

A celebration of the life
of
Elizabeth Eva-Marie
Rosenthal

Thursday 1 August 2019
at Richmond Cemetery

Elizabeth was born into a Jewish communist family in pre-Nazi Berlin. Her parents, Henjo and Eleonore were very involved in the political and cultural life of the city and when the Nazis took power in 1933 – when Elizabeth was five – their lives were turned upside down. Her father went to Moscow but her mother was not allowed to and had to make some kind of living and support Elizabeth under increasingly oppressive conditions in Germany.

In February 1939 Elizabeth was able to escape to England via the kindertransport scheme and was placed with an English family in Oldham. Her mother joined her there two months later and the two were reunited – much to the disappointment of the host family.

Ten years ago at a meeting in the New North London synagogue, Elizabeth described how, from Kristallnacht in November 1938 until February 1939, when she left on the Kindertransport, she had been hidden in the basement of a house in Berlin by a German family.

“My mother was also saved by Germans,” she said. “One of them was later killed by the Nazis for his part in the Von Stauffenberg plot to kill Hitler.

“His daughter landed up in a mental hospital — she lost her mind, because her father was murdered. My mother and I went to visit her every year, as long as my mother could travel”.

Elizabeth won a scholarship to Oldham Grammar School and then, after two years at training college and a spell as an art teacher in a London primary school, to Birkbeck College, where she completed a part-time evening degree in French, working during the day and studying at night.

She gained her PhD with a dissertation on women in 16th century France, from studies of contemporary documents.

In 1959 she and Eleonore got their own place and in 1974 moved to the flat in Richmond which was Elizabeth's home for the rest of her life.

Everyone who knew Elizabeth will have spent time in that flat which she loved and which really epitomises Elizabeth as a person. As you step into the flat you are confronted by an array of books and children's books, photos, postcards and children's drawings. The flat emanates comfortable clutter with each item telling its own story – the story of her love for and engagement with people, especially children.

The many books on the shelves reflect Elizabeth's love of ideas, culture and the arts too, as well as learning and child development. She never stopped wanting to learn herself and was always very curious about new ideas. During her last year and many hours spent waiting in hospital she would read her 16th century women's poetry and even read Yuval Noah Harari's Homo Deus because she was fascinated by his ideas and the way he linked our history with his projections of what tomorrow would bring to mankind.

As you move further into Elizabeth's flat you see the plants growing on the balcony and inside the flat, and the bird feeder. These serve as a reminder of her love of nature, fresh air and animals. She would often talk about which birds would visit the balcony, how the sunflowers and pear tree on her balcony were doing.

A favourite pastime was to sit on her balcony in the sun, reading or chatting with a friend over a cup of tea while enjoying the view with its glimpsed of the river and Petersham meadow.

The flat would always be busy with visitors; neighbours popping in, especially neighbours with little children, who would stop to play with a toy or two or would make one of the many drawings pinned up in the flat like trophies.

Few of her little visitors would escape playing with Panchi, an old wooden marionette who broke many times only to be lovingly repaired by Lucia, Elizabeth's dear Brazilian friend, so that he could continue to fascinate the children visiting and playing in the flat.

Ramblers and swimming club friends would be invited in for tea and refreshments on a regular basis and all would be encouraged to sign the visitors' book. These books tell their own story of people's time spent with Elizabeth and her mother and the reasons for their visits to Richmond. The postcards pinned up in the flat reflect the international circle of Elizabeth's friends and adopted family: Croatia, Turkey, Israel, Asia, Berlin, Paris, Canada....to name a few.

Elizabeth's open house ethos is a reflection of how she approached people she met. Whoever she met and wherever it was, be it on the street, in shops, theatre, hospital, U3A, rambling club, local synagogue or on her travels, her natural interest in them and their lives and her innocent curiosity melted people's natural defences and they would always respond warmly to her.

Elizabeth had a knack of connecting to people of different religious, social and ethnic backgrounds because they could feel her genuine interest in them. Her positive outlook on life often rubbed off on those around her. Elizabeth built an amazing network of adopted family and friends who became connected even though many had never met.

Despite her traumatic childhood and pain felt from the loss of her father Elizabeth considered herself to be very fortunate and happy. All her life she supported international peace groups and was a regular interpreter French-English-French at an annual international peace conference. She saw the good in people and the joy of life and wished for a better and peaceful tomorrow.

Mark Rubin reads a message from Irene in Canada:

I wish I could be amongst you today, talking with you all directly, I know I would feel like I belong.

Betzi attracted friends and then shared them generously. She created communities. I have had the pleasure and the privilege to have met some of you, and to have heard about many of you. Betzi had photographs of you, your children and grandchildren all around her place. I know that if you are Betzi's friends, you are kind and loyal; you are good people.

The other week, I was going through Berlin on my way to Canada. I had discussed it briefly with Betzi three weeks before her passing. She said she would contact her Berlin friends and tell them about my arrival. Betzi had the gift of connecting people, of creating ties. When I arrived to my Berlin hotel the clerk handed me an envelope with my diminutive name written on it. By then Betzi had passed away; the envelope was from her friends; Marion, Peter and Michael. I was very moved. She had written her friends even though she was close to death. Betzi's friends turned out to be kind, warm and generous.

Betzi and I shared an uncle. Uncle Teo. We both cherished him. We cherished his sweet kindness and his incredible tolerance. We both admired his cultured, swift and brilliant mind. We were both lucky to be his nieces and that was our initial bond. I heard about Betzi since I was a child. She heard about me early on. We finally met when I was 14; I had come with my mother to England. All of us Holocaust survivors craved family. We all have experienced Betzi's and Lore's warm and generous hospitality, their desire to make their guests feel at home, to feel welcome. This first visit was followed by numerous others. Betzi visited often my aunt Flora and my uncle Teo in Tel-Aviv.

That very first visit Betzi offered me my first book in English; Helen Keller's story. How Betzi knew to find the right book for my level of English, for my interests still appears amazing. She had the gift to match people and books. Helen Keller's story became Betzi's special, lifelong gift to me. Years later I would reread fondly this empowering and inspirational text.

My kids grew on the books Betzi would send them and then my grandkids got the brown or white envelopes with Betzi's distinct handwriting. Betzi's love for books and her insatiable curiosity were tremendous. Her love of people and nature, art and cultures, languages and history were unparalleled. She would ask me for references in French-Quebec literature, for Israeli and Polish writers, I will miss our visits to her favourite bookstores.

So today I am with you all in my thoughts. We belong together because we have all known and loved Betzi. We will always share the memory of Betzi's kindness. She will live in our hearts.

I am sending you all a big "collective" hug.

Bob Watkins reads A Gift by Elin Watkins

You gave me a Gift. A wondrous, exciting Gift.

It started when I was pure, starry eyed, and with youth on my side.

I had not really seen life, not yet, my story was yet to transpire. You told me I could draw, but I did not really know what lay before my eyes.

So, you took me to see art. Degas you said, he drew ballerinas... The girls were beautiful, their shapes and lives.

On stage we would watch them dance in their costumes of elegance. The lights of London could set you in a trance.

It was their grace and magic that reminded me of you. The finer things in life, languages, literature, and art, celebrated with you.

You took great fight to tell me I could. Do. No matter what pursuit... eventually I would. I was a great artist, one you treasured so near. But the truth is Elizabeth, you were the one I held dear -

Always encouraging me to do good. No matter my desire, your support was in your heart.

This is your Gift to me Elizabeth, that I will always remember.

Sema Guaksuar remembers

Hello, my name is Sema. I first met Elizabeth about 14 years ago. I lived with her in her flat in different seasons of our lives, and she was like family to me. In times when I felt lonely and homesick she provided me with comfort and was warm and kindhearted. I found her considerate, compassionate and extremely understanding. What stood out to me was that she loved people and liked to help them regardless of their religion, ethnic background, race or status.

She was very hospitable and while she was well enough she would give people her full attention and she chose to be positive through the good times and through the hard times of life. This helped those around her.

She loved nature, flowers, birds and animals, and did what she could to care for the environment. Her love of literature and poetry was infectious. She loved to play Opera or Classical music concerts throughout the day.

She also had a passion for languages, history and art showing how culturally educated a person she was.

She was very well-travelled and could communicate skilfully even without the language. Elizabeth visited me in Turkey and stayed at my family home. We visited the museum in Antalya, and later went to the ancient site of Perge. Elizabeth was amazed to see that historical place. She told me that when she was a child in Germany she had seen some of the artefacts in a museum. She was happy to see these artefacts in their natural habitat and loved the Turkish culture.

Elizabeth was an excellent teacher and taught my husband English so well that he easily learnt enough to pass an exam in a very short time. She also had a very youthful attitude, loved swimming and dancing. I will continue to miss Elizabeth for many reasons.

Her friendship and energetic approach to life are irreplaceable. There is a great hole in my heart where Elizabeth was. We were together in each other's darkest and the best of hours. She became a major part of my life and I loved her dearly. I have lost a very good friend. She was an extraordinary lady. Goodbye my dear friend.

Ruth Wajsblum reads Times go by Turns by Robert Southwell

*The lopped tree in time may grow again,
Most naked plants renew both fruit and flower;
The sorest wight may find release of pain,
The driest soil suck in some moist'ning shower;
Times go by turns and chances change by course,
From foul to fair, from better hap to worse.*

The sea of Fortune doth not ever flow,

*She draws her favours to the lowest ebb;
Her tides hath equal times to come and go,
Her loom doth weave the fine and coarsest web;
No joy so great but runneth to an end,
No hap so hard but may in fine amend.*

*Not always fall of leaf nor ever spring,
No endless night yet not eternal day;
The saddest birds a season find to sing,
The roughest storm a calm may soon allay:
Thus with succeeding turns God tempereth all,
That man may hope to rise, yet fear to fall.*

*A chance may win that by mischance was lost;
The net that holds no great, takes little fish;
In some things all, in all things none are cross'd,
Few all they need, but none have all they wish;
Unmeddled joys here to no man befall:
Who least, hath some; who most, hath never all.*

There is not much essential difference between Humanists and those who have a religious belief: we may differ on the questions of ultimate origin and ultimate destination, but we hold the important values in common, of which the most important is love - a tiny word that stands for everything that is best about being human: respect for oneself and one's fellow humans, for all the other inhabitants of the planet and for the planet itself, the desire to experience all the good things that life can offer and to help others to do the same, and to make the most and the best of the one life we have.

When All That's Left Is Love by Rabbi Allen S. Maller

*When I die If you need to weep
Cry for someone
Walking the street beside you.
You can love me most by letting
Hands touch hands, and
Souls touch souls.
You can love me most by
Sharing your Simchas (goodness) and
Multiplying your Mitzvot (acts of kindness).
You can love me most by
Letting me live in your eyes
And not on your mind.
And when you say Kaddish for me
Remember what our
Torah teaches,
Love doesn't die: people do.
So when all that's left of me is love
Give me away.*

Ceremony conducted by Jim Trimmer, Humanists UK

Humanist
Ceremonies

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