

“Rebecca (and Rachele’s!) Journey Home”

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Silver Medal Winner of the Sydney Taylor Award

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**Description:** Sydney Taylor Honor Award winners share their stories.

**Brynn Sugarman** wrote the touching story of the adoption of a Vietnamese child by a Jewish family, which is a long-overdue addition to the body of Jewish literature for children.

When I was seven, my aunt and uncle adopted my cousin, Lisa, from Korea. This was back in 1968, when international adoption was in its infancy. My cousin was five at the time of her adoption.

Our extended family converged at my grandparents’ apartment in Queens, New York, to meet the new addition. My mother explained that Lisa had arrived with just a small purse containing a few Korean coins. It was doubtful that she had ever had toys. So my mother had gone to the toy store: we arrived laden with miniature dishes, Barbie dolls and coloring books. My sisters, cousins, and I ran about the place, pointing to beds, chairs, sofas and tables, naming them in English. Lisa then gave us the Korean translation. I was fascinated, and determined that some day I would follow in my aunt and uncle’s footsteps and adopt a child.

Thirty years went by, and I had not changed my mind. Like my aunt before me, I had already given birth to two children and was determined that the third child would be adopted. My husband, Dov, and I, along with our sons Aviv and Idan, were living in Oregon at the time, so we started our adoption process with PLAN, in McMinnville, Oregon. They in turn were coordinated with The International Mission of Hope, an adoption organization working out of both Vietnam and India.

Dov and I were biased toward Asia. This was not only due to the Korean origins of my cousin, but also to the fact that ten years earlier, shortly after Dov had finished his three year stint with the Israeli Defense Forces, we had spent 9 months traveling in Asia.

We were matched to Rachele as adoptive parents in September of 1998, when she was only three weeks old. Her birth mother was an unwed nineteen-year-old, who had checked into a clinic in Thai Nguyen Province in North Vietnam, given birth, and disappeared the following day, leaving a note that she “was not married and was from a poor background and to please find a loving family for her child.”

Even though our daughter was far away, every Friday night we blessed our daughter, in the same manner that Mr. and Mrs. Stein bless Rebecca in the book:

“...Mr. and Mrs. Stein had faced toward Vietnam, held their hands atop an imaginary little head, and said the traditional blessing for little girls: ‘May God make you kind and righteous like the first mothers of our people, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah.’ Even though Baby Rebecca wasn’t Jewish yet, receiving her parents’ blessing was a good first step.”

It was four months before bureaucracy on both sides of the Pacific would unfold. In retrospect, it all went quite smoothly and the entire process did not take much longer than a pregnancy, but at the time, the wait felt eternal. We wanted our baby and we wanted her immediately! We were surprised to find that the Immigration and Naturalization Services of the United States was almost as bureaucratic as its counterpart in a Communist country in the developing world.

My suitcase had been packed since November. It waited silently under my bed. It included items that would be used to celebrate Shabbat, which is faithfully recorded in the book:

“...Mrs. Stein had packed tiny candlesticks and candles, so that she and Rebecca could celebrate their first Shabbat together.”

A flexible airline ticket that allowed for me to travel within a week’s notice had been purchased. PLAN held our hand throughout the entire process. They hoped that I would receive approval to travel before February. During that month, the entire country of Vietnam shuts down, in celebration of Tet, the Vietnamese New Year. It could retard our process by an entire month.

Groups of adoptive parents are sent at the same time to pick up their children. A group was leaving for Hanoi at the end of January. PLAN hoped that the group would include me. Imagine our shared disappointment when the deadline came and went, and one particular outstanding piece of paper had still not been signed by the correct official and faxed to PLAN in the US. I was told that it was hopeless: I would indeed need to wait until after Tet.

I hung up the phone and cried. Then I began to pray. I reasoned with the Divine: I was trying to do a good thing and I needed some assistance: help me, I practically shouted.

Within the hour, the phone rang. It was PLAN. My contact at the agency was both excited and baffled. She said that it was already evening in Vietnam, and offices were closed. So naturally, they had not expected my coveted piece of paper to arrive. Yet since we had last spoken, a fax had arrived from Vietnam, and it was indeed that very document. I was told to get ready to leave for Vietnam in exactly a week. So my adoption story includes a small (or not so small) taste of the mystical and miraculous.

On the plane, I was barely breathing from excitement.

The trip took seventeen hours, and included many stops: from Portland to Los Angeles to Osaka to Bangkok, and finally on to Hanoi.

Meanwhile, my mother Marlene was also in transit, from Ben Gurion airport in Tel Aviv to Hanoi, via Paris.

Our time in Vietnam was magical: rickshaw rides and water puppet shows, boating on misty waters which led us through tunnels and caves, thousand-year-old Buddhist temples and colorful silk shops. In “Rebecca’s Journey Home” I try to capture the essence of these exotic experiences in the gifts that are bought for the children back home-and which were indeed purchased for Aviv and Idan:

“...Mrs. Stein was touring the country and shopping for interesting gifts-wooden instruments shaped like frogs, silk robes, and a dragon water puppet.”

All of these items and experiences were wonderful. But the truly transcendent moment took place less than two days after I landed: a minivan arrived at the hotel where I was staying. A troop of women flocked into the lobby, each carrying a baby. I stood with several other anxiously awaiting parents-to-be. Names were being called.

“Sugarman!” one woman shouted. She had fostered Rachele since her birth. I recognized the baby girl in her arms from a photograph we had received just weeks before. Within seconds she was in my arms, and I couldn’t stop crying. Neither could her foster mother as she said goodbye. I could tell that she had received a lot of love and nurturing. Best of all, my mother, who had just arrived in Hanoi, walked through the front door less than half an hour later, and the tears started all over again.

We brought five-month-old Le Thi Binh Minh, or Rachele Zohar, as she would be known in English and Hebrew, upstairs. In spite of the fact that it was mild and 70 degrees Fahrenheit outside, she was swaddled in two blankets, two knit sweaters and a number of tiny t-shirts. In East Asia, they believe in keeping babies warm no matter how strongly the sun shines: those of us who neglected to put a cap on our baby’s head while walking about outside received tongue clucking and reprimands which easily broke through any language barrier. This was seen as invasive by many of the non-Jewish adoptive parents. However, having lived for many years in Israel, and being a member of the nation that invented the term “chutzpah,” I was used to a culture which pooh-poohed privacy and not only found these behaviors acceptable, but familiar and endearing.

It took several minutes to peel off all of the clothing layers. Her bottom was padded with, by now wet, rags: diapers are expensive in Vietnam. We squatted down beside the inflatable baby pool that I had brought in my suitcase (I had been warned that the hotel bathroom would only contain a shower stall) and got a good look at our beautiful new daughter, and granddaughter, as we cleaned her up and cooled her off. She was a charming little Buddha, with fuzz for hair, a round face and yummy cheeks (both above and below!) Even her nocturnal sobs, which kept my mother and me comforting her in

our arms throughout the first night, could not keep us from falling immediately in love with her. Sleep deprivation was no match for her charm.

The Vietnamese government has a special “Giving and Receiving Ceremony” whereby custody of an adopted child is officially transferred from one individual to another. My mother, Rachele and I traveled with the other adoptive parents and babies from Hanoi to Thai Nguyen in a minivan, where we met with the individuals who still had custodianship over our children. Rachele’s was the doctor who had delivered her. His name is Le Van Binh. She was born in the Minh Lapp Clinic, as in Ho Chi Minh. So her Vietnamese name, Le Thi Binh Minh, is a combination of the doctor’s name and the clinic’s name. Together, Binh Minh means “sunrise on a beautiful morning,” which corresponds to her middle name, the Hebrew Zohar, that is, “illumination.”

We all sat around a long table of polished wood. We signed documents, shook hands, and posed for photographs under the official symbol of the State of Vietnam, which hung proudly on the wall. Not exactly the spiritual, jasmine tea-sipping experience I had hoped for! However, Dr. Le Van Binh was a lovely man, who placed a beautiful silver anklet on Rachele’s foot as a good luck gift. She was the only baby who had ever been relinquished at his clinic, the experience had been unique for him, and he took her well-being quite seriously.

My mother and I wanted to visit the orphanage which had been involved with Rachele’s health and general care, but some of the children were sick. The orphanage manager felt that we could pass the germs on to Rachele, and therefore barred visitations. My mother had brought a suitcase with her filled with one hundred wrapped gifts for the children. In the end, we simply gave this suitcase to a representative from the orphanage. I fictionalize this in the book by mentioning that

“There were boxes of toys that members of the synagogue had donated for the children at the orphanage.”

We regretted not having been able to go to see these little ones ourselves. As the Jewish tradition states, “to save a life is to save a world,” but we likewise wanted to give of ourselves to those left behind. I suppose we’ll just have to visit the orphanage in a few years time, during Rachele’s Bat Mitzvah trip, when we plan to return to the land of her birth.

When I arrived home in Oregon two and a half weeks later, where my husband, parents-in-law from Israel, and sons were waiting, the process of falling in love began anew, as the next stage of becoming a family began. This is mirrored in the Stein family’s airport reunion:

“At last the day arrived for Mrs. Stein and Baby Rebecca to come home. The family arrived at the airport early and waited eagerly until they saw Mrs. Stein, walking like a queen down the carpeted hallway. Little Rebecca was in a pouch, pressed to her tummy like a baby kangaroo. Jacob and Gabriel hopped up and down while everybody hugged.

‘I want to hold her!’ Gabriel shouted.

‘Me first, I’m older!’ Jacob argued.

‘Hey, what about me?’ Mr. Stein asked.”

We spent the next year making our daughter an American citizen and arranging her conversion to Judaism with the rabbinical court of Seattle, a city which soon became home. Naturally, in the book, the mikvah ceremony was a perfect way to capture the process of conversion:

“Just before her first birthday, the family brought Rebecca to the mikvah, the ritual bath. Inside was a small, warm pool. Mr. Stein carried the baby down the steps and gently placed her in the water while the rabbi recited blessings. She was given the Hebrew name Rivka Shoshanah. Mr. and Mrs. Stein promised to give their daughter a Jewish education and raise her to love Shabbat and the holidays.”

The years passed. Like most adoptive parents, my husband and I bought books on adoption, both for us and for our children. Rachele was now over five, the age that my cousin Lisa had been when she was adopted. She had a book about adoption which she loved, “I Love You Like Crazy Cakes,” by Rose Lewis. She had her adoption photo album, the baby book which memorialized her entrance into our family. But among the adoption books available for children, I realized that there was an empty niche waiting to be filled. None of the books dealt with adoption from a uniquely Jewish angle.

Luckily, I had a BA in Creative Writing and a Master’s in English literature. My poetry had been published in a variety of literary periodicals. In recent years, parenting had taken precedence over writing, but the hunger to return to my chosen craft had started gnawing at me about three years before, at around the time of 9/11, the second Intifada and my 40<sup>th</sup> birthday, all emotional events. I had returned to writing, but this time I was attracted to children’s literature, an art form requiring the same skill as poetry: the ability to be concise while evoking thought, emotion and color.

As a writer, I cannot resist the urge to fictionalize reality: non-fiction is not my calling. I therefore turned “Rachele” into “Rebecca” and “Sugarman” into “Stein,” and took some creative liberty with details. However, *Rebecca’s Journey Home* is strongly based on Rachele, the story of her adoption and how it affected our entire family.

Jewish tradition is woven into the book. However, I wrote with an intention to be inclusive. Although I personally identify with the liberal end of Modern Orthodoxy, my desire was to speak to all Jews, regardless of labels and affiliation.

The message of *Rebecca’s Journey Home* is that a person can be many things at once:

“Now the baby had three names. She had a Vietnamese name: Le Thi Hong. She had an English name: Rebecca Rose. And she had a Hebrew name: Rivka Shoshanah.

She was Vietnamese, American, and Jewish.”

I hoped that the book’s message of diversity not only within society but within oneself would appeal to a diverse audience and enable the book to find its place among the rainbow of multicultural stories available today - touching non-Jews and non-adoptive families in addition to those within the Jewish adoption community.

I also wanted to promote the notion of diversity of interests:

“‘And she’ll be many more things someday,’ Mrs. Stein said.

‘Maybe a mother like you,’ Jacob suggested.

‘Or an astronaut like me,’ Gabe added.

‘Or a famous poet, Olympic skier, and mathematician all rolled into one!’ Mr. Stein said with a smile.

‘You can’t be all of those things!’ Jacob protested.

‘You can be as many things as you want to be. Or at least you can try,’ his dad replied.

I knew that writing is a competitive field, and that to send an unsolicited manuscript is to gamble. So you can imagine my delight when I received an e-mail from Kar-Ben Publishers, a Jewish press for children’s literature, stating that my book had been accepted for publication!

Kar-Ben was in the process of being bought by Lerner Publishing, located in Minneapolis. I signed a contract with Kar-Ben/Lerner in 2004: it would take two years for the book to be released. Meanwhile, Michelle Shapiro was chosen to illustrate the book.

I was thrilled when Kar-Ben/Lerner finally e-mailed me a preview of Michelle’s work! Michelle makes gorgeous use of color and captures the loving spirit of the adoption journey. And I couldn’t get over how she portrayed the streets of Vietnam: as if she lives there! Michelle is aunt to a child who was also adopted, and told me that this gave her a sense of intimacy with her subject matter.

The book could be preordered on Amazon by September, 2006, and was officially released on October 31<sup>st</sup>. My family had gone through many changes since I had signed the contract two years earlier with Kar-Ben/Lerner: mainly, that we were no longer living in the Pacific Northwest but were instead 10,000 miles away, in Ra’anana, Israel.

My husband and I had met more than two decades before at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and had spent nine years living in that wonderful, lovable, sometimes maddening place. Almost our entire immediate family had made aliyah-that is, moved to Israel, years before. We missed them, and we equally yearned for Zion. Although we enjoyed the laid-back lifestyle of Seattle, with its pastoral green landscape, dramatic mountains and numerous lakes, Israel was calling us home.

It is now two years since we returned to Israel, and Rachele, the original Rebecca, is now Israeli in addition to Jewish, American and Vietnamese. Since Israel is an exploding mélange of Jewish diversity, with its olive skinned and curly haired Moroccans and Yemenites, ivory toned and flaxen haired Russians, chocolate hued, graceful Ethiopians and now a whole slew of Bnei Menashe, who come from the Himalayas and bear a resemblance to Rachele, our daughter fits right in.

And when she happens upon a Hebrew word that she knows and we don't, and she rolls her eyes in exasperation, I know that her absorption into her new home is succeeding!

Rachele is thrilled with *Rebecca's Journey Home*, and loves to attend book readings and add her autograph to mine when I sign books. She is also proud of the fact that the book has won a Sydney Taylor Honor Award. The book and award have helped her to feel that being adopted is a cause for celebration, and that being different can be a wonderfully positive experience. I hope that other young, Jewish adoptees similarly find joy in knowing that there is a book out there written especially about them.