

Sarah
&
Abraham

The Search for Miracles
and The Stuttering Poet

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The Search for Miracles
and The Stuttering Poet

Sarah Engelhard



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*Dedicated to the souls who risked their lives
so I could know blessings and pass on a path to miracles.*



Dear Asa

Truth is a patient man's game
Lies earn quick returns, while truth
Comes only long-term. And though
It promises a dividend of schadenfreude

There is no guarantee that one
Will be graced in life to see the bonds
Mature.

.....
.....

Yours truly,
God

From *Skullduggery*, Asa Boxer

“Master of the universe! I hereby forgive anyone who has angered or vexed me, or sinned against me, either physically or financially, against my honor or anything else that is mine, whether accidentally or intentionally, inadvertently or deliberately, by speech or by deed, in this incarnation or any other ... may no man/woman be punished on my account ...”

The opening prayer for peaceful sleep, especially if one does not wake-up. (From the Lubavitch *Book of Prayers*).

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My name is Sarah. In Spain I am Sarita. The Hebrew letters for the name are related to “song”, or to “sing”. In Hebrew, Sarita means “he who struggles with man and God and prevails.”

“... Not Jacob will you now be called, but Israel; for you have striven (*sarita*) with God.”
—Genesis 32:28

Avi, whose name had over time changed from Abraham to Abie to Avi, had christened me Vena, the name by which he had made me his when dark forces conspired to split us apart.

*At 18, to consecrate our love,
We slashed our wrists
Pressed our wounds together
So our blood would mingle
Enter each other's heart
Make us one forever.
Avi*

Of Vena, he wrote, years later:

“We were innocent then, and more pure, and the name sounded perfect, for surely our life together and our love for each other surpassed all mortal names. I wanted to mythologize us, and the young men that would spring, fully-grown, from your immaculate thighs. Now ‘Vena’ sounds hollow, sterile, barren ... And my ancient biblical Sarah is more alive, is more real to me than Vena.”

How had the biblical Sarah managed to bring forth life when man and nature conspired against her? “Barren, to old age,” we are told, Sarah ended up with laughter, gave birth to *Isaac*, which means laughter in Hebrew. But I could not miss the horror when her God-crazed husband Abraham took their miracle child to sacrifice.

Abraham did nothing by the book and neither did Avi.

*I am Avi Boxer, son of Joel,
I am full of romantic clichés
Like I was carved from lightning
And stuffed with aching stars.
Look at my face.
I am Caesar, Rasputin, Heine,
Touch me, and you will never be the same ...
Avi*

At the end of his road, Avi would challenge: “Which one of us has the better excuse to have so royally fucked up?”

Nietzsche wrote: “If you have a reason ‘why’ you can take most any ‘how’.”

I had a “why,” the same “why” as Sarah: a child.

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chapter one

You Can Tell The End From The Beginning

1941

FATHER WAS FRANTIC, puffing away at cigarettes, packing up what could be brought downstairs to the coal bin without attracting attention. Mother was cramming the suitcase with the barest necessities.

“*Shnell, mach shnell*, fast, hurry. *Abbé Laroche vet du bald zein*, Abbott Laroche will soon be here.” Father was rushing her, then, scolding her. “*Heib nisht un tzu veinen yetz*, don’t start weeping now.”

Mother blew her nose and clutched her chest to catch her breath. She was holding the photo of her sister, my *Tante* Erna, surrounded by her husband and three handsome teenaged sons. *Tante* Erna had gone into hiding at the beginning of the systematic roundup of Polish Jews who had immigrated to France in 1929. My cousins had come to warn us ten days ago: “She came out of hiding and was home ten minutes when they pounded on the door and got her.”

Next she held the picture of her brother, Heini. Now living? Trapped? In the Warsaw Ghetto? Mother had begged him to leave Lodz where for generations the family had a printing shop, and come join us in France. Sometimes she asked out loud if she should have demanded he leave and in the same breath answered herself: “Erna left, and who knows where she is now?”

And her brother Raphael in Paris, who had thought his son Villy safer with us in Toulouse, France’s “free zone”. My mother would never get over the guilt of Villy being rounded up when she sent him

on an errand. That had happened yesterday. And this morning my father sent me to school to tell a lie.

I am to tell my teacher that I cannot stay in school because my mother has broken her leg, which she hasn't, and I am needed at home to help with my year-old brother. No one is to suspect we are planning to escape to Spain. Even I didn't know it.

I didn't need to be told that horrid things were happening, like running crazed to bomb shelters with sirens wailing, planes roaring overhead and dropping bombs all around us. I knew about queuing for hours for milk, one litre for each child under 12. I knew about the ration tickets, which did not get us food anyway. I knew something even worse was brewing after *Tante* Erna was hauled from her home in a cattle car and my cousin Villy was picked off the street, and I knew it long before my teacher Mlle. Menard made me sit in the dunce seat because I was a Jew.

And I stand before Mlle. Menard as with a rock stuck in my throat to deliver my father's message. My mother broke her leg and I am needed at home to help.

"And where is your father's note?" Mlle. Menard asks, with a suspicious look. I have no note. "Take your seat." She points at the seat in the back row. The class giggles, some give me the "shame" fingers as I curtsy and go to the dunce seat. I am in the grips of not having lied well enough for my father and having lied to a teacher, and what can possibly go worse?

Mlle. Menard sends for a replacement teacher. "I am going to take you home myself," she says.

That walk with Mlle. Menard is a blur. Blind fury clamps my throat wordless. It is not just that I am nine years old and am made to lie that deranges the spirit of things in me. Lying for a matter of life and death and to save your parents and brother is noble, which I had failed to be. I want to feel like I belong, like I matter, like I am part of the goings on. Like my uncle Pinche—my mother's brother whom Father in a fit of jealous fury has forbidden us to see—makes me feel. And I hanker for my uncle's hug as I shudder for the banishment I have earned for a mission so botched. "Stupid like your mother," with that dismissive wave of the hand is a mood I dread the most.

Not one hair of Mlle. Menard's iron *mis-en-plis* stirs in the balmy breeze the young spring morning. Each step her hard, wiry body clacks out on the cobbled streets is executed as with Germanic precision.

Did my parents, in their panic, not consider that some teachers had brought their Jewish charges to detention centres, never to be seen again? Such were the bedtime stories wafting in from the kitchen that no one thought I heard, my bed in the next room up against the kitchen wall. And I shudder, where is Mlle. Menard taking me?

We pass the narrow lane of rue St. Germain, where *Tante* Erna had once lived. She was as fair as Mother was dark, the dynamo of the family. She drove a car in 1927 before the men did, Mother claimed. She ran the family business, as well as her husband and three boys. They teased me for my black eyes but applauded my performances of the tear jerking Yiddish songs Mother taught me: "*kinder yoren zisse kinder yoren*, childhood years, sweet childhood years." That's how it had been for my mother in the bosom of a bustling home of five spirited siblings. Before she was married she used to sing. Maybe I could live my mother's dream.

"Surely another Shirley Temple," *Tante* Erna said, fuelling Mother's fantasy that I'd be a star.

They had moved to Montluçon where their business, selling spirits, had been meant to be more profitable. I start to weep and Mlle. Menard gives me a dirty look. Who knows what she thinks I am crying for? Actually, I don't know exactly what I am crying for except fear. Nauseating fear. Inexplicable fear. Not only might I not be going home but would my parents still be there if I ever got there? They could have been rounded up as Erna had been and what would happen to me? And my uncle Pinche, what would he say to the mess I had wrought?

Uncle Pinche is the loving spirit I see comforting me. He reads fairy tales to me. He tells Mother not to show so overtly her favouritism for baby Jack. Did Pinche know that Villy had disappeared?

The month that Villy was with us he was given the chore of walking me to and from school. Only yesterday morning I had run to keep up with Villy's long-legged strides, and at the school portals he had smiled his crooked boyish smile and said he'd be there when

school let out. But Villy was not there when school let out. Instead Father was there waiting for me under his large, black umbrella with heavy rain drumming down upon it. Father had one of his nervous smiles for me as he stood there with the other parents waiting for their young ones, but on the way home he did not speak and I did not ask why Villy had not picked me up. It may be something I did wrong again. Mother is tearing around the rooms, distraught. She had sent Villy on an errand after he got home from taking me to school. It is seven hours later and Villy has not returned. Living in the “free zone” had seduced my Uncle Raphael to believe that only German Nazis were out to destroy us. But the French of Marechal Petain did the Nazis proud.

That night—only last night—Father stayed out late. After 9 o'clock curfew. Either he returns or like Villy, he doesn't. He has gone to arrange for guides. Then comes the next day, which is today, when he sends me to school to make it look like all is normal. And indeed, for us it is.

We pass the Monoprix fabric shop where Mother bought the silks, cottons and wool for the dressmaker to sew and for Mother to embroider. Mother was praised for the handiwork that had kept her father on cancer medication.

Next block is the market where Mother and other housewives had met and gossiped and bargained with the vendors hawking their wares of fresh fruits, vegetables, *cacahouètes*, and stinking old cheese. We walk by the places where father had dared tempt the God he was always challenging, by taking a daily aperitif in non-kosher cafés. For all the fear that constricts my throat, my heart yet melts at the sound of the music blaring out of those cafés. Music, that was so often to sustain me. And here, Tino Rossi, heartthrob of the young and the old, is crooning *Le plus beau de tout les tangos du monde*, “the most beautiful tango in the world is the one I dance in your arms ...” A bewitching melody connected to summer days at the *piscine*, a treat of *pêche Melba*, the seductive scent of suntan lotion glistening on sunbathers. Those were the days I didn't feel the weight of having to tell a lie to carry my parents and brother to safety.

And it is a stinking walk with Mlle. Menard because of the break-

fast debris and the contents of emptied night pots that stream down the gutters. And turning the corner on *rue des Lois* I don't know whether to be relieved to be coming home, or terrified.

We enter the front portals into the open inner courtyard. We walk past the smelly outhouse, past the succouring aroma of glue and varnish that Mr. Savoie, the furniture maker, is using to repair a Louis XV chest of drawers. As Mlle. Menard stomps past him she doesn't notice Mr. Savoie taking in the scene and giving me a strange, imperceptible nod. All that is left is the climb up two flights of stairs. Mlle. Menard pounds on the door. What will happen when she sees my mother standing on both unbroken legs? I am the chosen interpreter between mother's Yiddish and the host languages. Mother understands and speaks even less French than Father does. More pounding. No answer. "*Allons voir ton père*, let's go see your father."

My father's store is two doors outside the courtyard. My father is a rabbi but makes ladies' handbags for a living.

My father's steel-grey eyes scare me. His cigarette breath repulses me. His temper tantrums terrify me. His silent treatments freeze me. The way he curses my mother—"May the angel of death take her"—horrifies me. Only once did my father beat me. I must have been four when I was calling out "Papa, Papa, Papa," while he was hammering a nail. He banged his thumb instead. He dropped the hammer to the floor and walked over to me lying in my parents' big bed before bedtime. He whirled me over on my tummy. He pulled down my pyjama pants and on my bare bottom whacked me red. My father never hit me after that and I never sang "Papa" again.

We pass the spot in the courtyard where, at Christmas time, three months ago, my best friend had run over to call me "dirty Jew!"

Incarnation was the concierge's daughter. We had played hopscotch, skipped rope or thrown a ball and when it rained we had sat by the open doors protected by a covered roof to watch the horse-and-buggies go by. Mostly we hoped to see a car, that strange new invention. We'd watch the driver crank up the engine and run fast behind the wheel and we always laughed when he failed and had to start cranking all over again. Incarnation and I held hands when we walked to the corner store to buy a roll of *liquorices*. We held hands when we

went to the *guignol* for the puppet show. She called me her best friend and I called her mine, until Christmas, when Father gave me the gift. I couldn't guess what was under the large wrap Father was removing. It seemed to take forever for the surprise to emerge and then, at last: a toy butcher shop. Cardboard slices of meat for a cardboard butcher station. My father had expected greater enthusiasm for such a large toy. I would have liked a book, like my uncle Pinche would give me, or coloured pencils to draw with, not a clumsy box to deal in meat, even if the cardboard slices were innocuous.

The next afternoon Father had set me up in the courtyard for "business" and, when I saw Incarnation run out of her door, I had thought it was for our usual playtime but she came over to call me, "*sale Juive, dirty Jewess.*"

My legs wobble as Mlle. Menard and I enter my father's store.

Father jumps when he sees my teacher. He rushes over and kisses the back of her hand. I am transfixed by the elegant, though clumsy, gesture. He fusses about nervously looking for the chair that Mlle. Menard would have none of.

"Sarah tells me that Mme. Engelhard has broken a leg and needs Sarah home to help, but Mrs. Engelhard is not home. Sarah had no note to that effect. I venture to conclude that Sarah here is lying."

"*Vee, vee, yes, yes, Mlle. Menard,*" he says. "My wife she did break the leg. She is with the brother."

"So you don't need Sarah at home."

"Mlle. Menard, the wife of brother also sick." Father puts his hands to his stomach.

She eyes both of us suspiciously. Turning to leave, she says, "We'll see about this."

I prepare for my deserved blows. I deserve lashes for the badly told lie. I deserve them for bringing Mlle. Menard, for not knowing how to save a horrible situation. For that and so much more I even deserve the silent treatment, the one I try to avert at all cost, the one where you're not worth talking to because you are such a "*shtick drek, piece of shit*". But just then the Abbé Laroche, in his long flowing black robes, turns the corner where Mlle. Menard has just disappeared.

The Abbé is like a family member. He studies Hebrew from my father. He brings me chocolate and pats my head. I especially like the Easter chocolate bunny. He has arranged for our guides.

“Noah,” he says, wasting no breath, “our contact at the gendarmerie has just been arrested. He will be made to confess names of people for whom he forged documents. Come to church, you will leave for the train station from my parish. Start rehearsing your new names.” He points at me: “You are Thérèse Beaulieu.” My mother is now “Francine”, my father is “Jean”, my little brother is “Jean-Pierre”. “All of you were born in France.” He turns to Father. “Pack only one bag. And Noah, let me repeat my offer one more time, leave Sarah at the cloister with us. One of you will be sure to survive.”

“We die together or we live together, Mr. l’Abbé. Go now Sarah to Mr. Savoie’s furniture shop. Your mother and brother are hiding there. Tell her to come straight home and pack a bag.”

“*Shnell!*” Father is back from the coal bin, where my trousseau is being amassed (so far mostly bed linen), and Mother hurriedly wraps the beloved snapshots in a silk scarf and wedges them securely against the edge of the suitcase so they don’t suffer damage. Added to underwear and clothes for us all and a new corset for herself, those cinches and stays that I could hardly wait to get into one day, were monogrammed handkerchiefs, two new crocodile leather handbags not picked up by customers who had ordered them. Mother, ever the astute dealer, thinks she might yet sell them, wherever we might be. On top of it all, she folds diapers for Jack. Mother is not going to let go of this suitcase.

It is decided to take turns, Mother and I, lugging the suitcase.

I take up my duty, awkward, off balance. I lean way over to my right, in order to lift the weight with my left hand. It goes dragging and banging against my legs and bumping into Mother’s and Father’s. Now it is all our worldly possessions in my incapable hands and outside near the train the Nazis are booming orders.

“*Lingst, lingst, left, left,*” they are hollering in German. Only Jews

whose Yiddish is a bastardized German would understand. “*Lingst, lingst,*” a trap? Are those going “right,” the wrong way, going to be spared? And those who turn left, following orders, going to be caught? Father hesitates and then we follow him *lingst* into a frantic melee of station attendants calling out train departures and arrivals; people embracing for arriving or for parting; people running lugging their belongings, holding onto one another until the train wheels begin to roll and the whistle howls.

We are seated two seats from a coach door, hoping to reach Putchardas, a border town at the foot of the Pyrenees, to make it through to the next safe foothold. The wagon door at the other end bangs shut and a ticket agent calls out to us to have our tickets at hand. He moves sure-footedly as the train speeds along serpentine mountain rails. He checks left and right and stops to punch tickets and places the stubs in the slot at the top of the aisle seats. The wagon door bangs shut again and there, at the front entrance, stand two Nazi officers. We are facing north so we can see their progress examining papers and asking questions. They inch their way toward us. Mother is a grey white mask; her plucked eyebrows, penciled stark black in thin new moons, is the look of the day, Rachel Nacre powder from Coty, and rouged cheeks on her blood-drained face, she is a study of naked fear. Father on whom rests the burden of our security mumbles inaudibly a prayer he no longer believes in. The train is over-full. I am squeezed between Mother and Father. My brother is twisting, restless, jumpy, on Mother’s lap. Pitch-black fields whizz by and suddenly the train lurches to a halt. The man across from Mother lowers his window and sticks his head out. With gleeful grin looking directly at Father he reports: “They just hauled down some more Jews. They’re going to get every one of them.” He slaps his thigh with a triumphant flourish.

The train starts up slowly. The officers continue up the aisle, toward us. “*Papieren, papers.*” One of them holds out his hand to my father. My father’s hand darts from pocket to pocket, shaking as if he has palsy, from jacket, coat and vest and over again. He can’t find our papers. He finally produces the false documents and the Nazi is examining them when the wagon door behind us bursts open and

two more Nazis bound in. They whisper something urgent to our two men who hand the papers back with orders to keep them ready. “*Vir comen gleish tzuruk*, we’re coming right back.”

“What beautiful eyes,” the elderly woman facing us says, admiring my brother’s long eyelashes. Mother makes an imperceptible “tphew, tphew, tphew,” spitting three times to ward off the evil eye.

“What is his name?” the woman asks, clearly not a Jew travelling with false papers.

“Jean Pierre,” I say, giving the name I better not mess up.

“Eh *bien*, Jean Pierre,” the man by the window tries to shake my brother’s hand. “Two good Christian names. And what is your name?” he asks of me.

“Thérèse,” I say.

“Eh bien, Sainte Thérèse D’Avilla? You plan to be a saint?” He laughs.

Again, the doors at the far end of our coach clank open and shut. They are coming toward us. My father has our documents on his lap but they speed right by into the next car. Wagon doors rumble open and slam shut. So many people going to the WC. Jack falls asleep to the rhythm of the wheels. Three other station stops until at last the ticket agent announces: “Putchardas.” He removes the stubs from our seat and repeats: “Putchardas, *votre arrêt*, your stop.” Another clang of the wagon door and they are coming through, again, examining papers. New arrivals had embarked at the three last stops. These Nazis are slow and meticulous. We prepare to get off. My mother wraps my brother in his coat and hat. I put on mine. They are getting closer. The train howls its imminent arrival. It begins to slow. Father’s arms are shaking. Father’s entire body shakes as he steps on the feet of the woman who admired my brother’s eyelashes. He hoists our suitcase from the rack above our head, into my hands. He puts Jack in the rucksack and heaves him on his back. “*Bonnes vacances*, good holidays,” the woman calls to Mother. Our story is, we are on holiday because Mother is sick. So sick she can’t talk. I do the talking, she waves to my brother, and to me she says, “*tu es bien élevée et trop sérieuse pour une fille de neuf ans*, you’re well behaved and too serious for a girl of nine.” The train is slowing. The whistle is announcing its arrival. Other passengers are lining up behind us. A couple of Nazis are

standing watch at the door of the connecting train. It has never taken so long for a train to grind to a halt.

We are nine on the run with two guides: one at the head, the other at our back. I don't know if Mother or Father know how long the trek will be. I have no idea. All I know is to keep up with the guides. The only light is the waning moon. We slip on ice, not yet melted in early spring. We trip on fallen trees and are gashed by razor sharp branches slamming our faces. We slosh through mud pools from recent rains and melting snow. The valise and I get caught in brambles and branches and it bangs my legs, but I run. A light pierces the deep dark. It looks like a star in the distance. It is a house light. I buoy myself by imagining myself heading for it. That far I can make it, I tell myself. Then the light disappears. Nothing but black. I hear shrill alarming sounds and the howls and calls of creeping, hopping things. We skid down slopes and clamber up hills. We trip and fall on spiked rocks. I drag the suitcase, then Mother takes over and we are falling behind and the guide prodding us on warns my mother: "If you can't keep up, we leave you behind."

It takes a long second as those ahead disappear from sight and Mother lets go of the baggage. Nothing left but what is on our back. Another light appears and we run until dawn breaks and we come to an impossible bridge to Spain: a foot-wide wooden plank, spanning 30 feet of gushing water. A guide shows us how to cross it sideways, inch by inch. The five older group members are convinced they can't make it. The guides size up the crew and the order in which we go: the fat man with his bulging valise is last. Mother is certain that Father, stiff from rheumatism, will drop into the current with Jack on his back. I am certain Mother will not even step onto the plank at all. Father falters as Mother forbids him to risk crossing then says: "*Mir zenen biz du de kimen, mir gehen. Gey, we have gone this far we go forward. Go.*" And Mother goes, and Father goes, and I go, and two young brothers go and the woman hobbling on an ankle broken six weeks ago, goes, her husband goes, the guide at our rear goes, and the fat man

with the bulging valise goes last. We all let out an “oh” when the board creaks and the fat man with his bulging valise reaches the centre. “*Lâcher la valise, lâcher la valise*. Drop the valise; drop the valise!” the guides call out. But the fat man will not part with his valise and steps across the fractured plank as nimbly as if he were a practiced tight-rope walker.

We huddle in a pigsty that will hide us during the day: two lean, tall brothers, Leonard 17 and Maxime 21. Mr. and Mrs. Levine, who are about the age of Mother and Father, Mrs. Levine with an ankle swollen the size of a knee, Mr. Levine the most emaciated of us all and fat Mr. Ginzburg with the bulging valise. We stand ankle deep in a muddy ditch, slashed, gashed, scraped, scratched, bleeding and swollen, clothes ripped and torn. There is no food and the harrowing question is: will the guides come back for us, or will they keep the cash and leave us to die? In the dark of night we hear frightening noises approaching. We are among the lucky ones. They are back and we resume our run until we reach a farmhouse.

The Cordovas hide us in their attic, a crawl space we share with rabbits, mice and pigeon-dung. We drink warm milk, milked from the cows mooing beneath our roof. The outhouse is next to the chicken coop. The mattresses carpeting the creaky wooden floor are left over from the inn the Cordovas had owned before the civil war, six years before. We are to stay here until further notice, and it is my duty to keep my brother from giving us away. When he naps and no one is arguing I stretch alongside the two brothers for English lessons. “First,” Maxime instructs, “English you speak like you have a hot potato in your mouth.”

After five days of body smell and whispered arguments, sometimes so intense that Senora Cordova climbs the ladder to remind us that the town’s police station is on the next farm over, word comes that we will move before dawn. All luggage is to remain behind, even Maxime and Leonard’s English books. Only fat Mr. Ginzberg cannot be parted from his possessions. He renders himself immobile by emptying his suitcase, and putting on every piece of underwear, pants, shirts, jackets. He is given a choice: he stays or the valise does. We assemble at the front door when four things happen in the blink

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Hagar Yahel Ross, my friend, took a copy of the scrip to the Holy Land, made notes, on holiday, and returned with most profound comments and came up with partial title of the book.

David Himmelstein, a teacher/writer, a friend since 1980, an invaluable help with comments in the early stages of the book.

Orit Shimoni, singer/songwriter, one of the advisors and editors of the book, I love her as my daughter. She wrote the song “Oh Abraham” for me.

Jack, my baby brother with some seven books to his name, touted my book in many of his columns before it was ever finished.

My children, Robin, Miriam and Asa, were commentators, advisers, researchers, editors, opinion givers, helpers, and just plain blessings.

My grandchildren as of this writing: Itzy, Yaacov, Devorah, Tova, Yoel. Chaya, Simi, Zari, and Sruly, are inspiring support.

And when came time that I was ready to let go, when after years of sitting, hunched over the computer, brooding over the work, when the pain in my hips and knees made it impossible to sit, hunched over, one moment more and I thought, “it is time to start looking for a publisher,” that Michael Mirolla, publisher of Guernica Editions, flashed up for the first time on my *linked-in* site saying: “Michael Mirolla would like to connect with you,” and so I did.

Such is having angels hovering over you, for what could be better than to have Connie McParland and Michael Mirolla as final editors.

That space, beyond words, manifests itself via goose bumps, that frisson that explains overwhelming gratitude. Goose flesh is unique to humans. All the people mentioned above, give me goose bumps.

About the Author

Sarah Engelhard was born in 1932, in Saarbrücken, France. She came to Canada on the first WW2 refugee ship, the Serpa Pinto, in 1944. She was a television host, radio personality, teacher, singer/songwriter. She speaks regularly for the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre. She is the mother of four. *Sarah and Abraham: The Search for Miracles and the Stuttering Poet* is her first published book. She lives in Montreal.