my mother. He was, says the epitaph, a "loving husband and father" who is forever in the hearts of his family. And dashing Paul Henreid, who starred as Ingrid Bergman's husband in *Casablanca* and so romantically lit two cigarettes at once for him and Bette Davis in *Now, Voyager*, also lies, with his wife, nearby. "Oh Jerry,

don't let's ask for the moon," Davis tells him, in the famous last scene, "we have the stars." The simple grave marker bears a star under Henreid's name, and a rose under that of his wife.

Other Hollywood personalities are buried here, too, as well as writers, political figures, and even a professional wrestler. Mom would probably enjoy the company. She was an artist, a mother, a sister, a daughter, an aunt, a grandmother, a friend, a mentor and all that. And she was forthright, and honest, and fair. But she was also a fan — and she was also a romantic.

As a teenager in Houston, she cut school one day to wait for her then-idol, Nelson Eddy, to exit his hotel. She stepped forward and presented him with a portrait of him she had drawn from photographs. "I'll hang it in my den," he told her. Decades later, when I myself was a teenager, Mom took me to New York to see the musical *Camelot*. Afterward, it was she who led the way to the stage door, where we waited for Richard Burton to emerge. I still have the Playbill on which he scrawled his autograph.

My parents met at Oberlin College in the early 1940s. Then, during World War II, when my father was stationed in Iran, Mom sent him a photo of herself, leaning against a wall, wearing a pair of short shorts with distinctive, sailor-style buttons. Both she and Dad had recently been jilted, and the photograph kindled a correspondence that led to a marriage that lasted more than 61 years. Indeed, Mom's cancer diagnosis came just a couple weeks before she and Dad marked their 61st wedding anniversary. The year before, for their 60th, we had held a party, which they presided over wearing fanciful paper crowns made by the child of friends. This year, despite her illness, we also had a party; small groups of friends and family commuted between my brother's house and the hospital, where Mom sat in bed in

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a fluffy, pink bed jacket, a present from my aunt, and unlike anything I had ever seen her wear before.

The photo of Mom in the short shorts takes pride of place on the first page of the oldest of our family photo albums, with the caption, in Mom's handwriting, "What started it all." On the same page is a photo that Dad sent her from Iran, a handsome young man, sitting musing in a forest.

After her funeral, I, the only daughter, spent several days going through Mom's things, separating what to put away, what to give to friends as keepsakes, what to send off to charities. In doing so, I learned something that I had never realized and which, given my own wardrobe preferences, is rather remarkable: My mother did not own a single piece of black clothing.

Mom was very organized. Storage bags were clearly labeled; drawers and shelves and hangers were neatly arranged; shoes were in boxes. Still, before I put anything in the charity bags, I checked pockets and opened handbags to make sure they were empty.

In one handbag, an old, brown, leather purse that had been made, decades ago, by a craftsman friend, I found something wrapped up in tissue paper and further protected by a plastic bag.

I took it out and removed the wrappings.

There, carefully folded, was a dark brown cotton garment, decorated with buttons. I unfolded it. It was the pair of shorts Mom had worn in the picture. The one that had started it all.

*Ruth Ellen Gruber
September 2007*