

**ON THE WRITING OF *TEN GREEN BOTTLES*:
VIENNA TO SHANGHAI-JOURNEY OF FEAR AND HOPE**

Vivian Jeanette Kaplan

Description: This book is my mother's true life story told in the first person and in her persona. It describes her life in Vienna where she was born and grew up and the circumstances of Nazi occupation and persecution that drove her and her family to flee. They found refuge in Shanghai, where among 18,000 Jewish refugees, they managed to survive a hair-raising ordeal and internment under Japanese occupation and plagues of biblical proportion. I was born in Shanghai after the war in 1946. The family stayed there until 1949 when they finally were admitted into Canada and settled in Toronto.

Vivian Kaplan graduated from the University of Toronto. She is married and is the mother of three sons. She is the winner of the Canadian Jewish Book Award (Louis Lockshin – Frances and Samuel Stein Memorial Award in Biography Memoir) for her book *Ten Green Bottles: Vienna to Shanghai, Journey of Fear and Hope*.

Ten Green Bottles has been called a unique and unusual memoir by literary critics, and I suppose that that is true. There are a number of paradoxes in its telling. It is written in an autobiographical style, in the first person, but it is not my life story, rather my mother's. It is written in the

present tense yet spans the years from 1921-1949, most of the years before I was born and all of them before the start of my personal memories. Some novels are written in this way, although even that is not the norm, but in this case the story is in the creative non-fiction genre. It reads like a novel but is an actual life experience. The characters are real people who are my family members and others whom they encountered, and the circumstances in which they find themselves, no matter how bizarre or unlikely they may seem, are true.

Unfortunately this format was not at all well received when I approached numerous publishers with my manuscript. I was actually advised by one senior editor to rewrite it in the third person as a strict narrative so that it would fit more easily into the non-fiction category. I was told that war and especially Holocaust or related material should never be presented in a form that might be considered exaggerated or imagined as there are already many who deny the atrocities and crimes committed against the Jewish people. Although I agree that anyone so inclined might turn this writing to their own corrupted use, I still believe in the original premise that guided me. I wanted to infuse life into the story, to pull it from under heaps of dusty historical documents and give the reader the chance to relive the peaks and valleys of an extraordinary life complete in its richness, including description and dialogue, which had, of course, to be fictionalized as I was not there. Despite my detractors I did not change or compromise my concept and it has proven to be the single most lauded aspect of my writing.

How did I become familiar enough with another person's biography to believe that I could put myself into her very mind and body? "Was it a difficult writing technique?" I have been asked. In reality I could not formulate it any other way. From the outset, the very first word on the very first page, I began to knit together the anecdotes that I had heard from my parents and relatives since the earliest of my own memories. The scenes of their lives were a part of my vivid recollections, tales I had been told of their youth, the

wrenching events of the onslaught of the Nazis and Fascists in Europe, their escape and eventual relocation in Shanghai, where I was born after the war, all were pieces of the puzzle that floated around in my brain. I just needed to put it down on paper, but not as a third person narrative. Right from the start I envisioned my mother's life as seen through her eyes, starting from her childhood. I knew how she would react to the situations that confronted her. I knew how my father and other relatives would inter-relate and could hear their words forming in my head which I then transferred onto the written page.

As I mentioned there were many anecdotes that I knew, bits of information about my mother's years in Vienna, the hardships but also the joys of the life that she loved. Through to her core she was a proud Austrian, a fact that had often been conveyed to me. I wanted to reveal to the reader of this book what it was that drew her back to fond images of her homeland even when she found herself exiled to the opposite side of the globe. Writing about her childhood I tried to recreate all of the sensations of her early years, during the Vienna of the twenties and thirties when she, nick-named, "Nini", would describe, as a child and then as a young adult, how she fell in love with her country, a love that endured despite the horrific way that she would be forced to leave it. In the early chapters I set up this sentiment so that the impact of the upheaval that was to come would resonate even more keenly, and the shock, when read, would hit with the same painful rupture that she experienced.

I think that my art studies and work as a water colour artist have had some influence on my writing. When I create a scene I first visualize it in shades and tints. Using words rather than a brush, I created Nini's childhood in Vienna drawn in colours that were full of light. It is meant to be bright, buoyant, and effervescent, as though she were afloat in champagne bubbles that are heady, sweet, and intoxicating.

I will read a section from the book to illustrate what I mean:

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"Vienna glitters like jewels in a crown, and we take full advantage of its attractions. We meet at sidewalk cafes for Viennese coffee topped with billows of fresh sweet whipped cream and rich confections of pastries like Black Forest cake, the huge dark cherries suspended in layers of cream and chocolate. As we grow older, we attend fancy-dress balls and parties. Spinning endlessly, we waltz in elegant swirls to the melodies of Strauss throbbing around us. How proud we are to be Austrians, in the cultural centre of the world. We need nothing more and have no desire to travel beyond our borders. Where else, after all, would one find a palace to rival the opulent Baroque grandeur of Schonbrunn? Where would mountains, emerald-green in summer and icing-sugar white in winter, welcome as ours do? Where would food taste so good and everyone you meet be your friend?"

This was written in contrast to later shades of darkness, heavy strokes of sadness and cruelty. Descriptions of sights, sounds and smells are the pigments that I used to paint these pictures. Emotions are evoked in the same way. One reader told me that I write in Technicolor and I was gratified with that. The next section is described in an opposing tone to the one that I just read. This is the scene of Nini and her younger brother Willi caught out on the street during the chaotic devastation of Kristallnacht:

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"Pressing against the shadows of the houses we have known all our lives, we make our way home. Willi, clutching my hand, tells me to have courage. My throat is raw from the

thick smoke hanging in the cold night air and the sheer panic I feel. Fear is so overwhelming that there is room for nothing else. We move forward like the blind. We are not aware of where our feet are going or what thoughts propel us forward.

"On a wild rampage of bloodlust, Nazi soldiers, followed by crowds of eager Viennese citizens, shove through the streets, looting the shops and scorching their way along a path of random violence. In my mind I see Mama lying on the floor like Frau Kaufmann, tortured, bloodied. Maybe they have taken her away. We rush through the black streets, showers of broken glass crashing around us as the destruction continues. We are coughing and gasping from the dense smoke, clouds of soot, and odour of burnt timber."

I wrote the book in the way that someone might construct a patch-work quilt, creating sections and then fitting them together into a whole. It was not written with a pre-formed outline or in chronological sequence but in vignettes. These were then carefully integrated into the correct time-line after a considerable amount of research was done into historical events that form the backdrop. As the story evolves there are more examples of light and dark to define the mood.

Leaving Vienna the family sails across the Pacific on a luxury liner and again the feelings and colours turn optimistic, clear blue skies and green sea-water and there is hope for renewal. But as the refugees approach land things take on a darker edge once more. The first sight that they have of the Chinese coast sets the tone for what is to unfold. Although this may seem contrived it is my honest perception of the true facts and an interpretation in verbal terms of a visual depiction, the sight of a heavy landscape, redolent of oppressive odours and the claustrophobic presence of a heavily over-populated country where nothing is familiar, everything is strange and harsh.

I have selected the following to read from the book to show the effect of the first sight of Shanghai on the Jewish refugees.

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"Miles out from the shoreline, we crowd together at the railing of the ship's deck, our necks craning

forward, jostling one another for a better view of our new destination. Before the image is clear, our senses are already attacked by the foul odour of garbage and raw sewage. Everyone is moaning, holding hands over mouths and noses to keep out the offensive smell. The cooling breeze of the ocean behind us has dissipated and we begin to feel the oppressive heat hovering like a heavy blanket in the air. Though we are still far from the Whang Po Wharf, the water is no longer the clear azure of the open ocean, but has turned to a murky stew, littered with debris. The huge Chinese population cannot be confined to the land mass and spills over into the sea. Strange houseboats, called sampans, their sails rounded as they fill with the wind, dot the sloshing mucky water. They are loaded with women and children, baked brown from the sun, clothed scantily in rags. Fussing babies howl for mother's milk. The odours of rancid cooking oil and dead fish accost us as the ship drifts closer to the dock.. Men are standing on the pier, openly urinating into the stinking water, laughing boisterously. Are they congratulating themselves for the clever greeting they have provided for this new boatload of unwanted foreigners?"

I arrived at the title "Ten Green Bottles" from the name of a wartime drinking song, that my parents heard during one of their various enterprises in Shanghai, operating a bar on the rowdy docks. The bottles, ten, then nine, eight, and so on tumble and break and I thought of the words, the bottles falling and smashing, and it came to me that my mother'

life was like that, punctuated by a string of painful fractures, terrors, and heartache. It made me wonder how much she could endure, how much in fact, I could have endured. So the metaphor evolved, the question of the green bottles of her life, how many there might be before her mind cracked and deserted her. Following is an excerpt that explains this.

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"One particularly steamy summer night I am drawn into the mood of the sailors' sodden tunes. The air in the bar is the usual stale smokey mixture, bitter with the odour of ale, whiskey, and sweat. The heat drains my energy. Lethargy and remorse draw me into a sullen mood and I am uncomfortably hot and sticky as I feel my dress clinging to my body in the damp heat, perspiration trickling down my back. The sombre melody of the refrain echoes I my mind. The clinking notes of the piano fill the air, and the words of the song seem to symbolize my personal struggle. I question my own limitations. How many "bottles" remain in my life? How many more traumas can I endure before I tumble into the final abyss? It is so clear to me at this moment that the song represents my own life. In my mind I go over the words again and again, imagining the jagged glass as my own pile of disappointments and painful separations, losses, and alienation. Smashed, I think, like the glass of Kristallnacht."

"Ten Green Bottles" is a very personal story but one that I hope will touch readers' hearts and minds. Above all it brings the message that determination and human fortitude can win out in the face of enormous odds and the most colossal hurdles one could imagine. I considered the reader as a traveler who would enter into an exotic adventure by opening the pages of my book to retrace the steps of the amazing journey that my family took in real life.

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