

## Long wait for an angel

By Ruth Ostrow

JACOB Kaplan, 84, sits on his little balcony in Sydney waiting. Always waiting. For almost 70 years he has expected word to come from South America that his older brothers did love him after all. That they were sorry for the hurt they caused him so many lifetimes ago by abandoning him after the Holocaust.

Even after he found out that they had died, he's continued waiting. Waiting for a sign from God, from someone who may have met them, or known them, to provide an explanation. Waiting for an opportunity to forgive, so he could find some peace.

In a world torn apart by the Holocaust there was so much to try and forgive, but to Jacob his brothers' actions were the most unforgivable. Jacob was only 15 years old when he bade goodbye to the two brothers he adored. It was 1931 and they were fleeing Poland to Uruguay for their lives. As communists and Jews they were being hunted down by the government.

A few years later Jacob fled to Russia when the Nazis began rounding up Jews and putting them in ghettos.

Try as he could, he could not convince his parents to join him. Nor his five sisters, who were married with three or four little children each. In 1942 the Nazis swept into their ghetto and burned Jacob's entire family to death.

When the war was over, Jacob returned to his village near Warsaw to discover his whole family had been wiped out. Numb with grief and desperation, he wrote to his older brothers in Uruguay with news. "Let me come to you," he begged. "I need you."

The letter that came back was to shatter his world even more than the Nazis had. "Our dear brother. Do not come. Try and find yourself a better life elsewhere." "They did not want me. They did not want me," the broken man has sobbed to himself, every night for a lifetime. A wife, a son, grandchildren, a new life in Australia, has not been enough to ease the pain of loss and terrible rejection. Sixty-eight years have passed since that last goodbye, and still his heart is wet with tears.

Jacob sits on his little balcony, waiting.

Only today, someone is coming to answer his prayer. A messenger from God. Two months ago a letter arrived. His oldest brother had had a son, Victor Kaplan. Victor, 48, was writing to his uncle asking to come to Australia.

"Please let me see you," he wrote in broken English. "I have very important news for you."

Victor explained he was a cardiovascular surgeon living in Uruguay. That there was a convention on heart surgery in Melbourne this month he was thinking of attending, if Jacob would see him. "I need to tell you about your brothers," he wrote.

Today, I am here with Jacob as he waits. He is my father-in-law.

He has put on his best shirt. His hair is washed and specially combed back. He is pacing around, trembling. His wife Eva is trembling too. She met Jacob in a refugee camp waiting to come to Australia. Her family of five sisters, parents and grandparents perished in Auschwitz.

She suffers an anguish equal to his. "They didn't want us," she laments over and over, even as we wait for the knock on the door.

Then it comes. Victor stands at the door. He is identical to photos of his father. He enters the room with tears streaming down his face.

He grabs Jacob in his arms and the two of them cry like babies.

"They loved you ... they loved you," he explains in a mixture of Spanish, English and Yiddish. "They wanted you to know that."

The tragic story unfolds. Of words miscommunicated. Of words sent that never arrived. Of a terrible misunderstanding that has shattered one poor man's life. Jacob's two older brothers were desperately poor and lived wretched lives as illegal immigrants. They were ashamed he should come to Uruguay and they could not provide for him. They wanted him to have a better life.

The brothers could not read or write well and had their sentiments conveyed by a third person, who had written the letter without sensitivity.

Jacob's subsequent letters were not responded to. Victor explains that many Nazis had fled to Uruguay after the war and continued their persecution of the Jews, infiltrating high positions in the fascist regime. Jacob's brothers were targeted not only as Jews but as communists.

Mail was destroyed. Their homes were watched. Victor had been imprisoned for four years and tortured when he was a younger man.

"My father couldn't get word out to you," explains Victor. "And years later he felt too ashamed."

Jacob sits wiping his eyes. The tears are flowing freely. It is as if his heart is opening and all the stored-up pain and grief is pouring out. It's the forgiveness he's yearned for all his life.

"I had to come," Victor says turning to me. "I knew I had to come."

Sometimes God does send an angel of mercy. Such a godly creature is sitting in our flat. A doctor of the heart, a surgeon, who has healed the sick and broken heart of one suffering old man, not with instruments, but with his incredible and tender pilgrimage of love.

From the heart

Dear Ruth,

I want to put forward an informed lesbian point of view on your recent column (September 4). Kimberly O'Sullivan is straight. She couldn't fall deeply in love with a man otherwise. Believe me, it really makes a difference to a homosexual woman whether or not her lover has a penis.

When you're a lesbian, you want the look, the smell, the taste and the mind of a

woman. You want a woman. Nothing else will do! Kimberly was very much a woman of her time, when a pro-sex feminist activist could easily be swept up into a queer world. But she has found her real self now.  
Ann Jameison, Alphington, Victoria

Dear Ruth,  
As a fairly straight woman, may I be permitted to offer a perspective? How many of us consider the possibility that love can come before thought of sexuality?  
Margaret Wenham, St Lucia, Queensland

Dear Ruth,  
Hello ... hello ... come in, planet Earth! Am I the only reader out there who is sick and tired of all the soppy sentiments expressed in your column and letters each week? Newspapers should be a place where the news is discussed and real issues are reflected. They are not venues for spiritual introspection and emotional therapy.  
Reginald, e-mail

Dear Ruth,  
Your embracing of Buddhism reflects a desire for the warm fuzzies of pop religion without the personal discipline that is true religion's gift. One can get warm fuzzies by taking Valium -- but commonsense suggests that God might have something better in mind for spiritual beings.  
Joe, e-mail

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