My Aunt Giselle

Our daughter Elizabeth got the call. Nori gave her the news that my 97-year old Aunt Giselle in New York had suffered a "light stroke" and was in the hospital. When her condition hadn't improved after a few days I flew back, as much to comfort Nori as to be with Giselle. Nori, as a twenty-three-year old Ecuadorian immigrant, had begun helping Giselle in 1982, and had taken on increasing responsibility as her primary care-giver ever since. "Miz Berger" became a member of her family, attending the birthdays, confirmations and graduations of her children and their cousins, and being included in holiday celebrations whenever she wasn't with my mother or with us.

Giselle opened her eyes when I approached her bed and took her hand, and her crooked smile of recognition was wonderfully heartwarming. The stroke had been a massive one, "light" only in the sense that the paralysis of her right side was less than complete - she could blink both eyes and move her right foot. But she couldn't speak or swallow, and did not appear to be capable of recognizing speech. Although she would occasionally squeeze my hand, she wouldn't do it, or blink her eyes, on request. That afternoon, after extensive discussions between Nori, me, the internist and the neurologist, and in accordance with my aunt's expressed wishes, the intravenous saline drip was disconnected and she was moved to a nearby nursing home for "comfort care only". She was to be kept comfortable and pain-free, but was not to be given any food or liquids unless she regained her ability to swallow. The wait began.

Giselle ("Gittel" on her birth certificate) was my mother's oldest sister, 5-foot one at her tallest, considerably shorter in her last decade. Until well into her eighties she spent the first forty-five minutes of every morning doing calisthenics, and remained a strong swimmer. The nursing home admissions director was surprised to hear that Giselle's only hospitalization in memory was for a broken hip ten years earlier, and she had fallen then only because her vanity prevented her from using her cane. Her husband Hans had been handsome, athletic and 6-foot three, and had won many national prizes for his designs of the famous window displays at the Woodward and Lothrop department store in Washington DC. I remember marveling at the wonderful animation in his Christmas and Easter windows when we visited them. Hans was also a talented magician who delighted my brother and me by pulling silver dollars out of our ears whenever he came to visit.

For two days Giselle slowly weakened, her breathing occasionally becoming labored, then returning to a quiet, more regular pace. Nori and I kept her and each other company, and exchanged stories. Two years earlier Jan and and I had taken Giselle to lunch at a favorite French restaurant near the Metropolitan Museum. Another old friend who was with us excused herself, and Giselle leaned over toward Jan and asked, "How old is Lydia"? "She's eighty years old, Giselle". "Really, she's *that* old???" Pause... "And how old am I?" "You're ninety-five, Giselle". Look of shock and amazement... "*Nooo!!!, really*???"

Giselle and Hans were in their apartment in Vienna in 1938 when two young Gestapo officers came to arrest them. Hans berated them for their impudence - he had fought for

the fatherland in the Great War, he showed them the medal he had earned, how could they treat a decorated veteran so disrespectfully...and they shamefacedly left. But Giselle and Hans knew the officers would be back with a less impressionable superior (indeed they were), and they left immediately with no more than they could carry. They escaped pursuit by swimming across the Danube and managed to make their way to Belgium, eventually arriving in New York a year later where Hans had relatives who had preceded them. A surprising fact I learned when I looked through Giselle's papers is that they had arrived in the U.S. as Belgian nationals. How had two penniless Austrian Jews obtained Belgian passports on the eve of World War II? Certainly not legally. But whoever helped them obtain these documents undoubtedly saved their lives.

On the third day my aunt's periods of labored breathing became more frequent, and she opened her eyes only rarely and only for a few moments at a time. Her look seemed reproachful - why weren't we helping her? - but the physician told us that following standard hospice practice he could prescribe morphine only if her breathing became more rapid. Otherwise it would "push her over the edge", and he would not do that. But that evening she finally let go on her own, with Nori by her side. I had gone to see Lydia in Manhattan, but turned around and came back to meet the representative from the Neptune Society. Giselle had requested that she be cremated and her ashes scattered at sea, as had Hans and my parents earlier.

I have always felt extremely fortunate that my mother and her sisters all made it to the U.S. with their families. Likewise, my father, his three brothers and their parents and families all escaped from Germany to New York. I grew up knowing them all, except for my father's parents who died not long before we arrived in 1947.

But not all of our family escaped.

Also among my aunt's papers was a document from the International Red Cross dated November 13, 1943, a response to her attempt to contact her parents who had left Vienna and made it as far as Brussels. A handwritten note in French says:

> *"Septuagenarian couple Reitmann arrested and deported destination unknown apartment confiscated 12/12/1942. For further information contact German Security Police Brussels"*

George Gutman, July 2002