

Chapter 2

Twelve Ordinary Extraordinary People and a Dog

Jack and Judaism



Me with my father-in-law Jack Stein.

Jack Stein taught me about being Jewish.

First, he told me that Jewish husbands are the best husbands because they “only cheat a little.” He grinned up at me and I smiled back. At five feet eight inches tall, I am used to being taller than many men, but when I put my arm around my diminutive father-in-law, the top of his bald head barely touched my shoulder. Still, he stood as tall as any man I ever knew.

When my father-in-law, Jack Stein, congratulated me on converting to Judaism, he said, “Don’t be ashamed.” That time he wasn’t kidding - he really meant it. His admonition made me sad but also taught me more than any book or museum could teach about persecution, cruelty, and hatred. I knew intellectually what I was in for, but Jack’s words hit me in my new Jewish gut – don’t be ashamed.

When I met my husband-to-be more than twenty-five years ago, I had no idea that I would gain not only a wonderful mate but an entire culture and religion that was more than five thousand years old. What I learned in my conversion class was thimble-sized compared to what I soaked up by spending time with Jack and his friends.

When I came into the family, Jack was part of a group of Holocaust survivors who had been together since they arrived in Dallas after the war. What I learned from them is that being Jewish leaves one open to irrational hatred that no one can understand, much less explain. What Jews do, I learned, is survive.

One night I sat on the couch with Mrs. “red” Goldberg and Mrs. “black” Goldberg (so designated by the hair color of their respective husbands) and listened as they described the Nazi horrors inflicted on them and their families. They described their hardship without self-pity or bitterness but with a will to survive that didn’t have to be expressed specifically because it was infused in their words. They talked with gratitude about the life they had been able to build in this country.

Mrs. “black” Goldberg told me the Nazis liked to watch her husband, Herschel, run up a hill while carrying two soldiers, one under each arm. It amused them, and probably saved his life. Herschel was still a bulldog of a man who, well past retirement age, worked part-time at a Jewish

deli and was the source of day-old bagels for the group.

When Jack told me not to be ashamed of being Jewish, he spoke volumes about what it is like to belong to this tribe. An unbreakable thread runs through it that has never been severed, in spite of consistent and brutal attempts to break it. By telling me not to be ashamed, Jack was telling me to be proud of my decision to become a Jew.

Jack taught by example to survive terror and pain and go on to live a good, long life surrounded by family and friends. Jack didn't just survive; he chose to love life again. He teased the ladies, cheered for the Dallas Cowboys, and hummed in the shower. I saw a gleam of triumph in his eyes, filled with tears, as he watched his granddaughter ordained as a rabbi.

We lost Jack five years ago this month, just before Thanksgiving. Last week, as we rose for the Kaddish, I gave thanks to God that Jack was part of my life and that he taught me to be a proud Jew. I could not have found a better teacher.