

LOVE AFTER DEATH

By HADASSAH RIBALOW NADICH

For love is strong as death.
SONG OF SONGS 8:6

AFTER MY mother's death, last spring, I realized that many well-meaning people offer the wrong consolations. My mother died "at a good old age," it is true, but this did not lessen my sorrow. I cringed and was hurt when some of those who came to console me said: "Your mother lived a full life—a long life." The loss was, and is, keen. And the healing which is gradually taking place has no connection with the fact that my mother died when she was old. Rather, I am comforted by my recollections of my parents' home—the recollection of my mother's and father's love for each other, and the love they gave their children.

My father, Menahem Ribalow, was a Hebrew and Yiddish writer, the editor of the weekly *Hadoar* and the prime activist of the Hebrew movement in this country for over thirty years. My mother, Rose, a dentist by profession, shared his life in every way. My father died 27 years ago; my mother did not remarry. When I was going through her papers, I came upon a cache of hundreds of letters which my father wrote to her over a period of thirty years. They were written in exquisite Hebrew and Yiddish and revealed to me something of the tremendous and deep commitment they had to each other, to their children and to their ideals.

As I read letter after letter, suffused with an endless well-spring of love, I got a picture not only of a man and wife, the builders of a home and a family, but of a generation that is gone, and has much of value to teach us and our children.

They were born in Europe, in conditions of poverty and persecution. They came to America, poor in means but rich in spirit and idealism. On one of his grueling train trips to the Midwest to raise the pitifully small sums necessary to keep *Hadoar* alive, my father wrote of his joy when he found 7 subscribers in one city. He proudly told

my mother that the number would probably increase to 12. He was overjoyed when he succeeded in raising \$200 for *Hadoar*.

On August 20, 1939, he wrote from Cincinnati, "Good news—Elihu Stone has informed me that Boston will be giving us \$1250 instead of the \$600 of last year. This Elihu Stone is a wonderful chap!"

With great enthusiasm he wrote in a lengthy letter from Chicago, in 1933, of a meeting with Rabbis Solomon Goldman and Stephen S. Wise (at the Zionist Convention) who spoke of organizing a committee of prominent American rabbis and would appeal to their congregations to contribute \$10 to \$25 a year to *Hadoar*. He concluded his letter: "We should soon be receiving perhaps \$500 from the Jewish community of Chicago."

How grateful for small favors he was. And every letter is full of enthusiasm for his work which he regarded as a sacred mission. He was an optimist about the future of Hebrew in America and of American Jewry in general.

All his letters speak of his great yearning for his wife and his adoration of her. In a letter, written on July 2, 1925, I found a perfect rose, brown with age but with every petal intact. He explained to her that he received a letter from a close family friend, in which he enclosed a rose for my mother to match her name. "I send it to you," my father wrote, "because I love you." She kept the letter with the rose enclosed in her drawer for 55 years.

At times, when my key opened her door, I caught a glimpse of Mother sitting in her bedroom at her dresser, reading letters. I respected her privacy and did not disturb her. Now I understand the sustenance she derived from remembering the past. It was difficult to tell which was more real to her—her lonely present, or her warm and glowing past of which my father was the center.

SENSING all this, I felt even more fully my responsibility to make her life as comfortable and secure as possible. Gradually, as the years wore down her health and she was, as the saying goes, "tired of living, and feared of dying," I felt driven to do more and more for her—until she became more my child than my mother. The nurturing,

Before her marriage to Rabbi Judah Nadich, Mrs. Nadich was the Executive Secretary of the Rabbinical Assembly of America and research assistant to Dr. Louis Finkelstein. She is now doing volunteer work in various areas of Jewish education.

the feeding, the dressing, the care and concern that are a mother's function became mine, and she accepted it willingly.

But I always kept the image before my eyes of the woman she was—not what age had done to her. She had been beautiful and proud of her looks and I knew it was important that she be always well dressed and well groomed. She loved nice surroundings and I surrounded her with comfort and beauty.

When my mother's physical condition deteriorated and she could no longer live alone, her doctors tactfully suggested that we place her in a nursing home. The thought was anathema to me and the family. We rejected the suggestion. We did so not only because it was unacceptable for us but because there was a silent presence—my father.

We felt it would be an affront to his memory and to his great love for my mother to remove her from her home and her familiar surroundings. And so she was cared for with love and devotion in her

own home. She remained the head of her household.

Each time I closed her door, I felt my father's smiling approval at what we were doing—and that made what I did easy and rewarding.

Four months before my mother died, we refurnished her living room, to give her "a lift." We wanted her to feel like the head of a prosperous and normal household. This was important to her and to all of us. We did this for her, for us, and for my father whose presence has been strong and meaningful in our lives.

In my sadness over her passing, in moments of longing for her presence, and in recollecting the thousand and one ties which we had, I take comfort in the knowledge that she was lovingly cared for and respected in her old age. Perhaps now I can go back to being again the child instead of being the mother.

My parents' love was strong as death. It comforted my mother in her 27-year widowhood. Now *this* love is my comfort and consolation.