

**WATERSPRITES, DESERT, MOUNTAINS AND SEA:
TO HAVE AND HAVE NOT
or
FOUR TIMES HOME**

Rachael Kohn

The four pictures by Josef Lada, which I just had framed, lay spread out on the living room floor—remnants of my parents' world, which had pervaded my young life. A world that, with the recent death of my mother, threatened to fall silent forever. Josef Lada is Czechoslovakia's most famous artist-illustrator. His pictures recall a lost innocence, which I suspect in the 30s and 40s and early 50s, Lada was defiantly asserting against history's cruel march across this tiny "Camelot," as my parents often called their native land.

"The first outing in Spring" depicts a village exactly like the tiny one where my father was born. The picture of the Ranger's cabin, on the other hand, overrun with the animals of the forest taking shelter for the winter—was surely the same one my mother frequented with her father as a child, and where they acquired a pet bluejay. And finally, Lada's most famous depiction of a troll perched on a dead twig above a pond. As he sucks on his pipe, silhouetted against the low moon, his friend the raven quietly shares the night with him. How many times had this Troll figured in stories and rhymes that spooked me as a child? And wasn't this nocturnal pre-Christian world the very same that had inspired Smetana's most beloved composition of tone poems, *Ma Vlast*, My Country?

This imaginary world came to life for me when I visited Czechoslovakia twenty five years ago. It was a homecoming I could hardly have dreamed of, filled with castles, forests, and storybook villages. My oldest sister was born in Karlovy Vary (*Karls Bad* in German), a spa town of such exquisite beauty and charm that being there you think any minute you'll be enclosed between the covers of a fairy tale book. Czechoslovakia is something like the land of the "never never" for me. And Lada's pictures

capture that, with their black cloisonne outline looking like they literally hold in the enchantment that more realistic paintings could not.

I again went to the Framing Shop last weekend to pick up three small pictures which I have treasured for many years. Given to me on my first trip to Israel, the ink wash sketches of Jerusalem by an artist of some repute are forever linked to my family and an overwhelming love I cannot put into words.

When the Soviet tanks rolled in to Czechoslovakia in 1949, my parents headed for Israel. (My father had attempted to make his way there in 1939 and then in 1940. Both attempts ended in failure. The first time he was caught; the second time the tiny boat, holding 400 refugees, broke up on a rock in the Aegean, and he was taken prisoner by the Italians... but that's another story.) My parents finally got to Israel in 1949, and lived there for three years. By all accounts it was an exciting and happy time, even though it was perilous and unsettled. My second sister was born in Jerusalem.

When I went to Israel for the first time I had no idea how it would make me feel. I can still recall the doors of the plane opening. I saw the sunlight, which I had never seen burn so bright. And I smelled the land. I shall never forget the smell... of an earth so different from anything I'd ever known. But most incredible of all, I was in a country where being Jewish was *mainstream* _ was central, not peripheral. All my years of studying Jewish history and literature, the new Testament... all their roads led here. I had the unique sensation of belonging. These were *my people*; many would be relatives, near and distant. I cannot tell you what that is like for someone who never felt it before. I was almost thirty.

The three ink wash pictures are highly contrasting plays of dark lines and bright white. They have an almost blinding beauty in their small delicate frames. Only a miraculous mauve hints of Jerusalem's evening light emanating from the purple desert. Jerusalem is like that, like an icon which holds back from being rendered naturalistically _ as if to do so would kill its power to offer transcendence. Other historic towns in Israel (Sfad in particular) have this blinding stark beauty which lift them out of ordinary time. Am I making it up? Doesn't everybody wax transcendent about *eretz*

Israel? Even Isaiah never confused its human failures with the glory of the place itself.

Yes, it has an ugly side. But Israel lives in me. I cry for it.

After my doctorate was conferred, I lived in England for a year, in moody Lancashire, close to the Lake District. I had many opportunities to criss-cross much of the historic green isle, so rich in the heritage we colonials were extremely lucky to inherit; didn't Israel owe part of its establishment to England? Wasn't Czechoslovakia's first President, Bedrick Masaryk, inspired by English democracy? And wasn't it the English who had liberated my father, and for whom he fought at Normandy? And didn't my mother know every English Queen, King, prince, and illegitimate offspring of the royals as far back as Boadicea? Yes, all this and much more.

But England's well trodden manicured countryside aroused in me an unexpected longing for my vast rugged majestic native land—Canada. Joni Mitchell sings,

On the back of a cartoon coaster,
in the blue tv screen light
I drew a map of Canada,
Oh Canada
with our face sketched on it twice
Oh, you're in my blood like holy wine
You taste so bitter and so sweet
Oh, I could drink a case of you, darling
and I would still be on my feet
I would still be on my feet...

Joni was the voice of Canada; but of someone who often had to appreciate it from a distance, while deep in California, in Europe, or in Marrakesh, wherever the music took her. Her love for a man, superimposed on her love for Canada, is doubly significant... because we love places where we love people. And yes, Canada is in my blood like holy wine... so bitter and so sweet, at one level, indistinguishable from the people I love there. My parents moved there in search of a secure and peaceful life. And then I was born.

In my twenties I too was on a search, for the wilderness that I had never seen. Canada to the West and to the East stretched out before me, and

I climbed and hiked its mountains, curling up at their feet by night. And they showed their gratitude by blanketing me in a thick cold fog the next morning, completely hiding themselves from view. Wherever I walked, fresh bear tracks appeared, as indeed did their owners, peering at me from just up ahead. Cautiously I stood, or slowly made my way.

And when I travelled along rivers and byways on the back of an old Ducati 200cc, camping beside streams and picking wild blueberries in a cold New Brunswick morning, and seeing the ocean for the first time in my life, cold and forbidding waves, I understood why Canadians are known for their modesty. By American standards, we positively reek of humility. Canada, bound by the Atlantics and the Pacific, and by the Arctic to the North, is a land of enormous power. We are a trifling spot on the landscape. But the bears, the caribou and the wolves, they have dominion over its wilds.

I was not born anywhere near this untamed grandeur. My forays into it were as passionate and awe inspired as they were short lived, and all too detached from my urban life: and would be for years, as I lived and studied in different cities in Canada. First Toronto: neat, clean, important, nostalgic, and where, in one of its oldest neighbourhoods, I was born. Then Montreal, where I lived during the turbulent separatist 70's, when the Parti Quebecois seized power. And later Hamilton, the steel city surrounded by massive conservation areas, as if to cushion the blow of industry's dirtiest commodity.

Then eleven years ago I arrived in Australia. Totally unprepared for its beauty, its lavish gifts bestowed on anybody who wished to enjoy them. Water, beaches, sun, flowers, the world's most beautiful harbour. Imagine a city where homeless people aren't turned into frozen corpses in the winter; where the scent of jasmine and frangipani cuts through car exhaust; where a summer night still seems to belong to the earth.

I have never stopped being intoxicated by Australia's natural beauty, whether its bucolic dairy country, or the wild Victorian scrub, the friendly Blue Mountains, or the cane toad nights of Queensland (in this I am increasingly aware that my love for amphibians is "over the top"). It's a country that is not forbidding. It's a land that brings out the opposite in me,

the desire to care for it, like an old parent, who has given too much. I was born in a geologically young land, and I will die in an old one. I hope it will not die with me, for I know that it is becoming wizened, dried out, depleted... the original "old salt."

What has all this got to do with belonging, and spirituality? From early on I knew about places, somewhere else... of memories, love and belonging. It was never one place. Even Czechoslovakia was split—my father from the east, my mother from the west. (My mother would sometimes smugly quote a saying that everything east of Prague was China!) In fact, all the places I have called spiritual homes have not been undivided. Israel is a battleground of two peoples. Czechoslovakia is no longer. Canada is on the brink of a break-up that has already happened in spirit. We can only speculate how Australia will be apportioned. In find all this very sad... but perhaps inevitable. The tragedy as I see it is how territorial fetishism blinds us to far greater goals of essential humanness; how a spirituality turned material is emptied of its original meaning.

People hearing my story might assume I am rootless. Nothing could be further from my sense of self. It is true that early on I knew that just when you think life begins and ends in a certain place, history will march across your path and tell you "No, not here... This space is now occupied by someone else, this history now belongs to someone else, this reality is now passé." Being from four different places doesn't diminish any of them in my heart, but strengthens my understanding of their deeper spiritual meaning for me; the ways in which they cross over and enlighten one another. My mother had this perspective too.

It also helps me realise where the construct ends and another reality begins. Enchanted Czechoslovakia? Tell that to a weary Czech who's lived for 40 years in a concrete Soviet housing project. Majestic Canada? Tell that to a miner in Sudbury, where nickel mining has turned the land into something resembling the surface of the moon. Generous Australia? Tell that to a sheep station owner in Northwest NSW who has had to shoot his starving sheep two years in a row. Exalted Jerusalem? Tell that to an Israeli

who has been prevented from praying at the Wailing Wall by fundamentalist Jews.

Excruciating realities don't extinguish my nostalgic constructs, but they chasten my affections, and temper them with a realism that sometimes is easier to see from a distance. That is why we all need to step back from the things we love. That is why we have to resist turning spiritual principles into clods of earth and clay.

As for me, love this country as I do, there are times when

I wish I had a river
I could skate away on
Oh I wish I had a river so long
I would teach my feet to fly
Oh I wish I had a river
I could skate away on...

Thank you Joni Mitchell. And thank you for hearing a very personal story.