

# Deborah Knowles

## Joe Grossman: 'Don't talk silly, darling'

Deborah Knowles speaks of family dislocation as a result of the Holocaust. She remembers her father with affection and tries to see him as he was - rather than how she wanted him to be. The recipes included in the book *Mixed Blessings*, are the cherished connections with the European past.

Max Grossmann was my grandfather. I never thought of him as such, because I didn't think I had the right to connect myself with him. But recently I have given myself permission to claim him. Other people have grandfathers in the normal course of family events and never take much notice of the fact. For me it has been different because it seemed to me that my father Joseph Grossman put a kind of embargo on the past.

For many years I resented this because I would have liked to feel more connected to him. It would have been nice to feel that I was his daughter and a link in the chain of his family. I now understand he couldn't give me that, firstly because he died while I was still too young to articulate my need and secondly, because it wasn't his to give. The war had taken it away from him. As a refugee whose home and family life had been destroyed, he was no longer free to pass on to his own children a warm and trusting world of family stories and cultural heritage in a natural context.

He needed to protect his New Zealand family, why should they be endangered too when they had such a chance to be free? He wanted to save us from the despicable things inflicted on his brother and sisters in Europe so he chose not to connect us with our European Jewish heritage. I thank him for his courage, his love, his energy and his resilience, but over the years, although I have understood his reasons for making this decision, I have witnessed some of its consequences.

He probably wouldn't have agreed with my interpretation of his life and his choices, 'Don't talk silly, darling,' he would have said. I now understand he was a man in a hurry - he had so many responsibilities, so many people depended on him, and after all he was a survivor and knew the necessity of being practical and looking ahead. He had no time to think about the past or the wisdom of sharing an important bit of it with his children.

I remember he was a man around whom things happened: action, change, sudden arrivals and departures; new things would appear suddenly and he loved to surprise us. Very often on a Friday night he would come home with a present - perhaps a hula hoop, or the first pair of rubber jandals that we'd ever seen. Anything seemed possible on those evenings, for he had such warmth and energy that doubts and obstacles just faded away. We all believed in him, he was in charge of his world and we all wanted some of it.

Joseph Grossman was born in 1905 in a town called Turčiansky Svätý Martin, which, in those days, was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire but is now in the Slovak Republic. Max and Charlotte Grossman had five children: Hugo, Malvin, Iren, Flora and Joseph, the baby, who was born in 1905. The Grossmanns and their extended family were merchants in the wool and textile trade. They lived and worked successfully amongst the Gentiles but remained observant Jews. After leaving Martin, he went to university in Prague and was inspired by the new nation of Czechoslovakia, created by Thomas Masaryk. After university he headed for Budapest, where his eldest brother Hugo was a successful and influential bank manager. He divided his time between Hugo and Flora's husband Karel Fuchs in Szeged who was in the timber business. I imagine this must have been a very happy time for him, because it would have been a job he loved. He used to ride his horse deep into those dark, Central European forests, estimate the worth of the trees to be felled, and then make the owner an offer. He organised the felling of the logs and their transport out of the forest and into the mills using teams of bullocks.

This challenging outdoor life, according to his old photo album, was interspersed with lots of girlfriends, skiing holidays in the Dolomites or the Tatras, and perhaps sunbathing in Abbazia. He was now well into his thirties but didn't seem to have a house or any responsibilities, his only possession being a glamorous red sports car. He spoke many languages, neither religion nor social class meant anything to him, and he could be at home anywhere, he thought.

At least he enjoyed it while he could, because it all ended on 15 March 1939 when Hitler invaded Prague. Joseph happened to be there that day, too. He rang through to his brother Hugo in

Budapest and asked for advice. 'Take the proceeds of the latest timber deal and I'll organise all the paperwork, then go to England!' That was the kind of brother Hugo was.

Joseph got to England, and he had only a few days on his visitor's visa in which to save himself, otherwise he would be sent back. It was almost impossible for Jews to gain entry visas. He used every contact he had, and finally struck it lucky with someone in the British Embassy, who sent him to New Zealand House where he managed to get one of the very few entry visas available. He gained entry to New Zealand as an agricultural labourer just in time before his visa expired. He arrived in Wellington Harbour on 13 June 1939 and thought the yellow gorse blossoms on the surrounding hills were the most beautiful things he'd ever seen. Of course, he must have felt guilt and terror about escaping and leaving his brother and sisters behind (his parents, Max and Charlotte, were both dead by then, thank God) but he never spoke of it.

The timber industry was something that he knew about, and after arriving in Auckland, he got a job nailing boxes in a box factory in Onehunga and within fourteen years had built The Onehunga Timber Company. His easy charm and business acumen, meant that he was equally at home with the Maori owners of the Urewera timber he bought, as he was with the lawyers, accountants and future investors of his business.

After the war he located and brought out his beloved brother Hugo and wife Clare, his sister Flora and her son Peter. They had all survived the terror and privations of the Budapest ghetto. Tragically, his sister Malvin, her husband Lazlo Nathan and their son Paul were taken from their home in Bratislava and murdered in Auschwitz in 1942. Iren, the other sister, committed suicide in Budapest when she learned of her sister's deportation.

Joseph was a spontaneously generous man who helped many people, other than his own family. He befriended them when they first arrived from Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Bosnia or Russia, offering them advice, money and his services for negotiating the New Zealand government systems.

The unspoken aftermath of the Holocaust, with which my father and all these new immigrants were branded, mixed uneasily with his love for his new family. Looking back now I can see that our 1950s family life in Epsom could never have been straightforward. He had to divide his time between his wife and children in the New Zealand 'compartment' and Hugo, Clare, Flora and Peter in the Hungarian/Slovak one. Sadly, the two sides didn't understand each other; certainly they both loved Joe, but this just wasn't enough to bridge the culture and language divide. My father died at 57 of a brain tumour, which he had apparently had since birth. Energy and foresight could not save him this time. Perhaps one of the problems associated with being a man of action in dangerous times is that you have to rely so much on your own strength and ingenuity, that you don't have time to look back and give thanks. Nor do you see yourself as a link in the chain of generations. That is perhaps the role he left for me.

This was one of my father's favourite lunch recipes.

#### FRANKFURTERS WITH GREEN PEPPERS AND TOMATOES

¼ cup margarine or cooking oil

4 large ripe tomatoes or a can

Pepper

2 medium-sized onions,

1 teaspoon paprika

Thinly sliced 4 medium-sized green peppers

8 frankfurters

Cut in strips lengthwise

Melt the margarine or cooking oil in a pan, add the onions and green peppers. Cook until the onion is transparent. Then add tomatoes. Add salt, pepper and paprika. Simmer gently for about 5 minutes.

Cut the frankfurters in 2.5 cm pieces and add them to the pan. Mix them gently with the vegetables. Simmer until frankfurters are heated.

This recipe belonged to my grandmother Charlotte. When I travelled to Martin in 1998, I was lucky enough to be introduced to an elderly man called Dr Trnovsky who remembered the Grossmann family. After our return to Auckland I got a letter in German from his niece Zora. This was the first of many letters that Zora sent, telling me how her mother, Zelmira Kucharik, had grown up in the same house with the Grossmann family. Her grandfather, Samuel Kucharik, owned the building and my grandfather Max rented the downstairs shop. Zora told me that when

her mother was old she wrote up a detailed journal of her childhood memories. When asked why she spent so much time writing about the old days, she replied, 'One day someone will be interested.'

That someone was me. This is one of the recipes Zora found in her mother's journal. At the top of the page it said:

#### MRS GROSSMANN'S CHOCOLATE PUDDING

For one person

Mix 1 egg yolk with 20g of sugar. Add 20g butter and 20g melted chocolate.

Mix well.

Whip 1 egg white to stiff peaks and fold into the yolk mixture.

Pour the mixture into a small, buttered and floured pudding mould. Place the mould in a double boiler and simmer until the pudding sets.

Tip the pudding out and garnish with fruit or cream.

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