

THE BORDER OF TRUTH

Counterpoint 2007

Some thoughts on the novel and my father's story:

Like so many children of survivors and refugees I grew up in the shadows of my parents different escapes from war. Shadowed landscapes are, I suppose by definition, intriguing and murky and it was often unclear what I was to see and what should remain in the dark. For a writer—such ambiguity is rich soil. My father left Europe on the Portuguese ship the Quanza and was among the 86 passengers retained on the ship in NY and then in Mexico to be sent back to Lisbon and then presumably to be repatriated into Nazi occupied Belgium. The ship, after refueling with coal in Virginia, was saved by the remarkable efforts of Eleanor Roosevelt in outsmarting Secretary of State Cordell Hull.

The Border of Truth is certainly not my father's story. As a writer I was keenly aware that a journey away from the bombed city of Brussels through France and Spain and Portugal was, like so many journeys, a natural for story-making. And as parents so generously do, my father gave to his daughter whatever she needed. I've invented, rearranged, compressed, shifted, imagined and then when it was done I worried. There's little he'd recognize, I'm certain.

My father became, as must be obvious, my first and deepest research source. It is a gift I would wish upon any child to have the chance to ask one's parent questions that otherwise would never occur to be asked. I'd ask, "What American movies would you have seen in Belgium in the late 1930s?" or "What was your school uniform?" and watch my father's face shift as memory bloomed inside of him. Had he recalled how those school socks itched even once before in the intervening seventy years? Had he said aloud the name of the beach side town where his family went on summer holiday in all those years, suddenly smiling at the amusement rides he loved as a boy and the cafe where his friends gathered with girls on August afternoons? While I took notes, I watched the smells and textures of my father's childhood return to him. "Here," my father would say, drawing on the paper tablecloth of restaurant, "Here is the street where our family lived."

This fall, I worked on the edited manuscript pages in a hospital room while my father recovered from heart surgery. "Read to me from the book," he asked through the breathing tube. "It's nothing like it was," I warned my father and he brushed at the air with his taped-up hand saying, "Please, don't you think I understand literature?" The boy, the father, the daughter-- they are born of this novel and happily we live outside it. My father's story in the end is still his-- shadowed still in ways not even for his daughter to understand.

It was Aug. 19, 1940, and she was 11, her skinny legs rooted to the heaving deck of the Quanza, a Portuguese cargo ship that 317 passengers had chartered to flee war-torn Europe.

Malvina was desperate to feel safe. She had been seasick every day of the 13-day voyage, and spent the nights wrapped in a blanket on the open deck, unable to bear the fetid, windowless bunker where her mother, her 3-year-old sister, Annette, and her aunt slept.

But New York offered no sanctuary. While 196 passengers, including 66 American citizens, got off, the other 121 passengers, nearly all of them Jews seeking political asylum, including Malvina and her family, were denied entry. Eighty-six of the 121 passengers were later turned away in Mexico, too, and to their horror, the captain was preparing to go back across the Atlantic. It was only when the Quanza anchored for coal in Virginia on Sept. 11 and a State Department official finally granted them visas, at Eleanor Roosevelt's behest, that the refugees were able to disembark....