

Our Father: Frances Sheridan's play, The Waltonsteins, forced her family to confront the demons of its secret past

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Clicking cobbled stone with a white cane, wearing the yellow armband of the blind, Dr. Bernie Sheridan slowly makes his way through the streets of Vienna, the city of his childhood, the city of a million secrets. An old man now, shrunken to five feet tall, Dr. Sheridan is weighted to Earth by a gigantic briefcase that holds a fragile piece of paper from his past: his baptism certificate from the Holy Rosary Cathedral in Regina, Canada, dated Nov. 24, 1952.

He climbs the steps of the old city hall, pulls out the certificate, and says in quiet German to a clerk, "I would like this invalidated."

The clerk opens a large book, makes a notation, then stamps VOID across the certificate. Dr. Sheridan slips it back into his briefcase, then makes his way to the city's Jewish Community Centre. He says in the same whisper, "I would like to redeclare myself as a Jew."

Dr. Bernie Sheridan, once a prominent eye surgeon in Ottawa, now 84 years old, is filled with fear.

This is his daughter's doing. Frances, beautiful Frances, the actor, the one who always wrote to him when his six other children turned their backs. Not so long ago, he had fumbled to open one of her letters, slipping it into his reading machine to magnify her handwriting 65 times.

"Dad," she wrote, "I hope you will understand but I am going to write and perform our family's story. I'm sorry, but this is important if I am to find out who I am."

In a cross-Canada comedy show, Frannie Sheridan had recently unveiled a new character. Herself.

"So, I was raised Catholic, but I'm actually 100-per-cent Jewish," she told audiences, revealing, for the first time, her family's secret. "My parents were Holocaust survivors, but they never told us. But who were they fooling? On the way to church they'd yell at each other in Yiddish."

She hunched over, making her back into her father's, screwing her face into his. "Good day, Father O'Malley, it's so good to be in choich."

"Hello, my son, body of Christ?"

“No, thank you. I’m a vegetarian.” The audiences laughed. She decided to reveal more.

When Dr. Sheridan received Frannie’s letter, he was filled with fear, anger, sorrow, the emotions he had tried to outsmart for 50 years. After a while, he thought, “I did what a lot of Jews did.”

He also thought, “Maybe her play won’t go anywhere.”

Now, months later, he closes his briefcase, closes it on five decades of deception and paranoia, and prepares to walk the streets of Vienna as a man long ago lost. There can be no more secrets.

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ACT ONE: 1913-1940

Somewhere at the other end of Dr. Bernie Sheridan’s life, there is a child named Bernhard Sigal. He sits at the kitchen table in a small apartment in the 16th district of Vienna with the Torah open. As he struggles over the meaning of a passage, his grandfather, the Rabbi Herman Beutel, puts an encouraging hand on the boy’s shoulder.

Rabbi Beutel, a pious and wise Polish refugee who wore the long forelocks and stern black of the Orthodox Jew, guided young Bernie’s education while Bernie’s father, Israel, was away at the Great War, fighting as an equestrian soldier in the Austrian Army.

Before he could read, Bernie learned by heart much of the five books of Moses. This was a boy who knew who he was, and his place. He was proud to be Jewish. He loved his parents and his two sisters, and was proud to have earned the admiration of his grandfather.

Bernie learned early the consequences of being a good Jewish boy in Vienna. In his Christian school, Bernie was studious and brainy but his teacher hit him and called him a “dirty little Jew.” Bernie could always count on his friend, Erich Heider, to turn around and give him a wink for courage. He valued his friendship with Erich, a Christian and the son of a prominent manufacturer of pots and pans, would value it more later when the Nazis rose to power.

Small and slight -- as he would be his entire life -- Bernie made an easy target outside of the classroom. Many afternoons he was forced by older boys and sometimes by shopkeepers, who refused to sell him bread for his family, to crawl home through the gutters. Some days Bernie, who had a sweet voice and was a talented violinist, performed on the streets for money. People often spat in his face.

Somehow, despite the nastiness and hatred in this profoundly Catholic city, Jews in Vienna thrived. From the late 19th century and into the 1930s, the Viennese Jewish

community, which represented 10 per cent of the city's population, was much stronger and more visible than in other western European capitals. The upper middle class was assimilated. Jewish intellectuals helped shape the development of art and science, literature and journalism.

Small traders and craftsman, like Israel Sigal, who was a tailor, shared great hopes for their children. Israel encouraged his son be a doctor.

“You will have much respect from everyone,” he said. Bernie, excited by all he would learn, imagined a wonderful future. And just like his father, he would serve Jews and Christians alike.

In March 1938, German soldiers marched into a welcoming Vienna, followed by rolling tanks. Bernie, a 26-year-old medical student, glimpsed the back of Adolf Hitler's head as his motorcade wound its way through the cobblestone streets to the large city square. There, from a balcony, Hitler accepted the ovations of the large crowd and Bernie heard thousands of his fellow Viennese shout “Death to Jews.” Hitler took away the rights, businesses and citizenship of Austrian Jews, just as he had German Jews.

Bernie talked to his parents about leaving but they wouldn't hear of it. “We will be protected,” said Israel Sigal. “I fought for the Austrian Army.”

Days after the occupation of Austria, newly unleashed Nazis stormed the Josephinum, the medical college where Bernie studied. They singled out the Jewish students. One muscular man, a mechanic or a butcher, took Bernie over his knees and began smashing his skull. When Bernie woke up, other Jewish students around him were unconscious, perhaps dead. Bernie fled.

From the shadows, a man in a uniform called to him. “It's okay, it's me. Erich. Erich Heider.” His old friend urged Bernie to disappear. “Your name is on a list. You will be arrested as soon as you're found.”

“All this because of a little snip snip on the penis? All this because some Jews are rich? Because some Jews have businesses? Want to be doctors?” he asked himself. His parents remained certain the “foul mood” would change.

Bernie, only two exams short of his medical degree, reluctantly packed a few belongings. He said good-bye to his parents and promised to return when the danger passed.

He fled to Bethune in Switzerland, and then to his cousin's house in the northern French town of Lens. From his hiding place in their attic, Bernie had no way of knowing about Kristallnacht, The Night of Broken Glass, when on Nov. 9 and 10, 1938, the windows of shops owned by Jews were smashed and synagogues were

burned to the ground across Germany and Austria. About 6,500 Jews in Vienna alone were taken into custody and sent to the first concentration camps or put under house arrest.

But during the next two years, Bernie eventually heard about Hitler's advance through Poland, then Denmark and Norway.

There were rumours about horrible atrocities against the Jews. He thought of everyone he had left behind and prayed for their survival. His sister was married and living in Lodz, Poland. He hoped she'd be safe.

In Lens, the postmaster took a liking to Bernie and tried to convert him to Roman Catholicism. "You will be safe. Life will become much easier for you," he said. Without a thought, Bernie replied, "I do not change my religion as easily as I change my shirt."

Hitler moved across France in early 1940. The Germans seemed invincible as thousands of troops and Panzer tanks advanced effortlessly across the low countries. In May, the terrified citizens of northern France fled to Dunkirk, on the English Channel. Men too old to fight, women, children and cripples ran for their lives. Bernie was among them.

At Dunkirk, he was arrested by the French Army and then seconded to the Red Cross.

Night and day, Bernie patched and sewed up the wounded and prayed for them. One night, a refinery was bombed and oil and metal rained down. As he searched for victims of the bombing, Bernie found a wailing infant pinned to his dead mother's breast by a rigid arm. He wrestled the baby free and delivered him to a French girl.

The dead mother's face and the baby's cry would haunt him for years to come. Bernie could feel the Nazis coming and was terrified, knowing he would be killed if he were caught. All they had to see was the snip snip. "I must die my own death," he told himself.

He stood on the beach and stripped down to his underwear. He looked to the sky and shouted in Hebrew, "Do unto your neighbours as you would do unto yourselves." Then he plunged into the frigid waters of the English Channel and began to swim. He would die, or be rescued. It was up to God.

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ACT TWO: 1940-1952

On Feb. 7, 1942, the Montreal Standard carried a small item. It began: "In the summer of 1940, the British Admiralty thanked a young Viennese doctor for his courageous service during the evacuation of Dunkirk. For two days and two nights, without rest or equipment, this 28-year-old doctor cared for the wounded in the

face of relentless enemy fire. A few days later, this same doctor and thousands of other refugees in England were rounded up by the authorities.

The imminent threat of Nazi invasion allowed no time for discrimination. Almost every German or Austrian refugee, boys of 16 to men of 60, were promptly interned and sent to Canada or Australia. Today more than 1,300 of these men are confined in two refugee camps in Quebec."

Bernie had been plucked from the Channel by a tiny fishing boat, then taken to England, where he was imprisoned as a potential spy. In July 1940, two months after Dunkirk, he was put on a ship bound for Quebec loaded with hundreds of German and Austrian Jews, many of them the intelligentsia of the cities and towns from which they fled. There were members of the Viennese symphony orchestra, judges and professors. The boats also carried several hundred German prisoners of war. And since the ships' commanders couldn't distinguish between Nazis and those fleeing Nazis, they were all housed together.

Bernie found himself on Ile aux Noix in Quebec, a narrow triangular island in the middle of the Richelieu River, where he was detained for two years, making fishing nets. He was forced to share his room with a Nazi, to whom he refused to speak. There would be no welcome in his new home.

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Twenty-five-year-old Leisel Zwienicki had strikingly sad eyes. So dark, they appeared to be black. They were faraway eyes, always focused on something in the distance. She worked as a secretary in a small business in Montreal and lived with her father and brothers.

When she was introduced to Bernie Sigal she was enthralled by this small man with the large ambition. After he was released from internment, he enlisted in the Canadian army as a medic. He strolled around Montreal in his dashing khaki uniform and, although he was only a technician in a tuberculosis hospital, he planned to complete his medical training and become a doctor.

But Leisel Zwienicki and Bernie Sigal would be a couple united in grief.

Stories of Nazi death camps and the murders of thousands -- maybe millions -- of Jews began to reach Canada. Bernie fretted every day about the fate of his parents and sisters and the countless other relatives still in Austria. In 1946, he returned to Vienna for a brief trip to look for his parents, but didn't find them. It's impossible to say what he found, for it is a trip he never spoke about.

For her part, Leisel mourned her mother, Selma, who was one of five people murdered by the Nazis on Kristallnacht in Bremen, Germany. As synagogues, shops and homes owned by Jews burned, Nazis stormed into the Zwienicki home. They thought Leisel's father, a prominent member of the Jewish community, might have a

key to the synagogue. When the soldiers couldn't find him they shot Selma in the stomach and abdomen, then beat one of Leisel's brothers senseless.

Seventeen-year-old Leisel was in Hamburg, where she worked as a nanny, and didn't witness the murder of her mother.

The Zwienickis fled Germany after a cousin in Canada volunteered to sponsor them. They settled in Montreal, a city openly hostile to these new refugees, where Leisel's father opened a bicycle repair shop. Her brother Gerd headed to the United States to study to be a rabbi. Leisel settled into a life of caring for her father and mourning her mother.

Bernie Sigal, with all his ambition, would be her saviour.

They were married in the spring of 1946. Their engagement photos show a handsome, hopeful couple: Bernie, with his trim black moustache, not yet wearing the thick glasses he would sport for much of life, and Leisel who, despite her sad eyes, looked like a giddy teenager.

Bernie had to start medical school all over again at Queen's University. After he graduated, he completed training as an ear, nose and throat specialist in Victoria and Winnipeg. Leisel took care of the children. First came the twins, Marilyn and Selma, then a boy, Peter, and another daughter, Margaret. Almost a decade later they had Michael, Frannie and Robert.

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The young Jewish family hoped that the Canadian Prairies would be a refuge and a new beginning, a place that stretched open to them. They were not prepared for the hostility of some of the German, Polish and Ukrainian immigrants who had arrived first and transplanted old ideas that spread like weeds.

Dr. Sigal first opened a practice in Gainsborough, Sask., near the United States border. Then they moved to Morse, where Dr. Sigal served as the town's doctor and the regional coroner. He faced the same life as any country doctor, driving for miles to deliver babies and being paid with grain and chickens. But this was a strange and unfriendly place for the family. There were no other Jews, at least none who would own up to being Jewish, and there certainly weren't any synagogues. On Sundays, the family watched the townsfolk walk past their house to the town's white church. They felt like aliens.

Without a kosher butcher, keeping a kosher kitchen was impossible, although Leisel tried. She had two sets of dishes, and two separate soaps, one with the red dot to clean meat plates, and another with a blue dot for dairy products. They were kept beneath the sink and the toddler twins sometimes played with them as if they were precious stones.

Despite their isolation, Dr. Sigal was making his name as a very good doctor, travelling far and wide tending to sick folk.

This brought threats from another doctor, a German named Schmidt who lived in a nearby town and felt that Dr. Sigal was stealing his patients. One night in April 1951, while Dr. Sigal worked late at his office, Dr. and Mrs. Schmidt burst in. Dr. Schmidt first hit, then grabbed Dr. Sigal and held him tight so Mrs. Schmidt could beat him about the head. The small man was left half-conscious on the floor of his office. Dr. Schmidt pleaded guilty to common assault and was fined \$20 and costs. Mrs. Schmidt received a \$10 fine for aiding and abetting her husband.

This attack was as devastating to Bernie as if he had been accosted by the Nazis on Austrian soil. He took it as a sign that Jews were safe nowhere. He couldn't forget his father's naive belief that his fellow countrymen in Vienna would protect him from the Nazis.

Bernie again uprooted his family, this time to Punnichy, Sask., about 130 kilometres north of Regina. There, his fear grew and his anger festered.

He constantly worried about the children and began to keep them away from other people. The few visitors to the house noticed that, although the children were born in Canada, they spoke English with the heavy German accents of their parents. Religion was never mentioned; the couple was too afraid of what being Jewish might mean to their children. Neither parent spoke of Hitler, or the Holocaust, or Nazis, and yet the children's earliest memories were of anger and hatred. When he was three, Peter, the eldest boy, believed his parents hated him. He remembers his mother often held him under the bath water until he was blue and sputtering. Although the fear of drowning never left him, he came to believe that he was not the source of his parents' anger.

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On a cool November day in 1952, as Leisel made sandwiches, Bernie loaded the four children into the family car for the two-hour drive to Regina. Inside the Holy Rosary Cathedral, the most beautiful church in the province, the six members of the Sigal family were baptized as Roman Catholics.

The four children were held over a huge stone basin while Reverend W.A. Wadey sprinkled water on their heads. Then it was Leisel and Bernie's turn. As the water droplets fell on their foreheads, they told themselves, "It's only water. It's only water."

Since the couple had no friends, the Archbishop of Regina and the church secretary served as godparents. When the children were older, Bernie told them the family had been baptized by St. Patrick himself.

By turning his back on his religion and heritage, Bernie knew he was betraying his parents, his grandfather the rabbi, and his entire faith. He knew that there was nothing worse than a Jew who had left his faith. But Bernie Sigal believed he had no choice; the taking of Hitler's religion seemed like a small sacrifice to protect his family. And besides, it was only water.

But from the moment he felt the droplets of holy water on his face, Bernie Sigal became a different man. Or perhaps two people.

The next spring, as the twins finished kindergarten, Dr. Sigal announced the family was moving to Montreal.

“Because we're moving so far away, we're going to get new names,” he told them. “It will be very exciting.”

Dr. Sigal believed a new name, a new religion, would finally bring a new beginning. He chose the name Sheridan, after the popular Hollywood actress Ann Sheridan, and the little girls would soon forget they ever had another name. In Montreal, he planned to study to be an eye surgeon; he wanted to help people see clearly and he also worried about his own faltering sight. Only 40, he wore thick glasses.

He pushed worries of the unknown fate of his parents, sisters, cousins, aunts and uncles down deep. He only saw their faces and imagined their screams of agony and despair in his dreams. This, the new Dr. Bernie Sheridan thought, he could handle alone.

Concealment was a small price to pay for safety.

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ACT THREE: 1953-1960

By the time the family arrived in Ottawa in August 1959, where Bernie had accepted a post as an ophthalmologist at Sacre Coeur Hospital in Hull, the transformation was complete. The Jewish Sigals were now the Catholic Sheridans.

It appeared that there couldn't be better Catholics.

The family, which lived in a brick home on Highland Avenue in Ottawa's west end, attended St. Basil's Church and the older children attended St. Joseph's High School. The twins knew the Latin mass by heart, just like Bernie had once known the Torah. Peter was an altar boy.

The newly minted Dr. Sheridan made a big show of his efforts within the church. His attendance was exemplary -- he never missed Mass -- his contributions generous and his zeal fervent. In the privacy of the confessional, he was often asked, “How do

you really feel about being a Christian?" And while the priests never asked outright if he was Jewish, he thought their questions a sure sign they knew.

He believed their secret would be the shame of the entire family. They would be mocked. And perhaps endangered. Jews well knew the stories of the Marranos of Spain and Portugal, who in the late 1300s during the Spanish Inquisition agreed to be baptized and to live -- publicly at least -- as Catholics. Those Jews had two choices: convert or be burned alive. There was honour in being burned alive, very little in changing faith. And many of those who converted were burned anyway, turned in by priests who didn't believe they had sincerely accepted Jesus. Dr. Sheridan always told the priests he felt lucky and happy and blessed to be Christian. Inside, he burned like a coward.

Leisel reluctantly went to church, thanking God her father was dead so he couldn't see her. But to her brother, Gerd Weiner, there was no justification for her actions. While the Sheridans hid their Jewishness, Gerd became a rabbi in the United States. Bernie Sheridan and Gerd Weiner represented polar opposites of the choices that Holocaust survivors made after the war.

Rabbi Weiner knew of the many Jews who slammed shut the doors on their pasts, unable to cope with the memories or because they believed that then they would never have to tell their children about the death camps and mass graves and missing relatives. Others became more religious and even more militant, determined never to let the world forget.

He made it his life's mission to publicize the atrocities. In retirement, he volunteered as a tour guide at the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington.

When the family first moved to Montreal from Saskatchewan, Dr. Sheridan drove to New York and urged Rabbi Weiner to cut off all contact with the Sheridans.

"He is afraid of being a Jew, afraid of himself, afraid of the truth," Rabbi Weiner thought. He refused Dr. Sheridan's request, but his visits would become few and unwelcome.

When the children asked about their uncle and his strange rituals, or if they had grandparents, or other relatives, Dr. Sheridan sometimes told them stories about their great ancestor, St. Patrick. More often, he just said, "Don't ask questions." That became the household motto.

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The family retreated into silence. The children came to dread coming home to a father who was always on the verge of rage, and a mother who, more often than not, was crying over the sink. Leisel would silently celebrate rituals like Passover, laying out gefilte fish, matzoh and roasted egg to be dipped in salt water, never telling the

children that the salt water represented the tears of Jewish slaves, or that the egg represented rebirth. Then, she would bitterly put on a spread for Easter or Christmas, religious holidays in which she did not believe.

The children couldn't understand why their parents didn't seem to love them. Years later, a generation of children raised by Holocaust survivors would relate their experiences of growing up in homes devoid of emotion. Those who had escaped the atrocities often cut themselves off from their emotions and memories.

Dr. Sheridan's frequent comings and goings were a mystery to children who couldn't ask questions. Dr. Sheridan made frequent trips to England. Sometimes, he said, he visited his great friend Anna Freud, the daughter of his old teacher. He showed off letters they had exchanged.

Years later, he confessed that one of his sisters had survived the Holocaust and was in an asylum in England. She lost her mind while working in a munitions factory that was bombed during the war. But Dr. Sheridan never said if he'd visited her. And if he went to Vienna again, to hunt his family, he never said that either.

Once, when the family was still living in Montreal, he returned and presented Peter with a yarmulke, telling him the black skullcap with the red embroidered flowers and green leaves was just like what the Pope wore. He told his son that really good Catholics must wear one, and Peter, who was in Grade 2 or 3 at St. Malachy's in Montreal, was forced to pin it to his head and go to school.

Peter was beaten to a pulp by his schoolmates who said the skullcap was something worn only by Jewish boys.

This strange gift, the insistence that Peter wear it and risk giving away the family's secret, revealed the bizarre conflict between old and new selves going on in the mind of the doctor.

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In Ottawa, as the children grew older, Dr. Sheridan wrestled with how to give them freedom. Passionately concerned about their education and future success in the world, he yearned to support and encourage his children, but to do so would mean releasing them into the world of gossips, and bad apples, and friends in which his children might confide.

Once, in 1959, he allowed 13-year-olds Marilyn and Selma to go to their first high-school dance. In a classroom at St. Joseph's high school, the twins felt the thwap of their long braids against their sides as the other girls held their hands and taught them to jive. Suddenly, the room fell silent. Dr. Sheridan, sporting a moustache that the other children thought looked like Hitler's, stood in the doorway wearing a look of utter disgust. He motioned for his daughters to leave. It was their last high-school dance.

Marilyn and Selma, like the other Sheridan children, were the school's weird geniuses, whose pictures appeared in the paper in Grade 13 as top students, and who boys called "grandma" as they shuffled down the hall in clunky shoes, braids and skirts that were too long.

Dr. Sheridan once wrote a speech for Marilyn on whether Canada should increase armaments because of the nuclear threat. She stood in front of the school and debated aggressively in favour of more weapons and more protection, fighting her father's battle.

Even if the children had no idea that their parents were Jews, the teacher's at St. Joseph's had their suspicions.

The twin's favourite teacher, Miss McKay, now Sandra Glynn and the leader of the Catholics of Vision church reform movement, knew that the children were struggling at home, she saw their red crying faces at school, saw that they kept to themselves, but she didn't do anything.

"This was the time when no one interfered," she said. She thought maybe the children knew they were Jewish. Years later, she said she wished she had interfered.

ACT SEVEN: 1996

In Vienna, the old doctor had shrunken to just five feet tall, his moustache had become soft peach fuzz, and his eyes could no longer make out street signs and people's far-off faces. He did not feel safe in Vienna. It was bursting with anti-Semitism. Neo-Nazis were multiplying like rabbits. Swastikas were constantly appearing, then disappearing, as the more militant Jews in the city scrubbed them off.

All the time, Dr. Sheridan worried that he would be found out. He wanted to live out his days as Bernie Sheridan, the Catholic.

He was extremely worried by what Frannie was doing. When he first learned of her plans to tell the family's story, he had written her, "People can be sued for such things."

A few months later, another letter arrived from Frannie. This one, slipped into his reading machine, told of relatives and friends who were contacting Frannie after 45 years of wondering what ever happened to Leisel and Bernie Sigal. Frannie's luminescent scrawl on the reading machine told of how excited she was at finding her roots. Because of his daughter, his past was catching up with him. He was too old now to outdistance it.

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Since returning to Vienna in 1976, Dr. Sheridan had half-heartedly searched for what had happened to his parents. He visited the Red Cross and state and city officials, filling out documents requesting information about his mother and father. He learned their last address, a grey, six-storey apartment building overlooking the Danube canal, near the place where Jews had lived since the 1400s. His parents were confined to that building shortly after he fled the country in 1938 and remained there until 1941.

Many times during the past two decades, Dr. Sheridan stood before the building on Franz Joseph Kai looking up at the empty windows hoping to see the reflection of his mother.

Once he ran into a man in his parents' old neighbourhood, a Christian who fondly remembered Bernie's father for making him a beautiful wool suit even though the man had no money. The man had promised to pay when the war was over, but Israel Sigal had disappeared. For the next four decades, the man, who never again got back on his feet financially, wore the suit to church on Sundays.

This chance meeting made Dr. Sheridan, who was groping for links to his missing father, weep. A week later Dr. Sheridan learned that the man had died and Dr. Sheridan suspected the suit was worn for one last time at the burial.

Dr. Sheridan believed in his heart that his father had perished during the Holocaust. He had pretty good evidence that his sister Eva had died in the Lodz ghetto in Poland. But he clung to the hope that his mother, Josephine, had survived. But once again, he pushed his parents to the back of his mind, and concentrated on his studies.

As he had so long ago, he spent his long hours as a student at the University of Vienna. This time, he was working toward a philosophy doctorate, writing a 300-page dissertation on death. Men will forever search for the meaning of death, but never find it, he argued. His advisor there would chuckle at the endless studying.

“But you are already a philosopher.” He didn't understand what the poor-sighted old man was seeking.

Dr. Sheridan was reasonably content with his life, until Frannie's letters arrived. Facing his own death, and realizing that relatives and friends now knew his secret, he decided to set out once again to learn what happened to his parents.

He didn't have to go far. Three years earlier the Archive of the Austrian Resistance had published a document titled, *Expulsion and Murder, the Fate of Austrian Jews, 1938-1945*. On page 23, it describes a deportation train that left Vienna for Lithuania on November 23, 1941; 693 Jewish men, 1,155 Jewish women, 152 Jewish children were taken to Kowno, Lithuania.

The document clinically describes what happened to them: They were shot immediately following their arrival by the Fuhrer's elite guard with the co-operation of "helpful" Lithuanians, then dumped into a pit. Dr. Sheridan's parents, the Sigals, were among them.

Sitting on a streetcar, after reading this document, the tiny man began to sob, shoulders quaking. No one asked him if he was okay, they just moved away. Barely able to get up, he was like a heavy stone. "Help me," he called out.

At home, he slept on the floor with his ear pressed to the ground, turning his face, kissing the floor. He talked to his mother, Josephine, as if she was beneath him, under ground. She was so near to him he would forget she was dead.

"I will always love you," he whispered.

Then his dim eyes would see a light in the kitchen. "Mama, are you boiling water for tea?" he called. "Mama?"

To himself, he whispered, "I should have known, how could I not have known. All those weeks, months, years."

Shortly after receiving this information, Dr. Sheridan went to the Jewish Community Centre and asked to redeclare himself as a Jew. It was a quick decision. "I wanted to be near my father and my mother. I wanted to tell them I supported them. That I was sorry."

He wrote Frannie about his reconversion. The news was buried between talk about the weather and details on a book he was reading. Always wanting to protect his daughter, he did not tell her about the pain he was suffering.

It was this letter that Frannie and Marilyn received that Friday night after sharing their first Sabbath meal together.

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ACT EIGHT: APRIL 1997

It is a cool Thursday morning in the courtyard of the Josephinum. Once part of the medical college of the University of Vienna, it is now a medical museum. Inside, there are macabre wax models of the human body with transparent skin, exposing organs and meandering vessels below.

A small man wearing the yellow armband of the blind, sits on a bench in the courtyard, arms resting on his white cane. Abruptly he throws down his cane, and holds up trembling hands. "His arms, they were this big. He must have been a mechanic or a butcher," he says. "He wore brass knuckles."

This is the building where Bernie Sigal was attacked by a Nazi 61 years ago.
This is where Dr. Bernie Sheridan weeps today.

“It's endless. Endless,” the 84-year-old says of grief so fresh it's as if the attack came yesterday.

After he sent the letter about his reconversion, his daughters, Frannie, Selma, Marilyn, visited him in Vienna, becoming, if only for a few days, the Jewish family they had never been. Their father showed them his boyhood home, the old Jewish neighbourhood, and the house of Erich Heider, the friend who had saved his life so long ago.

It was a remarkable visit, mostly because of the change in their father. They saw a man who, stripped of the anger and paranoia, was charming and kind. The man he might always have been if history had been kinder and the choices he made had been different.

Still, his family was shocked when he agreed to be interviewed by a journalist. Dr. Sheridan wanted people who hear his story to understand and sympathize with him. “Make sure in your story you talk about that Madeleine Albright woman,” he said, referring to the U.S. Secretary of State who found out only recently that her Jewish parents had fled Czechoslovakia before the war and had hidden their identities in America.

With his prominent cheek bones, scraggly goatee, high forehead, he looked like an aged Sigmund Freud.

“You know Freud was my teacher,” Dr. Sheridan said, when told of the similarities. “I knew his daughter as well. I visited Anna in England. She was the one that told me not to get involved in my own dreams, my nightmares. She told me to be careful not to become obsessed with them, veer off into the dark alleyways. She told me I could lose my sanity.”

He talked in detail about his life as Bernie Sigal, in Vienna, France and even Saskatchewan. But his life as Dr. Bernie Sheridan in Ottawa was unreachable.

On some days, while being interviewed, he talked of his duplicitous life with regret. “When you want to protect your children you will do anything. Maybe, I went too far.” He talked of the mind games he would play with himself while at church. Other days, he said defiantly, “I would do it all over again.”

Then, another hour later, he spoke as if none of it had happened, and he was a perfect father to his happy, well-adjusted children.

“I was really a very happy-go-lucky man. I charmed them with songs, told funny stories. Very happy-go-lucky. No matter what they say.”

Some moments, he was a proud Jew, who recited passages of the Torah with pride in the middle of his favourite restaurant, as though his fading memory was trying to meet a more accurate memory of his past. Other days he was indifferent to God, saying he really didn't believe in a divine being. Suddenly, he was spilling over with admiration of Jesus.

“I'm not really a very religious man. I don't see why I should be persecuted. It's ridiculous.”

Sometimes he held his head and shook it, so obviously trying to sort out the truth, and his place in it. Just as suddenly his voice would drop, “There are Nazis everywhere still. I could be dragged into an alleyway and never be the same again. I redeclared to support my parents, but I don't want anyone to think that I am really very Jewish.”

One day during lunch, he leaned forward and said: “I'm trying my hardest to tell the truth. But for a guy like me, after all these years, it's really easy to make things up.” He chuckled sadly.

“Everything I say is 100-per-cent true. No matter what anyone else says.”

Later, shuffling down the street, white cane clicking against grey stones, he said, “What do children really know about their parents? What are parents supposed to tell their children? Everything? Do you terrify them? What do you do?”

If only Dr. Bernie Sheridan, if only Bernie Sigal, knew.

DENOUEMENT

On a Vancouver stage, during a restaging of *The Waltonsteins*, Frannie Sheridan bends down and opens her suitcase. “I recently received this letter from my father in Vienna, where he has been living as a Catholic for many years.”

She unfolds it and begins to read a passage: “Dear Frances. I officially left the church and I re-entered the Jewish faith, which I never had left anyway. Cordial congrats to having received what you had so much wished for. I put my fatherly arm around you and hold you tight for a minute. Love Dad.”

Frannie stands and faces the audience. Emotion is palpable.

“Before the Second World War, there were nine million Jews living in Europe. They lived in villages, towns, cities. They were everywhere. Poland, Estonia, Germany, Latvia, Vienna, Greece, France. After the war, almost 90 per cent were gone,

vanished. Murdered, burned, gassed, shot, tortured. Men, women, children, babies, mothers, fathers, grandparents, lost forever. My parents were among those who escaped.

“I am proud of parents ... so why is this my legacy? All this fear and shame? I won't accept this inheritance. I want to celebrate their courage. I want to say out loud, I am a Jew.

“I am a Jew.” These three small words hang in the packed theatre.

She tells the audience about her first Rosh Hashanah dinner, and how she tried to fake the Hebrew prayers by making a moaning whine at the back of her throat. Everyone around the dinner table stopped to stare at her, and she was horrified that she might be mocking them.

Instead, everyone broke out laughing.

“It reminded me of one time that my father was truly happy,” she says to the audience, hunching over, pulling her shoulders up around her ears, becoming him once more.

“He was dancing with the golden maples trees in our back yard, performing the Papa Song on air violin.”

She begins to dance from side to side, playing the violin herself.

“We all joined in,” she says, beginning to sing the Papa Song with a German accent. “Yaddle dee yaddle dee dee, yo oh on na,” she sings. “Yaddle dee dee yaddle dee dee, yo oh on na. . .”

A look of rapture comes over father and daughter's face. They dance off the stage.