“Remembering Rosa”

By Jeffrey M Cohen

I'm eighty-three.
Old enough to remember
the children of the *Kindertransport*,
the influx of young, orphaned
and bewildered, Jewish refugees,
embraced by our communities,
accommodated, and loved,
in our and our neighbours' homes.

Young enough, then, to be mystified
by the occasional sobbing
of the lovely Rosa
several years after she’d joined our family,
In ’39, a year before I was born.

I knew she hadn’t been scolded –
My parents didn’t do scolding –
for Rosa was a gentle girl,
as good as gold.
So wherefore the tears,
and the sadness
seeping through the wall,
and into my heart,
from her next-door bedroom?

Not until my teenage years would I grasp
the awful context of her sighs of sorrow,
tears of torment, and laments of longing
for adored parents, siblings, grandparents,
aunts, uncles, cousins, teachers, and friends –
all indispensable
to her emotional development
and sense of identity,
to her capacity to feel pride
and to give and receive love.

All responsible for bonding
the vast network of interactive pieces
that formed the jigsaw
of their offspring’s life experiences.
All who served as her role models,
gently implanting within her
their own finest ethics and values,
to serve as the building blocks of her character
and prepare her, unconsciously,
for the real world,

and for how to guard against
its agonies and its temptations.

~~***All of them blanked out of her life in an instant.***~~

I loved Rosa and was as unprepared as she
for the bombshell that hit us all
just a few weeks after the war ended,
In the form of a telegram
from her grandfather in America:
”Sending tickets for you to come
to live with us in Seattle. Prepare now, Kurt”

My mother later told me,
when I was old enough to appreciate
the subtleties of language,
how appropriate was his name
to the ‘curtness’ of his message,
with no thought of contacting us
neither beforehand nor after!

Rosa had only met him once in her life,
when he’d visited her home for a family wedding.
She must have been about my own age –
five or six – at the time,
and could but vaguely remember what he looked like.

She hadn’t even remembered his name
until it blurred her eyes with tears
when she first read and grasped the import of
his telegram.

Was she to be uprooted now –
for the second time in her seventeen years –
from the family that had given her
a second chance of life,
to be made to wander into the unknown,
like our first father Abraham,
instructed to leave ‘his land, his birthplace,
and his father’s home,’
to journey to the Promised Land.’

But what guarantee did Rosa have
that this instruction –
Sent so tersely
to come and settle in Seattle –
would be for her benefit
and happiness?

What if it was no more than
Just another dislocation,

leaving behind a bereaved family,
mourning the ‘daughter’
who had enriched all our lives,
whom we had all taught to laugh,
and affirm life again,
to speak the English language
as fluently as us,
and to enjoy the culture and mores
of English society?

So, what happened to Rosa?
Did we retain our special bond
through visits, letters, and phone calls?

Well, we did for a while.

I remember sending her my drawings,
which I assumed she’d regard as priceless
and, if she’d not put them up for auction,
she’d have exhibited on her lounge wall.

But then, after a year or so,
the contacts abruptly ceased,
and we knew not why.
Letters went unanswered.
Phone calls were met with
the operator’s cold, disappointing message:
“The number you have dialled
has not been recognized.”

Perhaps her grandpa didn’t want her
to be reminded of her earlier life.
Perhaps she had married (we hoped),
and had moved to the other side of the world.
Perhaps – my childish suggestion –
their luggage had been lost,
on the way to that new life,
and our contact details had been lost forever!

All this was over seven decades ago,
yet I still miss our family’s beautiful Rosa
and wonder how she’d fared.
I pray she was as happy
as when she lived with us.
I pray she had not suffered
any further “dislocations.”