

*History Becomes Real*

During our four-day break, Margret calls. She and her husband, Gert, are planning to go hiking. Would Tanja and I like to join them? As Tanja relays their invitation, I nod eagerly.

The next day dawns bright and sunny. Waking early, I limber up—leg lifts, sit-ups, a few yoga stretches—then join Tanja for a breakfast of fruit, yogurt, and muesli. Lacing up my hiking boots, I feel my excitement mounting. On the drive into town, we chat amiably. At a parking lot near the university, we find Margret and Gert waiting for us.

Margret introduces me to her husband, a tall, muscular man with piercing blue eyes and white hair, worn long, down to his shoulders. He smiles, reaches out to shake hands, and says, shyly, “My English is not . . . so good.”

I smile back, “My German is worse.” And with that, we pile into their red van, our backpacks chock full of cheese, bread, water, and chocolate.

We take an hour’s drive to south Tyrol, passing through picturesque villages, each with its town square, church, wooden houses, and flower boxes. Tanja, Gert, and Margret converse in German. I am content to look out the window and let them take charge.

Soon we are on the trail. “It should take about two hours to reach the top,” Margret remarks. I am eager to begin, to test my muscles against the mountain. I’m impressed at the numbers of people coming and going: children running ahead of their parents, infants in slings, teenagers with orange tank tops, tattoos, and purple-streaked

hair, couples walking hand in hand, old folks with hiking sticks and strong muscular legs.

Gert quickly outdistances us. With his long strides and easy gait, he is soon out of sight. Tanja and Margret adjust their pace to mine which, despite my enthusiasm, is slow. I am surprised to find that there are barely any flat stretches. The hike is mostly uphill, the top nowhere in sight.

I need to stop often and catch my breath. I'm embarrassed that I'm holding them up. "Please," I implore Margret, "go ahead and catch up with Gert."

She furrows her brow and smiles. "I can hike with Gert any time. It's you I'd like to walk with today."

The air is warm; the sun, strong. We pause occasionally to drink some water and eat some cheese. As we climb, we chat about novels and films, our lives as teachers, finally our upbringings. Margret, the fourth child out of five, comes from a Catholic family, two girls and three boys. Her Italian mother and Austrian father divorced years ago. Her sister lives on the island of Cyprus; two brothers and their families live nearby in Innsbruck, the other in Linz. She rarely sees her father and his second wife.

My family, I explain, came to America in the early 1900s, my mother's family from Poland, my father's from Russia, their 1912 arrival recorded in ledgers at Ellis Island. I am the eldest of four, two boys and two girls. We all live near each other. My mother, remarried after the death of my father, has eight grandchildren.

Tanja describes the small town in central Wisconsin where she grew up: "My parents, my brother, and I lived on a farm outside of Rudolf—population 492—home to three bars, a bowling alley, and a feed mill," she laughs. We laugh too when she tells us that Christmas mail gets stamped with a red-nosed reindeer.

"I came to Austria when I was twenty-four," Tanja explains. "I had a teaching assistantship from the Fulbright Foundation, and my plan was to stay for one year. But Austria just felt right," she says, "and so I never left. I'm amazed that I've been here for five years already." An adopted child, Tanja adds that she knows nothing about her ancestors.

The trail leads us into a stand of evergreens. The trees tower above us, filtering the sunlight. The air under the canopy is cool, raising goose bumps on my arms. We pause to put on sweaters. As we continue to climb, we become quiet. I focus my attention on each

step, lifting first one foot, inhaling deeply, exhaling as I put it down in front of me, then lifting the other. My calf muscles are beginning to ache.

Tanja and Margret move out ahead of me but turn back often to make sure I am O.K. I wave them on. Alone, I find a rhythm that suits me. As I climb higher, my thoughts turn inward. Talk of families brings back the past. Making my way up the slope, I trace another path in my mind: the one laid out for me as a child and then, later, a teen.

I see my first home, a three-family house in the Weequahic section of Newark, New Jersey. I see the front stoop, where neighbors congregated on summer nights, the rain gutters that ran along the sides, the clotheslines strung from back windows, bed sheets flapping in the wind. I recall the soft touch of pussy willows that grew behind the garage, the scent of lilacs in the spring air.

Pausing to catch my breath, I picture the three-room flat I lived in with my parents on the top floor just above my mother's parents. I hear the three short raps of a broomstick that echoed whenever my grandmother wanted something. The sound of Nana's broomstick hitting the ceiling was my signal to run downstairs.

I see the larger apartment we moved to—one floor below my grandparents—when I was four, when my sister, Sheri, was born. Now when Nana needed something, she'd stamp her foot. I recall how much I enjoyed scrambling up and down the back stairs, retrieving a milk bottle, delivering the *Star Ledger*, happy to serve as go-between, the daily link between mother and grandmother.

Continuing to climb, I remember how safe I felt in Newark. Doors were never locked, not even at night, and family was always near. As I emerge into the sunlight, faces come back to me: I see my grandfather, my Poppa, a hardworking, energetic man with a gnarled finger and an easy smile, his lively brothers—Herman, Emil, Sam, the twins, Maxie and Mendy—and his only sister, Minnie, whose big bones, freckled face, and blazing red hair made her stand out. I see my father's mother, my Grandma Rae, a widow, and her brothers and sisters—Izzie, Joe, Nathan, Max, *tante* Becky, *tante* Lena, and the youngest, Miriam, who used the modern English term, aunt. Their father, I knew, had been a rabbi and at one time, as children, they had all huddled together under tables in Siberia.

But in Newark, no one spoke about the past. My family was forward-looking; their future, undeniably American. And while people



emigrated from different countries, to my eyes, everyone was alike. In other words, everyone was Jewish. In fact, I realize, pausing again to catch my breath, as a child I assumed the entire world was Jewish. I had never met anyone who wasn't.

I move off the trail, find a place to sit, and pull off my sweater. I take some chocolate and a water bottle from my backpack. I have been hiking for at least three hours. I know that Margret, Tanja, and Gert must have reached the summit, must be eating at the *Gasthof* they told me awaits us above the timberline. But I am incapable of taking another step without first taking another break.

Leaning against a rock, turning my face to the sun, I close my eyes and see our second home, a split-level house in South Orange, New Jersey, a suburb of Newark. At age nine, I knew this move to a home of our own signaled my father's success, his rise from fire alarm salesman to company president, his delight in having emerged from the confines of working-class life.

I knew, too, that I was supposed to be pleased. I had my own room, a swing set, a Shetland sheepdog named Jigsie. I was still surrounded by Jews. But these Jews were different. They belonged to country clubs. The mothers wore Bermuda shorts and played golf. The girls knew things I didn't know: where to buy clothes; how to play softball. I didn't think we fit in.

What I did like, I recall, was attending synagogue. Although they never accompanied us, my parents, in a nod to suburban mores, joined Temple Israel, a Reform congregation, and sent Sheri and me to Saturday school. Sitting against a rock in southern Tyrol, I recall how I enjoyed sitting in temple, listening to Hebrew prayers, how the plaintive, pleading tone of the music often brought tears to my eyes.

I open my eyes and squint into the sun. Inhaling deeply, I know I must get up and keep climbing. By now, the others must be worried. I put on my backpack, adjust the weight, rejoin the hikers on the trail. The path is steeper now, the ascent more challenging: mostly rocky with short switchbacks, up and around, up and around. My calves ache with each new step, but I can glimpse the roof of the *Gasthof*, its flag waving in the breeze.

I marvel at the people, still eagerly climbing, passing me by with a nod. I marvel even more at the view: at my feet, wildflowers; below me, forests, dappled in shades of green; below the forests, tiny towns; connecting the towns, rivers, curving like snakes; above me, the sun, glinting off the snow peaks; and above the mountains, the clouds, the sky.

Climbing higher, I see our third home, which, like the *Gasthof*, rested on top of a mountain—the South Mountain, in Short Hills, New Jersey—the home that accompanied my father's dizzying ascent to the top of the business world. I recall how delighted my father was with the prominence of our house, how my younger brothers, Richard and Robert, grew up loving it. But, to my thirteen-year-old eyes, “the big house,” as we called it, was too big. I felt dwarfed by its enormous rooms and secretly longed for the days when my grandparents were just a stairway away. The big house, with its indoor pool, its sauna, its tennis and handball courts, embarrassed me. It made me stand out when all I wanted to do was fit in.

To me, at thirteen, my father's achievements meant only another move to another suburb—to a different world entirely. The Short Hills I entered in 1960 was a Christian enclave. I remember how strange I found it: there were Jewish kids in school but the popular ones were the Gentiles. The girls had names like Linnie, Ginnie, Jodie, and Chrissie. They wore round-collared blouses fastened with circle pins and went to church on Sunday. They were anything but loud and as different from the suburban Jews of South Orange as I could imagine. I was fascinated by them and longed to be like them.

Hiking up the last stretch, mustering my last ounce of strength, lifting one heavy leg, then the other, I recall how valiantly I tried, cutting my hair to look like theirs, dressing the way they did, even changing my name, telling everyone to call me Sandi. And, for a while, I recall, it worked. I became one of the “Short Hills girls.” I was invited to their homes, introduced to their parents. But something wasn't right. Someone's mother would stare at me too long. Someone's brother would joke that Jews had horns. I didn't know what to do with my discomfort, except to pretend it didn't exist.

I look up, wiping sweat from my forehead. The *Gasthof* is close. Just a few more turns. I shoulder my pack and climb on. But I am spent, out of breath, and stop abruptly on the trail.

Three burly men, hiking briskly, nearly run me over. I don't understand their German but their tone is clear. I'm in the way, why don't I move over. What a stupid woman, probably an American.

They are ridiculing me, I think, like the brothers of my Gentile friends. You're right, I think to myself, I'm not fast. I did not grow up hiking the Alps. I'm struggling, and I don't belong here. In fact, I think defensively, had I been born here a generation ago, you would



have packed me onto a train, confiscated my belongings, and moved into my house. Hiking your mountains doesn't make me one of you. I'm a fool to think I can come here, put on a pair of hiking boots, and fit in.

I am surprised at this surge of anger. I inhale deeply and fill my lungs with mountain air. I feel the sun beating down on my shoulders, my sweat-soaked T-shirt clinging to my back. Where did that outburst come from? I like to walk and to reflect. But being on my own, hiking on Austrian soil, surrounded for hours by people speaking German must be getting to me.

I look out over the great expanse of mountain and sky. It is so beautiful—above the trees, below the snow. It takes effort, I realize, to climb a mountain; it also takes stretching, I remind myself, to see beyond one's own narrow view. I am close to the top. I can do this.

When I reach the *Gasthof*, I let my backpack slip to the ground as I collapse into a chair. Margret and Tanja huddle close. Gert brings me a glass of water. Slowly, I revive. Over clear broth and hardy bread, I smile wanly and tell them I've had quite a journey.



On July 11, when we return from the break, everyone seems relaxed. Munching on peanuts and chocolate, we recount recent happenings. I describe my struggle to reach the top of the Zillertal. My legs still ache, but I am proud, I admit, to have made it and eager, I confess, to hike again.

A beaming Ingrid bursts into the room. "I read that article you assigned about the move from product to process in the teaching of writing," she exclaims. "The one about the paradigm shift. You know," she says excitedly, "I think I've had one."

We all start to laugh. Her enthusiasm is contagious.

The rhythm of the course is now carrying us along. Drafts are piling up; readings are being completed. There is a purposeful hum.

There is also much less fear. The teachers seem more willing to encounter the uncomfortable experience of not knowing what they will say or write. They are, in addition, forming their own answers to the question, "Why write?" But only two are willing to discuss the questions I'd raised earlier.

Back in our writing group, Martina, who has not yet written a word, confides that my questions leave her feeling helpless. Then she

adds, "My family lived in the country. My mother had nine children. The Nazis gave her Hitler's medal of honor for mothers who produce children for the Third Reich. She refused to wear it. All my parents ever said is that it was a terrible time."

It is Margret who responds most fully. In her mid-forties, outspoken and opinionated, Margret chafes at the characteristic silence of Austrian culture. My questions seem, finally, to have given her permission to speak.

"My in-laws," she begins, "were enthusiastic supporters of the Nazis. My father-in-law joined the Nazi party before it was legal to do so. He served in Hitler's army, fighting for six years."

Christa, Martina, and I sit silently, waiting for Margret to continue. But I am instantly on guard.

"My mother-in-law was the leader of a Hitler youth group of Tyrolean girls. She was proud," Margret pauses, "proud that her framed picture hung on the wall of the Reich Chancellery in Berlin."

So it's true, I think. *Their parents were Nazis.*

"We, my husband and I and our daughter, share a house with them. We have done so for years. Most of the time I cannot bear to look at them, to look into their eyes. It pains me," she says, searching my eyes now, "just to see them in the garden, knowing their history."

I nod. *It pains me too.*

"And your husband?" prompts Christa.

"He is as angry about it as I am. But he cannot talk to them. He has never been able to. In the sixties, he and his brother rejected everything their parents stood for. They became radicals, joined the Maoists."

*The sons of fascists become communists, I think.*

"How did you meet?" I ask.

"At a protest against nuclear power. Over twenty years ago. Gert is ten years older than I am. I was so impressed with him. But as soon as I met her, I could tell his mother didn't like me. She wanted him to marry someone else, someone prettier, and less opinionated." Margret laughs but the sound that emerges is harsh.

"How do you relate to her now?" I ask.

"I rarely talk to her. We all used to argue all the time. But we have learned that it is pointless to condemn them. We get nowhere.

"Now we all live separate lives," she continues. "In our garden there is a tree with a bench around it. We all sit with our backs to the tree, facing out, not looking at each other. We all exist in our



own separate worlds. With this immense silence in the middle. It is such a perfect metaphor for my life.

"Only our daughter goes back and forth with ease. This is the hardest part," Margret says, her voice breaking. "How can I teach her to hate her own grandparents? How can she ever understand?" A tear rolls down her cheek. Brushing it away, she becomes quiet.

The four of us sit in silence for a moment, then agree to take a break.



It is a clear day, the sun shining over the Inn River, the snowy peaks glistening in the distance. I decide to go outside, to get a breath of fresh air. As I stand on the bank of the river, looking out over the water and then up at the surrounding mountains, I see my father. Wounded in a freak accident just before his unit was shipped overseas, my father never fought against the Nazis. While his buddies battled on the beaches of Normandy, he remained in America, organizing shows and sports extravaganzas for stateside soldiers, a prelude to the business conventions, replete with company songs and company cheers, he would stage later in life.

As I walk along the riverbank, I see his mother, my Grandma Rae, and our large, extended family in the basement of a *shul* in Irvington, New Jersey, where at least eighty of us would gather to celebrate Passover. I recall how my cousins and I would run wild, hiding under tables, giggling, happy to ignore our grandparents bent over prayer books. My father would laugh, holding a video camera, happily taping the songs, the comic skits, the kids' antics. Oblivious to any religious significance, he viewed family Seders as another great spectacle.

Settling myself on a bench, watching people stroll along the riverbank, I notice a woman with blond hair. She reminds me of my mother whose light hair and blue eyes distinguished her from everyone else in the family. Characteristically sunny, my mother, Ruth, Rivka, Rivkele, greeted each day with a smile. She sang Broadway show tunes in the car and the kitchen. She still does. I see her today, sitting in an Italian restaurant singing along as a piano player croons. Soon he'll ask her to join in. She'll agree, get up, take the microphone in her hand. When she's finished, people will applaud, will think she's a professional, that she's had voice lessons. She hasn't. She was born with a voice so resonant it makes people cry.

Growing up at her side, I learned that the world was a good place, that one must be kind and understanding. That tomorrow will be better than today. That it is good to have hope. Rarely angry, never spiteful, my mother is not temperamentally a hater. But when it came to the Germans, her warmth would turn to ice, her face would freeze, her eyes narrow in disgust. As a child, I knew something had to be radically wrong. These people must be evil to turn my mother to stone.

Her condemnation was confirmed for me as I grew older and discovered photographs of the Holocaust. I pored over them—pictures of wooden barracks, of electrified barbed wire, of starved bodies with shaved heads thrown carelessly into large pits—until I felt sick. At thirteen, I could not grasp how one group of people, Christians no less, could march another group into the gas chambers; could not make sense of a world that reviled Jews, that either rejoiced or looked away when the Jews were gassed. But one thing I knew for sure: Had I been born in the land my grandparents had left, such a fate would likely have been mine.

Imperceptibly, my shock turned to fear, the fear turned to hate, and the hate began to harden. I began to hate the perpetrators—the Germans, the Austrians, the Poles—anyone who participated in the destruction. I began to hate God for allowing it to happen. And, I think, I also began to hate myself.

For I yearned to be like the girls in my junior high school, quiet and cultured, worldly and well traveled. I understood why the families of my Gentile friends did not like Jews. I didn't like them either, or at least what I took to be Jews: those-upwardly mobile, financially successful men and women who wore their wealth too visibly for me.

I recall our dinner conversations in the big house. My father would need to travel to Germany on business. My mother would refuse to accompany him, and I would side with her. *How could a Jew willingly walk into that Nazi hell?* But then his work would take him to Miami Beach. He would fly us all down and put us up in the penthouse of the Fontainebleau Hotel, a sprawling resort on the ocean with outdoor restaurants and an indoor skating rink. As a teenager, I'd look askance at manicured women who never swam and overweight men sporting gold chains.

Walking along the Inn River, letting my eyes rest on the pastel-colored houses that line its far side, I realize that years ago a complicated dynamic entered my inner life: revulsion for the Jew-haters alternated with revulsion for the Jews.



My father has been dead for twenty years, but his twinkling eyes, his boundless enthusiasm, his love of America are still vivid to me. What would he say now if he saw his daughter struggling with ghosts in an Austrian town?

If he were alive, could I explain to him that I loved the world of immigrant Jews he wished to escape? That his financial success, however well deserved, was also a cause of conflict for me? That in order to be accepted in the Short Hills of my youth, I felt I needed to blend in? That like Eva, the protagonist of my childhood fears and dreams, I, too, felt compelled to remake myself in the image of my Christian schoolmates?



Back in class, it is writing time. People are working quietly on their drafts. I sit down at a table in the corner and look out at the group. I no longer see Austrians. I see individuals who are becoming my friends. I start another poem:

*For protection, I have hated you.  
All of you. There was  
no distinction to make.*

*Germans? They're all Nazis  
I said. Austrians. The same.*

*But now, I have come among you.  
You have given me room  
to speak. Now  
I see you with your passion  
and your pain.*

*Your humanity  
becomes visible to me.*

In our final small group meeting of the day, we take a break from responding to drafts to talk about our families. Margaret, Martina, and I discover that all three of us have adolescent daughters.

I ask Margaret when her daughter was born.

"In 1984," she responds. "She just turned twelve."

"Mine too," I smile. "What month?"

"April."

"Mine too. What day?"

"The 24th," Margaret answers.

"April 24th?" I ask, incredulous.

She nods.

"But that's my daughter's birthday, too!" I respond.

We both grin.

"What's your daughter's name?" she asks.

"Sara," I respond. "What's yours?"

"Cara."

We start to giggle. We barely know each other, may never see one another again, but right now, we feel a closeness beyond anything we can put into words.

"Amazing," I say.

"Amazing," she nods, looking back, her eyes smiling.



On July 13, our final day, expectations are high, the mood is light. We need to add another table for the array of food: wine, cheese, homemade soufflés, tomatoes from Ursula's garden, basil from Hilde's.

We have reached the end of many hours of hard work. Much of our time this night will be spent in celebration: reading finished work aloud; appreciating what it took for each of us to get to this point; planning for the future; and reflecting together, one last time, on what we have all learned.

Tonight, too, we will see the presentations by the reading groups. In addition to working on our writing, we have also been reading and responding to "young adult" novels. I have asked each small group to create a presentation that brings the book to life. This light-hearted but serious assignment is designed to show that writing is not the only way to demonstrate an understanding of a text and to experience how other forms of expression—music, art, drama—bring other kinds of intelligence into play.

The presentations are at once silly, serious, and wonderful. Ursula, Hilde, and Astrid are touchingly sweet as cats from Beverly Cleary's *Socks*. Hans and Thomas as American toughs with switchblades, slicked-back hair, and cigarettes dangling from their lips make the

violence of S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* palpable. Christa, Andrea, Ingrid, and Martina enter in checked lumberjack shirts and baseball caps worn backwards and perform a rap song with the words from Judy Blume's *Then Again, Maybe I Won't*, made even funnier by their accents: "Maybe I vill, maybe I von't."

Margret and Tanja enact a scene from Roald Dahl's *Matilda*. Tanja in schoolgirl garb plays the irrepressible Matilda; Margret, wearing a black leather jacket and shiny black boots, her hair pulled tightly into a bun, plays the vicious headmistress, "the Trunchbull." When she enters, brandishing a whip and berating Matilda for her stupidity, I blanch. Her voice is chilling. My friend resembles a guard in a concentration camp. It is all I can do to contain myself.

Margret succeeds in capturing the wanton cruelty of a certain kind of teacher, dramatizes the abuse of power prevalent in so many classrooms. At the end, when she puts down her whip, we go wild with applause.

The final event of the evening is the "readaround," a more serious time when each person is given an opportunity to read a piece of writing to the group. Rather than discuss each piece after each reading, we listen attentively, clap, and move on.

Hilde has written about a woman who wakes up to find herself in a hospital bed, partially paralyzed after a car accident. Thomas gives a science fiction rendering of a woman intent on destroying the lives of the men she loves. Ursula describes a trip through France. Tanja reads a story of adoption. Ingrid has us in stitches as she reads her piece on the pleasures of organic gardening, punctuated by the pain of dealing with proliferating slugs.

When Margret reads her work, we become quiet. I can hear the tension in her voice. It is reflected in our faces, mirrored in the postures of our bodies. We sit spellbound as she evokes, in a poem entitled "Innocence," the remorse her unrepentant Nazi father-in-law has never expressed:

*We didn't mean to  
brand your arms*

*We didn't mean to  
rip off your clothes*

*We didn't mean to  
make you crawl on your knees*

*We didn't mean to  
select you on the ramp*

*We didn't mean to  
send you to the gas*

*We didn't mean to  
hurt anyone on our march to Norway*

*We didn't mean to  
load a cross on our offspring's shoulders*

*We didn't mean to  
cut off the human bond*

*We don't mean to  
Say, "Forgive us."*

*We were wrong the same!*

When she finishes reading, I let out a long, deep breath. I catch her eye and nod. She smiles back. It looks like a smile of relief.

Then Martina clears her throat. She has something she'd like to read. It is a letter to Louise Rosenblatt, a rewrite of an earlier assignment. She begins slowly, her voice shaking:

Dear Mrs. Rosenblatt,

You originally wrote your book *Literature as Exploration* in 1938, one of the darkest years of Austrian history. While you were writing, enlightened by cultural pluralism, terrible things happened here from the "occupation" to *Reichskristallnacht*. And so many Austrians—Jewish Austrians—who wrote the best literature, were in danger, not allowed to publish, and had to leave the country. Or worse. Please, Mrs. Rosenblatt, may I express to you my deepest regret for all of the atrocities?

Yours sincerely,

*Martina*



I am astonished. For the past two weeks, Martina has been unable to write, has offered excuse after excuse. And now this. I knew Rosenblatt's book was first published in 1938. But I hadn't thought about that because I was eager to focus on the relevance of her message to our lives today.

Nineteen thirty-eight was the year of the *Anschluss*, when Austrians welcomed Hitler with open arms, when those Jews who were lucky or had the means were still able to flee. It took Martina's observation and her imaginative reaching out across time and space to remind me again how the land we inhabit alters the way we read and write.

Sitting there, impressed with all that these teachers have done, grateful to have come among them, I sense once again how much I have changed. I have brought another poem with me, not sure whether I will read it aloud:

*What pain has lain  
dormant  
inside me?*

*This is not my  
history.  
I was not born  
here. But the souls  
of six million  
still haunt,  
still call.*

*What is this hatred,  
born here  
nurtured here,  
turned hysterical?  
So overwhelming,  
so encompassing,  
it annihilates the other?*

*Can I find this hatred  
in myself?  
Or is the higher ground  
of victim  
preferable?*

I decide not to read it. It is too raw, it raises too many unsettling questions, questions I'm not ready to face. Instead I read a piece I have written to my daughter who is homesick during her first experience at sleep-away camp. I try to reassure her, explaining that each of us comes up against our own fears, our own demons, whenever we venture into the unknown. As I read I wonder: To whom am I really writing, Sara or myself?

When the readaround is over, we take a break and chat quietly for a few minutes. I feel the pride in the room. We are amazed by what we have just heard, by the sheer power of writing, the talent we have witnessed, the courage our colleagues have displayed—most in a second language.

With one hour remaining, I announce that there is still enough time to write final reflections. Then as we move around the room to read, it is clear that the question, "Why write?" has been answered. Now, for most, the question is, "How can I offer this experience to my students?"

No one is more adamant about the value of a learner-centered classroom than Margret, who reads to us her reflection on teaching:

I want to support my students in resisting all those leaders who seek to turn their minds into copies of their own, unquestioningly taking what they are offered. A mind that asks questions, reflects, and dares to speak out for all the values once acknowledged to be worthy . . . will be the goal I set for the students in my classroom. Is this utopian? . . . I don't know. But considering our tradition, I have come to ask the following question: Are there any mistakes a teacher could make that are worse than teaching young people to march joyfully into an atrocious war?

I feel tears welling up; sense within me a mix of relief, gratitude, even joy. This time, when everyone raps knuckles, I do the same.



On July 16, on the plane home, I think about the courses, the teachers, the little bit of German I now understand, the exhilarating and exhausting hikes up to the snow peaks, my family waiting for me in New York. I recall the scene at the airport that morning. As Tanja and I arrived, we were surprised by Martina, Hans, and Margret, who



had formed an impromptu goodbye party. Just before I entered passport control, Margret handed me a package with a letter inside:

I was so eager to bring to words what had been brooding in my heart for such a long time . . . This experience of reading each other's words and of responding to each other had its climax in a feeling of revelation. If you, Sondra, hadn't been so courageous to ask your careful questions, I would never have been able to answer them. When I eventually realized you were Jewish, it hit me right in my heart and my brain: you are kin to all those people who suffered inconceivably by atrocities committed by my people. History became real and present. I could hardly bear it. I had nothing to offer. An apology would just have been a token weighing so little that the scales of justice would not have moved an inch. Yet with you I have learned that some people are willing to look closer even if it seems impossible to bear doing so. Thus others get the chance to learn.

As I relax into my seat and follow the westward progress of the plane on the screen in front of me, I think about all that has happened. I came here just to teach. It was such a simple invitation.