

TOM VINCI

In Memoriam

MY MOTHER ELLEN SUZETTE VINCI died a year and a half ago, aged ninety-nine. She was born in Berlin to well-off Jewish parents, Margarete and Maximilian Auerbach. Her father was an industrialist who took his daughters and wife on picnics to the country. She seemed to have had a happy childhood, relatively insulated from the deprivation suffered by the German civilian population during and following the First World War. (Margarete died in 1942 in Bussam, Holland, and Maximilian in the Sobibor death camp, Poland, in 1943.)

Her late husband, Ernst—he died in 1983 at age eighty-five—was born in Gnesen, a city in what was then Prussia, now Poland, the only child of Reform Jewish parents, Adolph Wreszynski and his wife Anna. Adolf died when Ernst was three years old, and Anna moved her small family to Berlin. By 1920 Ernst was a young medical student back from the war (and a year of captivity in a British prisoner of war camp in Egypt), and an aspiring concert singer with a fine baritone. He met Ellen at a party when she was sixteen. Eventually it became time for the young ladies to sing, which my mother did, somewhat nervously, since Ernst's musical prowess was well known. She asked him what he thought. "Very nice" he said, "but somewhat through the nose." She never sang again, she reports, no doubt exaggerating. Despite this verdict she married him, though she never missed an opportunity to remind him of it at times when his sensitivity to her feelings needed stimulation, which it often did. Four years later they were married, and Ernst got his medical degree from the University of Berlin. In the following years Ernst established a thriving medical practice, devoting one day a week to public health clinics, the rest to making the legs of wealthy ladies free of varicose veins and then curing them, and their boyfriends, of syphilis. By 1930 he had the largest practice in Berlin. At the same time he trained with the famous German voice teacher Louis Bachner, and began to nurture a career on the concert stage. Despite much

economic dislocation and privation in the general populace, Berlin in the twenties was perhaps the most exciting city in the world, at least if you had money, which by that time they did. They were Jews, though probably not religious Jews. Life was good for them, though it would not, course, remain so for much longer.

In 1933 the Nazis came to power in Germany and my father, though in no immediate danger, sensed that the prospects for Jewish professional people in Germany did not look rosy. So they left Germany for Milan, where they lived till 1938, the year Mussolini passed the Anti-Jewish Laws. While there, my father practiced medicine and my mother began a short-lived career as a commercial artist. Fortunately, she was able to preserve some of her portfolio from that period which I still have in my possession. It was during this period that the story line of their lives diverges from that of their non-Jewish compatriots.

In August of 1938 Ernst left Genoa on the steamer *Rex* bound for New York City, with the objects of establishing a concert career in America and of securing immigration standing so that he might bring his wife to America and to safety. He made some progress toward his career goals, receiving help from Arturo Toscanini and Wilfrid Pelletier and securing an audition at New York's Metropolitan Opera, of which Pelletier was at the time principal conductor. But he made none towards attaining American immigration standing. Meanwhile Ellen had left Milan for Switzerland where Ernst had carefully—under the eye of currency control officers—accumulated some money on his weekly visits to Lugano, singing on a weekly radio programme. In November 1938, he received a telegram from a relative that Ellen was about to be deported to Germany unless Ernest obtained immigration standing immediately. The Holocaust had not yet officially begun; but it was clear already that her future in Germany would have been grim. With time running out and no sign that his desperate search for a safe haven would be successful, help arrived from Canada. Ernesto Vinci (as he then became known) received an offer arranged by Sir Ernest MacMillan to become the director of the Conservatory of Music in Halifax, Nova Scotia, beginning in January 1939. In the following June my mother arrived by steamship. They were now safe.

During the war many Germans and Italians, including Jews, were interned in Canada as “enemy aliens.” But my parents were spared this fate. Indeed, they participated fully in the life of war-time Halifax, fully accepted by the citizens, and treated with the affection and hospitality for which this city is still known. They contributed actively to the cultural life of the city: my father supported the war effort by singing for the troops in concerts organized by Hugh Mills; he also began his career as a teacher of voice,

with many students, notably the foremost Nova Scotian songbird, Portia White.

My mother became a St. John's Ambulance nurse, serving on a couple of occasions on a North Atlantic convoy; she also raised a young boy from England, seeking safety from the bombs, Christopher Laughton Matthews, son of an admiral in the British navy. Mother's child-rearing philosophy was centered on the injunction, "postpone gratification," oft-repeated, sometimes accompanied by a firm slap across the face. Christopher was so tall she had to stand on tip-toe when giving him his slap. He became an Anglican priest with a London parish, and died about twenty years ago. I never met Christopher but it would have been good to have compared notes of life with Mother.

In 1945 my parents moved to Toronto where my father took up with the Royal Conservatory of Music, later with the Faculty of Music, as a voice teacher. At the height of his career in the 1960s he was one of the most prominent teachers of voice in the country, a roster of his students reading like a Who's-Who of Canadian classical singing. He loved his students and his students loved him. But this created some strains within the family. His students, especially the female ones, seemed always to be camping out in their living room and mother eventually tired of this. She recalls especially not liking the task of laundering their underwear. So she left Toronto for New York City in 1946 where she lived, on and off, for the next three years. During this time she struck up a friendship with Walter Toscanini, Arturo's son—I still have some of their correspondence. She attended the Art Students' League and produced most of the visual art which she would produce in her lifetime. She also began to develop a second career as a commercial artist there. Her artistic work, focusing primarily on presentations of women—nude sketches and commercial fashion drawings—had begun in Berlin in the 1920s where she did some illustrative work for one of the posher nightclubs (where she managed to elude the lascivious attentions of one of the singers, Marlene Dietrich). Her work had several showings in Canada.

Mother abandoned her artistic work when she returned to Toronto in 1948, pregnant with me. I was born in January, 1949.

Summer vacations were spent in Shediac, New Brunswick, and after father retired, the cottage became their year-round home. A year later Ernesto died, and Ellen lived on alone in Shediac. She never complained about what must have been a lonely time for her—indeed, she never complained about anything, including a broken collarbone and thumb which went untreated for many months in 1996. Because of that I thought it time she came closer to us and so she moved to Halifax. Despite that, she

broke two more bones, one in her knee soon after her arrival here, one in her shoulder two years ago. In both cases she made a full recovery in about six weeks. She was a survivor and I suppose, in some way, that I imagined that she would be so forever

Ellen's sister's family fled from wartime Switzerland to the Dutch East Indies, but were interned in a camp by the Japanese occupiers for the duration of the war. After the war Ernesto and Ellen sponsored them to come to Toronto, where her sister lived until her death about fifteen years ago. Her sister's daughter, a silver medalist for Canada in the 1960 Olympics in synchronized swimming, continues to live just north of Toronto. Unfortunately, and for reasons that I do not well understand, during this period Ellen would not have anything to do with her sister and niece. An exchange of presents and a glass of sherry at Christmas was all the contact I had with my only close relatives. I do not know why Ellen determined to have things this way, but once she made a decision, it was never altered. She didn't attend her sister's funeral. Although I have since re-established some connection with my cousin, the estrangement between the mothers has perhaps prevented any substantial relationship.

My father was a great man in every sense and loved us very deeply, and we loved him, but, as an old friend once said to me, he sometimes needed to be reminded that he had a family. So it was that my mother and I, her only child, formed an especially tight pair. I was, as they say, the apple of my mother's eye, a Jewish mother's eye, a German Jewish mother's eye. That meant many things. It meant love given unstintingly and in full force. It meant unswerving attention and loyalty, given and demanded. It conveyed to me, one of millions of sons of Jewish mothers, a sense of absolute uniqueness. It also conveyed to me, the son of a German mother, a sense that the nature of right conduct lay in obedience to duty, especially filial duties, rather than in the pursuit of a good time (especially with girls).

Until one day in June of 1999, I did not know that I was, officially, a Jew. That was the day when I found an old envelope in the back of a drawer entitled "Important Documents, 1898-1939"—the paperwork that my father took with him to New York in his quest for immigration standing. They contain a record of many of the main episodes in my father's life, and in my mother's, where the two lives intersected. What I know about my mother's life, and especially on the fate of her mother and father, was provided through the German government's programme designed to help relatives piece together a picture of Holocaust victims.

The Jewish population of Germany in 1930 was about 500,000 in a population of about 80,000,000. By 1939 it had dwindled, largely through

emigration, to about 133,000. Some Jews, members of the Reform movement to which my parents belonged, had fully assimilated into German life. Some, like my father, regarded themselves as, simply, Germans. For him the Holocaust no doubt complicated his sense of Germanness, but never seriously eroded it. Later in life he took a trip to Europe, taking pleasure in visiting both Italy and Germany. My mother, on the other hand, repudiated her Germanness entirely: in later life, though she spoke with a noticeable German accent, she would even deny having been born there, insisting that she was, like her name “Ellen Suzette Vinci,” a bit Scottish, a bit French and a bit Italian. When I brought to her samples of the documents in which her late husband’s name “Ernst Wreszynski” appeared, her only comment was “Oh yes, that was the other name.” When her niece asked at her mother’s death for some details of their family history, about which she too was in the dark, Ellen’s only comment was “You know all you need to know.”

And, as for me, I grew up as a thoroughly Canadian boy, confirmed in the United Church of Canada, with no inkling of my Jewish background. This led to some nice ironies. There was, for example, the case of my first date at age fourteen, as it happened with the Jewish girl who lived across the street. Her father answered the front door and told me that his daughter could not go out with me that night or any other night, because one thing led to another and you never knew where things might end up. I was a nice and worthy young man from a good family as he well knew, but I’d better not get set up for disappointment: it was necessary that she marry a Jew. When I reported this to my mother she offered the usual meaningless consolations that parents offer their children. Inwardly, however, after enjoying the irony of the situation, she must also have felt that this treatment of her son was a slap in the face to the mainstream Canadian community which had saved the lives of her and her husband, which had contributed to the destruction of the European enemies of Jewry, and in whose midst the Jewish people have come to flourish. As such, it was also a slap in her face, as it was, doubly, in mine. On the other hand, perhaps she also understood that keeping the race pure was part of the mechanism for surviving persecution and absorption. Finally, perhaps she also took some satisfaction in her own success at making her son into the kind of boy that a conservative Jewish father would not want dating his daughter.

But I am of course more than the sum of my mother’s influences on me. And what is that? Am I, for example, a Christian? It is true that I was raised in the United Church of Canada, attending church faithfully as a child and teenager. I am sceptical about Christian theology, but I have always been deeply attracted to a philosophy of life structured around the

central concept of Christian charity. I know little about Judaism. I am a Jew only by descent and by right, not by religion and culture. So what then am I? Well, there is Descartes' answer: "A man."

But what is a man? Shall I say "a rational animal"? No At present I am not admitting anything except what is necessarily true. I am, then, in the strict sense only a thing which thinks [a *res cogitans*].

—*Meditations on First Philosophy*

So what does a thing which thinks do for a living? It becomes a philosophy professor. I have my mother to thank for that as well.