

Liberty Bell

Fall was in the air. My boss and I landed in Philadelphia, on separate flights, en route to Lancaster the following morning for meetings. The evening was open and this was my first time to Philly, so he suggested we check out Independence Hall and the historical park next to it. Being Canadian this was of mild interest to me, but liking old buildings I didn't mind exploring.

As we wandered around past the old town hall and memorial park I saw it – the Liberty Bell. A lot smaller than I imagined. I only knew it by name but thought it would be in an old church steeple. Ringing freedom all over the land, I suppose. I had heard about the bell, perhaps referenced in books or on TV, maybe even in cartoons or comics, but I had no context for history or significance, other than having heard my mother mention it as part of story of one of her many post-widowhood trips.

Mom was born near Zaporozhe in the Ukraine, at the start of the Stalin manufactured famine and purge of the 1930s. Her family survived in a Mennonite village stripped of their religious leaders and customs, until Hitler's German army arrived bringing a year or two of relative peace for those considered to be of Germanic descent. As the war turned against them, the soldiers retreated and many of the German speaking villagers were sent west as well for safety. Of the 35,000 that began the trek to freedom, only 12,000 or so made it through to countries like Canada, Paraguay and a few others, the majority were reclaimed by Stalin and ended up in Gulags, or displaced to the nether regions of Russia, or dead. My mother was lucky, and always felt blessed, to arrive in Canada when she was 17 and live out her days in the security that life in a peaceable country provides.

Her trip as I recall, was a packaged tour of Lancaster Pennsylvania and surrounding areas, with some emphasis on the Amish and Old Order Mennonites, the carless and the whitecaps, who originated in Switzerland and south Germany. They are theological cousins of the Russian Mennonites who stemmed from Prussia and further back from Holland and northern Germany.

One day she spent in downtown Philadelphia and the tour guide, while explaining various aspects of historical and revolutionary history, pointed out the Liberty Bell and made some offhand comment of it being a relic of a bygone era and famous for its crack. My mother interrupted the guide in mid-sentence, as she is known to do, and told them this was no laughing matter and the Liberty Bell had great significance and should not be belittled in that manner.

Who knows how, with my Mom's lack of early schooling and I am sure with little focus on US history, the Liberty Bell had somehow become an archetypical model for my mother in her flight to freedom. She explained, to the chagrin of the tour guide, that the very bell she was mocking was one of the few conceptual icons my Mom hung on to on her road to freedom, and that freedom should never be taken for granted regardless of the good times that we enjoyed now. She knew the hardships of her own particular road – the struggles for food, dignity and security – and it was beacons like the idea of the Bell, and the thought that there was a place of freedom out there somewhere, that helped her through her ordeals.

My mother didn't talk a lot about the time between fleeing the Ukraine and arriving in Canada. She did mention the highlights – when her mother and she and her siblings were reunited with their father after the war ended, as he had been conscripted late in the losing war effort at age 41, and was presumed dead; her time spent in business school and receiving top marks; and the constant generosity of her mother who would always share with anyone who came to the door regardless of how little food they had for themselves. She offered very little of a personal nature. The one exception being how her older sister, preferring to starve, refused to gather potato peels outside the American army base whereas my Mom did what was needed. I know she always struggled with unwelcome flashbacks and couldn't watch war movies. I suppose some of the trauma she lived with made its way into the family dynamic.

After reading the kiosk I discovered the bell wasn't from a church but rather was originally in the town hall and the bell tolled for many a reason before and after the nation defining revolution – including vital national news, the constitutional signing and significant founders' deaths.

Originally named the State House Bell, and installed for the 50th anniversary of the Pennsylvania constitution, the bell carried the inscription from Leviticus 25:10: "Proclaim Liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof," – which is a classic case of taking a bible verse out of its context. The original verse is said in the context of Jubilee, a period of restoration of freedom from debt and the return of land to the original owners: an event most historians are not sure ever actually happened in ancient Israel or any time since then. The name Liberty Bell was acquired when the bell became a symbol of the anti-slavery movement as the abolitionists took the verse to encompass a large part of its original intent – the freedom for all.

So, of course, now when I hear the Liberty Bell mentioned, whether in books, movies or even cartoons, I recall the history and significance with more accuracy and true affinity, as it reminds me of the freedoms we all should be able to hold and even more so, it holds a personal space for me to remember my mother, her life, and the freedom she experienced and held so deeply.