

JEWISH NEWS

of Greater Phoenix Online

October 26, 2007/Cheshvan 14 5768, Volume 60, No. 8

Paper-thin letters hold weighty memories

VICKI CABOT
Contributing Editor

Paper children. That's what Marcia Fine's grandmother called the stack of letters penned in feathery script on delicate blue onion-skinned paper. The Nazi insignia stamped on the envelopes hinted at the painful contents inside; the words, from relatives and friends, told the story of what happened to one family, on two sides of an ocean, victims of Hitler's evil scourge.

Just before her death, Fine's grandmother, who reluctantly left behind a loving family and comfortable life to follow her husband to New York, bequeathed her sad legacy to her beloved granddaughter. "She said, 'These are my paper children,'" recalls Fine. "It is all I have left."

Fine held on to the letters, written in Polish, German and Yiddish, for 25 years, before seeking out a translator and beginning work on "Paper Children: An Immigrant's Legacy" (HudsonHouse, \$17 paperback). Fine, who holds a master's degree in English from Florida State University, taught English at Arizona State University before founding

L'Image/Casablanca, a Scottsdale modeling and talent agency, in 1980. After selling the agency in 1990, she worked as a corporate image consultant, before pursuing her interest in writing. She penned two satirical novels of life in Scottsdale, when the packet of her grandmother's letters drew her to explore her past.

In a recent interview, Fine tells of growing up in South Florida in an area with few Jews and in a family with little interest in Judaism. "Religion was not important," says Fine. Nor was dwelling on the past.

Fine tells of "discovering" the Holocaust - and her own family's history - as a teenager when she happened on a book about Adolf Eichmann in a bus terminal kiosk. She bought the book with her lunch money, she recalls, and read it from cover to cover.

"Why didn't you tell me this?" she asked her mother. Her mother started to cry. "That was how I found out," says Fine.

She then approached her grandmother, and tried to coax out her story.

The result was five audiotapes in her grandmother's voice recounting wonderful stories of her life in Poland before the war and those later devastating memories.

Just before she died, Fine's grandmother added the packet of letters to Fine's trove.

Five years ago, Fine went back to listen to the tapes and decided it was time to translate the letters. She found a young Polish woman and spent an entire year meeting with her and poring over her grandmother's correspondence.

"I could not wait until the next week to see what happened," says Fine of the letters.

The letters amplified the taped conversations, and Fine became obsessed with writing a book to tell the story.

The resulting novel is a fictive account of three generations of family, beginning with Paulina, modeled after Fine's grandmother, who bravely immigrates to New York City in 1929, reluctantly leaving behind her large, well-to-do extended family in Poland. The second part of the book traces the life of Paulina's daughter, Sarah, who becomes a photojournalist, and is dispatched to the displaced persons camps in Europe after the war to document its aftermath. The third section of the book tells of yet another generation through Mimi, Sarah's daughter, who eventually inherits her grandmother's precious pearls and her packet of "paper children."

The book offers a compelling view of pre-war Poland, of the agonizing pain of those who were lucky enough to escape Europe but left family behind, and of subsequent generations as they try to come to terms with their past and craft a Jewish future.



MARCIA FINE

Contact: 480-831-0894

At the end of the book, Mimi, the granddaughter in "Paper Children," finds her grandmother's letters a conduit to her past.

The book, while clearly historical fiction, draws heavily on Fine's personal experiences.

She did extensive research, reading widely in Jewish history and Holocaust studies and traveling to Poland to research Polish Jewry at the National Archives in Warsaw.

And she has been on her own path to inform her Jewish identity, through individual study and communal involvement. "I educated myself Jewishly," she says of her progression. "I was committed to raising my kids as Jews."

Fine was the president of the first organized Jewish communal effort in Tempe, Jewish Organization of Tempe, and she and her husband, Skip Feinstein, were founding members of Temple Emanuel of Tempe.

She continues to study, and in 2005 became a bat mitzvah at Congregation Beth Israel.

"It made me feel complete," she says of the traditional Jewish coming of age.

Fine has written a second book of Jewish historical fiction, "The Blind Eye" (Author House, \$17 paperback), which tells a multigenerational story of Sephardic Jews from their expulsion from Spain in 1497 through their life in Miami in the 1990s. It was awarded "First Prize for an Unpublished Novel" by the Arizona Author's Association in 2006.

Fine, who has two grown children and two grandchildren, emphasizes the importance of knowing our stories and telling them to our children.

"Unless you have a connection with the past," she says, "We do not know how important the future is."