

Adult Essay Contest Winner

Hed: The Litany of My Life

By Ingrid Y. Alpern

From my mother, I learned it was possible to live in a house with many rooms, with wood-paneled walls and Persian carpets, with servants who turned down the bed at night and put a warming brick at the bottom, with a cook who twisted yeast dough into challahs while orange peel and ginger lay waiting for the honey cake and the smell of chicken soup wended its way through the house. I learned it was possible to have all of that and to leave—to walk out wearing the dresses you could layer beneath your coat, close the front door, and never return. Not to that house, not to that street, not to that country.

And I learned it was possible to have a father who loved you so much that even when he was tired he would play games with you after dinner for winnings of hazelnuts, engaging you in pretend combat so fierce it was clear nothing mattered to him more than you. I learned it was possible for that man—who once traded by dogsled in Siberia, who owned two movie theaters in The Hague, who allowed his wife to run her own business—to be struck down in one of his theaters by a Nazi soldier and die, barred from medical help by Nazi prohibitions against Jews.

I learned these things in my crib. Fear and anger lived around its edges. They sprang at me in my mother's voice.

“The Nazis killed my father,” she told me. “Those rotten Nazis killed my father.”

My mother, her sister and my grandmother escaped from Nazi-occupied Europe onto a ship in Lisbon headed for the Dutch colony of Suriname.

The story of my mother's escape became the litany of my childhood.

And eventually, fury rose inside me.

Why anger, I asked myself.

I was angry because I was jealous. She was the star. She was the hero. How could anything I ever did match what she'd gone through—what she'd done to go through it? My mother's life had cheated me. Because of her loss, her deprivation, I chafed against anything resembling the type of life she was ripped from. Because she had survived, I could not accept myself. I'd never suffered.

I could drag myself, dwarfed by my backpack, tent and sleeping bag, up steep mountain trails. I could wake up at 6 every morning for long bike rides before school and live on starvation diets. I could apply to a college 3,000 miles away and live alone in a big city and travel alone on the other side of the globe. I could stay up nights plodding through law books to get a J.D. and even a tax master's. But every challenge I could ever face would be a contrivance. Everything I could ever do would be self-imposed, artificial. I could spend my whole life trying to survive the Holocaust. But I never would.