

Monuments Men

Text written by Louise (Regehr) Wiens, Leamington, Ontario, February 2014

At 6:40 AM, I was rushing out the door to go to work as I reminded my husband that I was going to the movies that night with our 17 year old to see *Monuments Men*. "Why don't you come along?" I added, half-heartedly, holding my breath for his response as I watched him methodically fix his cereal and coffee before heading off to the office for the day. Groaning, he replied, "Now...you do know that I'm not really into that kind of stuff...I'd rather watch paint dry..."

The last movie that we saw together at the theater was *Titanic* when it debuted in 1997. Having also crossed the pond on an ocean liner, I had for years been fascinated with this story. Actually, that was not the last movie we saw together. That is a bit of a white lie, as it turns out, as I recently recalled that in 2004 my husband and I also went to see the biography of Howard Hughes, the wealthy Texan turned Hollywood movie producer. The only similarity between these two movies was the fact that Leonardo DiCaprio starred in both of them. I also remembered that either one, or maybe even both of us fell asleep during the latter, so in my mind that does not really count as "seeing it together." Recently while watching the "Golden Globes" awards on TV, the prestigious Hollywood awards show held annually at the Beverly Hilton Hotel, we realized 15 minutes into it that we both knew neither most of the movies nor the actors and actresses portrayed. Whole-heartedly we quickly agreed to change the channel.

Growing up, going to the movies was not on the approved list of activities in our home, even though we lived right across from the small theater in town. I was unable to join my young friends as they went to the regular Saturday cartoon matinees, and then to the Friday night shows as teenagers. But in 1975, the movie *The Hiding Place* premiered, the story of Corrie ten Boom, the watchmaker from Haarlem, Holland, and many locals who had never graced the doorsteps of the Vogue Theater rushed to see what really happened as Corrie and her family hid Jews from the Nazis. I was already very familiar with her story, having read it many times, as well as the *Diary of Anne Frank*. In many ways, although I am not Jewish, I was very personally familiar with the events of that time.

My daughter and I arrived at the theater early and bought our tickets from a teenage student, as I briefly glanced at the candy counter as we passed by. Walking down the long hallway my daughter reminded me that I had embarrassed her by making a fuss over the candy. OK, whatever. The theater was empty as we chose to sit plop in the middle of the room. As a handful of patrons trickle in slowly, two elderly couples settled in several rows behind us and promptly began to discuss the medical problems of a friend as I slumped further down in my seat. I wished I had brought my ear plugs along. They then changed the topic as one of the men asked what the movie was about and one of the women told him it was about war. She continued, "There is no nudity or sex, and it is not about Wall Street," as I began to feel that I was getting my own Siskel and Ebert movie review, although my daughter and I did laugh. Before the trailers began I ran out to get some candy returning with a big bag of red licorice for \$4.50. "I can't eat that with my braces! And I don't even like it!" my daughter exclaimed. "Eat it anyways!" I snapped back. "Your braces will probably be coming off in a couple of days anyways! Don't worry about it."

The music began as George Clooney graced the big screen with his characteristic good looks. I had actually never seen him in a movie before and knew him best as a very public actor often in the accompaniment of a beautiful starlet. He is also a nephew to Pat Boone. The Monuments Men were a group of 345 men and women commissioned by President Roosevelt towards the end of WW 2 to find and protect buildings, monuments and art. The opening scenes of the movie took place in the cities of Bruges, Ghent, and Aachen, Belgium, as famous paintings by several of the Masters, including Rembrandt and Picasso were portrayed, along with a famous altar piece from a cathedral, and a sculpture of the Madonna by Michelangelo, which had stood for centuries in Bruges. A team of about 6 of the infamous Monuments Men came to life, and we became personally acquainted with their stories as they were portrayed leaving their comfortable lives and banding together for a common cause in the midst of the great upheaval of the ongoing combat in Europe. They risked their lives to defend mankind's greatest achievements and avoid the destruction of 1000 years of culture. "This is our history. Our culture. Our achievements. Hitler will NEVER destroy that!" George Clooney proclaimed as I scrounged in my purse to find a scrap of paper and a pen so I could start scribbling some notes.

As historic cities and sites came to life on the screen, my mind wondered as I recalled walking the streets of both Ghent and Bruges with my Onkel Harri from Belgium, awed by the cobblestone streets and magnificent architecture surrounding me. My photos never really did do it justice, I surmise to myself. In the city of Paris the team discovers blocks and blocks of rooms of personal belongings arranged like showrooms, belongings that had been confiscated from Jews, we are told. "These are peoples' lives!" one of the actors remarks incredulously, as rows upon rows of fine china and collectables are displayed on the screen. There is a smattering of French, Flemish, German and Russian dialogue throughout and my daughter thrilled that she can understand most of the German comments. I think of her frequent question of "what kind of Germans are we again?" I think of my now adult nieces, raised in the Catholic faith and attending Catholic schools, sitting at my mother's supper table and first asking, "Daddy, what kind of Germans are we again?"

My mind wonders again as I think of Anne Frank hiding in the Annexe in the middle of Amsterdam and the infamous oak tree she saw through the attic of their hideout. She often refers to it in her diary and comments on its silver branches as she watches seagulls and other birds swirl by. The old oak tree has succumbed recently to moths and fungus yet saplings have been transplanted successfully in the USA and Israel.

I think Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel and his famous book Night detailing his survival in the camps and the ongoing debate over his tattoo. I think of my Hungarian patient, an old fellow, who was daily reminded of his ordeal by the numbers tattooed on his inner forearm. I remember the bed he was in, my reaction, and exactly where I was standing at his bedside when my eyes beheld the tattoo as history once again leapt to life.

The Monuments Men forge on to discover barrels filled with shiny gold fillings extracted from their Jewish victims. I think of Ernst Zundel and his adamant denial of the Holocaust, and the fact that he still occasionally gets air time. I think of a co-worker from Yugoslavia, daughter of Russian Germans, and a letter her parents received several years ago informing them that they could now apply to retrieve the property stolen from them decades ago. The greatest treasure hunt in history continues as tons and tons of gold bars stolen from victims are uncovered as they forge their way into the deep caverns of salt mines in Germany. I think of the old TV shows *Hogan's Heroes* and *F-Troop* neither of which were allowed in our home, although once in a while my dad would sneak a peek at Colonel Klink, the bumbling guy.

I think of my uncle from Germany, from Bessarabia, who was a POW in Texas and picked cotton with the African Americans. Years later he could still recall several English phrases. "Yes, we have a concentration camp right here in our town," his daughter tells me several few years ago as she piques my interest. I raise my eyebrows. "I've never been there, but we can go if you want," she continues, as we prepare for the short walk across town. "Well, we thought Hitler would only be in power for a short time," she sighs. Germany had had many different parties and leaders so when he became Chancellor in 1933, most thought it was only for a short stint." "I can't believe you have never been here, living in this village all your life!" I exclaim as we arrive at the large brick building standing by the railroad track. It was operating as a paper factory before it was seized by the Nazis to become a detention center for those they considered to be "undesirable." Over 3000 people were held there as it became one of hundreds of smaller camps across Germany. After the war it was turned into a furniture factory, but with a lone heir living in the USA it was given over to the town, my cousin relays to me. Exhibits at the center detail events of the past and on the wall facing the rail line one can still see the inscription of "Arbeit Macht Frei," the Nazi slogan, sandblasted into the mortar. As we solemnly walk home we stop at a dime store several blocks from the camp to help break our somber mood.

I think of my husband's grandmother, a Russian German, who sent 3 of her sons off to war in the 1940's. One never returned, and I recall driving through the city of Aachen on our way to his grave in the Canadian War Cemetery in Nijmegen, Holland. His name is inscribed on a monument, along with other fallen heroes, in Queenston Heights, near Niagara Falls, Ont.

I think of the book Hannah's Suitcase which has educated school children world-wide about the Holocaust. I think of my visit to childhood neighbors Friedel and Adolph in Germany, and I recall Friedel telling me, "Yes, if someone named their baby Adolph during those years, the parents received money from the government." I think of the movie *Schindler's List* and the little girl in the red overcoat. I think of all the times I have shopped at Macy's in the USA and the fact that Otto Frank was an acquaintance of its founder and had completed an internship at Macy's in New York before the war. He had applied to return there but was denied visas for his family.

The movie continues as two of the Monuments Men lose their lives. A Frenchman and a Brit. George is asked "Is a man's life worth a piece of art?" To which he replies, "Yes. It is our story. Our achievements." The Germans begin to burn some of their stolen artifacts as they realize they are losing the war. They discover the Madonna and it is returned to its place in Bruges. I think of a sister of my Onkel Harri, a nun who for many years lived near Bruges and collected stamps which they somehow turned into cash flow for some type of missions work. "She must have seen the Madonna in her lifetime," I surmise to myself. I glance at the woman sitting in the row ahead of me in the theater. The grandmother of her daughter-in-law was a war bride from England, married to a Russian German, and worked at our local Post Office during my childhood as I regularly went to buy stamps for my dozens of pen-pals around the world. For years I was able to regularly supply the nun with stamps for her charity.

The movie ends as I was still fuming that I was unable to find neither pen nor paper in my bag. We are made aware that there is still an ongoing struggle to return Nazi looted items to their rightful owners. The redundant motto "This is our history. Our culture. Our achievements. Hitler will never destroy that" resonates in my ears as we get in the van and polish off the last few pieces of red licorice in the 450 gram bag.

Over 5 million pieces of art and artifacts were found.