

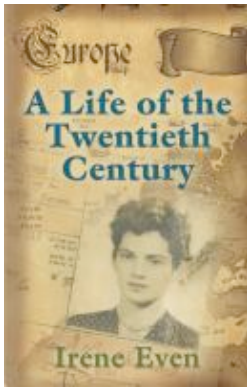
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A Life of the Twentieth Century



Irene Even



*A **Life of the Twentieth Century** is a fictionalized biography depicting the life of Aya, which started in a small village in the Carpathian Mountains. From there, she went to Budapest where she survived the Nazi occupation. After the war, she went to Palestine and experienced life in a Kibutz. Later, she immigrated to Canada where she graduated with a B.A. and a teacher's diploma from McGill University. Ava spent the rest of her life teaching.*

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ISBN 978-1-63263-435-1

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida.

Printed in the United States of America.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2014

First Edition



Chapter Twenty



In Aya's new home, gathered around the table were Lyn and Eitan and their families, as well as faithful Shoo-Shoo and Gabi, her old friend and master builder. Amongst all that she had newly acquired, this dining room suite held a special significance for her since around its ornate wooden table her entire family could be comfortably seated. She was 'home' at last—and fortunately, her return to Montreal had proved to be quite painless, the details having been so well planned that everything had fallen into place without a hitch. Her brand new condo was spotless and freshly painted; Eitan had even ordered a new living room suite for her as a surprise.

How often had she fantasized about a time when she would have her precious family with her, seated around a beautifully decorated table! That evening, for the first time in many years, Aya had them all—both children and grandchildren—as her guests of honor. It felt heartwarming to be able to receive them in her home. There was also Shoo-Shoo who had proved her loyalty since the beginning. She had sustained Aya's faith in herself, being—as she was—witness to her friend's struggle to cope with her University studies during that period of devastation in her life when she could barely concentrate on anything for more than two minutes at a time. As for Gabi, having been instrumental in the acquisition of this new condo, he was now Aya's trusted financial advisor. Dark-haired, energetic Shoo-Shoo with her

swift, incisive intelligence and Gabi with his mellow, good-natured manner of a ‘bonvivant’—both were long-standing allies and private witness to her darkest history, all the while remaining her staunchest friends.

Given the significance of the occasion, Aya had made a special effort for everything to be perfect. The table, spread with her hand-crocheted white tablecloth, was laden with platters of baked salmon, leafy salad dishes, olives, chestnuts, cheese croissants, lemon-glazed chicken, vegetarian fare and most importantly, her children’s favorite desert, blueberry pie. She felt that she must somehow mark the occasion, momentous as it was for her, so she raised a crystal glass of gold-colored wine and pronounced a toast.

“I’m so glad that you were all able to be here; for me, this is a dream come true,” she said, with the glimmer of a smile, perhaps also the hint of a tear. Painfully, her children kept their silence.

“Bienvenue au Québec,” said her son-in-law, half humorously, breaking the awkward lull, but Aya was too deliriously happy to be able to detect the secret tensions already mounting behind her children’s ‘iron curtain’ of dissembling. The dinner went seemingly well, but later on, as she lay awake into the night, Aya felt uneasy because she could sense that the children were present with her only in body, definitely not in soul. There was not even a hint of affection, nor anything personal in their behavior toward her. She tried to dismiss all of this by telling herself—*you’re only imagining that there’s something wrong*—but deep in her heart she knew that her uneasiness was more than justified.

Her final year in Israel hadn’t left her much time to contemplate her life, so involved had she been with the urgent tasks of making the transition possible. Only after arriving in Montreal did she begin to absorb and take stock of her new

reality. It was now that she finally had the leisure and—she hoped—the maturity to gain some philosophical understanding into what her whole life signified. In retrospect, she perceived herself as a minute speck in the vast universe, battling through storms with no one to rescue her. This she had learned to accept as the normal state of being; she reflected on how easily—how many times she might have been wiped out, obliterated, with not even a soul aware of her disappearance. Perpetually watching life from the outside, Aya had never ever truly felt part of it. All she could do was observe other people and their lives with a blend of curiosity and longing; within her, at the same time, was a recognition and acceptance that everyone else in the world existed inside this ‘magic circle’ while she remained forever *on the outside*. It was a sense of perpetual disconnection, of floating through a bleak universe without ever finding a place to be able to touch down.

The fact of not truly belonging to any country or any family denied her a sense of being, throwing her entire existence into question. Human beings, she realized, undergo essential experiences at an early age, from which they bear the marks and inevitable consequences forever. First impressions and early memories determine, even dominate, how we perceive ourselves and the world around us. Aya had never properly understood, nor appreciated the person she was, in part because she’d had so little leisure time for contemplation, given the urgent need for survival, while coping with the many crises throughout her life. Neither had she given credence to the notion that she was a person in her own right, with legitimate needs and desires; she’d never learned to demand anything for herself, in fact, she barely recognized the existence of a ‘Self.’

Even the recognition and appreciation she had received as a teacher in Israel did not suffice, for this was a remote recognition, recognition from the outside. It took her a long time to grasp the fact that only *self*-acknowledgement and *self*-respect were of any value, and these were by far the hardest for her to attain. All her life she had strived to do what she thought other people expected of her, hoping for their acceptance and approval. She never questioned the tumult, the unforeseen hammer-strokes of destiny; her only response was somehow to cope—whether by fight or by flight, something she managed extremely well from an early age. It took her many years to admit finally that all was not well with her life, and to realize that there was a being called ‘I’ who had to be acknowledged. This ‘I’ was the one person whose acceptance of herself was essential, whereas the expressed approval of others was secondary.

However, here was the eternal paradox; how could she achieve self-acknowledgement if her entire existence was in doubt? Again, this epiphany was long in coming but she understood, at last, that she had a legitimate right to desire certain things and to reject others. No one and nothing, after all, was more important than her ‘Self’ and her ‘Self-’ respect, and this did not constitute being egotistical or selfish. On the contrary, the more one respects oneself, the more one is able to attain genuine relationships, which means consciously and willingly giving oneself to others. Her children had been short-changed as well for, having a mother who failed to value herself, how could they learn to value her? At the same time she denied her children their rightful sense of identity, since she herself had been devoid of an identity for as long as she could remember. It pained her unspeakably to see Lyn and Eitan inheriting the same paradigm of destiny.

If there was one thing for which she would like to ask their forgiveness, it would be for not being a mother to whom they could turn for guidance, a mother who instilled in them a strong sense of identity, a sense of self-appreciation and a clear direction in life. This realization came upon her very gradually and if she acquired such wisdom, it was thanks to her doctor who'd begun to help her unearth these insights so many years before. Gradually she acknowledged the harsh truth—but it took some considerable time before she internalized it. This, then, was the essential lesson she needed to draw from life. It reminded her of the many times she had explained to her students that understanding is only the first step toward learning; it takes hard work—and the necessary passage of time—to convert this raw understanding into knowledge.

As Aya gained these insights she would have liked to share her thoughts with her children, but their visits were infrequent and a sense of malaise dominated all her encounters with them. The 'cold war' persisted all around her, the tension, the brooding silences, the deliberate refusal to open up and talk. She didn't expect miracles but, given that they were three intelligent people—her daughter, an artist, her son, a professor of psychology—surely they would be able to meet on common ground. It was not to be. She tried becoming philosophical about it, telling herself that at least they both seemed happy in their chosen lives. This was the most important to her, after all—so be it—she would have to content herself with this. Each morning began with the same brave-faced resolution, which rarely lasted the day. A few months after her return 'home,' Aya had no choice but to admit that her children simply didn't want her there. It was surreal—as was her reaction to it—for she began tearfully to confide in friends, sometimes even in total strangers, about

the continuing estrangement that existed between them. It was painful, it was irrevocable; her hopes of becoming even a small part of their lives had been thoroughly shattered.

So many years ago she had left for Israel with the benumbed air of a sleepwalker. Had she been awakened, surely she would have asked herself, *'What on earth am I doing?'* Was this the reason her children were still angry with her? Were they secretly resentful of her leaving? It was so hard to know, for at the time they had showed no outward sign. *Don't worry, Mom, we'll come to see you,* they'd said but, in fact, in perverse sympathy with their father—they had actually wished her away. And so she wandered off into the unknown, alone, not quite understanding what she was doing, with only one sustaining dream—to be able to return one day to reclaim her children and, later on, her grandchildren. Like someone sent out on 'mission impossible,' she had not been expected to survive. On that mission she had fought and won hundreds of battles, only to discover that she had lost the essential war. She was like the fortress of Masada itself, besieged and then abandoned. What did it profit her to return, laden with honors and medals, only to discover that Satan had conquered her homeland and her flesh- and-blood children had allied themselves with the winning side? Aya was now the one to be declared the *Enemy of State*—it was she the eternal outcast.

Once again her nights became sleepless, and her return to Montreal was transformed from dream-come-true into nightmare; once again she was reduced to seeking help from her psychiatrist, Dr. Taylor, the same doctor who had guided and supported her some twenty-two years before. Although she felt she had no choice in this—she simply couldn't cope with the latest blow all alone—she did experience a strong resistance to revisiting the nightmare terrain that she had tried

so hard to leave behind. For his part, Dr. Taylor continued to listen with gentleness and patience, leading her back through the convoluted pathways of her own history to help her understand how her own children could have turned against her. The process was slow and painful—the journey destined to be rugged and harsh—but, with her doctor's support, she re-entered her life as it was thirty-five years beforehand.

Time scrolled backward to when her children were still very young. To the casual viewer, her life had seemed so normal at the time. She and Mort looked like a happy couple, very much in love, at least, so they appeared on the outside, working hard, building a family, and tending their well-appointed houses. She earned kudos for taking care of her husband when he fell ill from time to time—a war wound, people whispered in compassion—which only added to Mort's cultivated mystique of martyr-like heroism. Energetic and strong in those early years, Aya had managed to keep the 'show on the road,' helping to foster the necessary illusion, maintaining a surface gloss of domesticity for the benefit of the outside world. No wonder everyone took it for granted that it would go on forever.

This was the life she had accidentally fallen into, and never did it occur to her that there was anything else to be hoped for. She was twice-bonded, both to him and to her children; there was no eluding this well-fastened trap. Despite the abhorrence she felt for the man who had abducted her as a young girl, she had grown to accept her fate as his lawful wife and mother of his children, as though the forces of Fate themselves *could not be questioned, unraveled or reversed*. There was no escape; she was yoked to a man afflicted by drug addiction and also diabolically skilled at camouflaging this grim truth under the pretense of chronic illness. Willingly he had undergone seven major surgical interventions for no

legitimate reason whatsoever—Aya still shuddered at the memory. In those days, whenever she succumbed to morbid thoughts, she feared death only because she couldn't bear the prospect of Mort left in complete charge of their innocent children. How many times after all were they left, deserted during the evening meal, as Mort staggered upstairs to his Nirvana of drugs! She had tried so hard to fill the void, to relieve the fraught family atmosphere by talking and listening to her children for hours. When Mort's creditors harassed her for failed payment of bills, she gave what little she could spare from her own savings, anything to avoid humiliation or yet another confrontation with him.

But as the years elapsed, Aya felt herself eroding from the inside out—slowly but surely, losing her grip on reality. Like an automaton, she continued to function on the strength of will and habit. Everything still appeared normal on the outside; all the domestic necessities were being looked after, yet she felt she was being secretly transformed. Her metamorphosis became most apparent when Lyn and Eitan reached their teens. She recalled how she did everything she could to send her children away from home. They were encouraged to embark on all kinds of excursions. Eitan went off camping at a very early age and became a camp counselor. He also went on a student exchange program to western Canada and a study trip to Switzerland. Like Aya, he even traveled to Israel to work on a Kibbutz.

Only much later did she realize that, prompted by her subconscious longing for escape, she had spirited her children away instead.

Mort continued to be obsessed with his 'sickness,' his doctors, hospitals and drugs, while at the same time—incredible though it may seem—amassing a stockpile of money, wealth that was never theirs but exclusively his.

Meanwhile, more and more alone, Aya spent wakeful nights downstairs in their desolate lounge, keeping her hands and brain monotonously occupied with quilting bedspreads, crocheting elaborate banquet- style tablecloths, and sweaters and dresses for Lyn. Her growing daughter was proving herself to be very enterprising, as well; she got a job at Martha's Vineyard, intending to save up a couple of thousand dollars that summer but arrived home instead, full of adventures to relate—and stony broke. Eitan went off to University that year, and some time later Lyn entered McGill. She studied for two years, then abruptly quit, broke away and headed for—of all places—Afghanistan.

Aya's final collapse came once the children had both left home and she was left completely alone with Mort. She had so little recollection of those days, beyond the few isolated images that remain—Lyn coming home to visit them one day and crying, *'Mom, what's wrong, why don't you talk to Dad?'* Had she stopped talking to Mort by then? She couldn't remember. After all, she was still up and about on her feet, single-handedly maintaining two houses and the ritualistic régime of her thrice-a- week swim. No one appeared to notice the morbid, vacant quality to her gaze and that, for no apparent reason, her weight had dropped to ninety pounds. It was only once she fainted in the restaurant that the whole world became alert and concerned about her condition. There followed the doctor's diagnosis and—against all Mort's blustering protestations—the enforced consultation with a psychiatrist.

"I felt as though the rug had just been pulled out from under me," said Mort, when he heard the word 'divorce,' and this for once expressing the truth of his heart.

How true—she thought—during all those years that I made your life soft, all you did was trample on me.

Now, lapsed into her own sickness, Aya recognized the shell of a human being that was Mort. There was no soul, and there was no substance; nor was there truth. His embarrassingly grandiose tales of his ‘millionaire’ family had no basis in reality. It became clear that his shameless boasting and his perpetual self-absorption were never going to change. By contrast, her own disconnection with reality was of another order. It was both blessing and curse. Under the protection of some ‘spiritual anesthesia,’ she was able to break away from Mort and forge an independent existence for herself. At the same time, due to that same sense of disconnection, she mindlessly relinquished whatever claim she had to their shared possessions, even to her cherished lakeshore lot in the Adirondacks and later, unforgivably, *even her own children*. She had never thought it possible to lose their loyalty, even during her years of numb, emotionless disconnection. She had always taken it for granted that they were hers and would always be hers, forever close to her heart.

With the help of her doctor Aya was able to re-enter those years and get a glimpse of what the children must have seen and certainly not understood—after all, they were only children. Lyn and Eitan, having been forcibly yanked out of a life of plenty, suddenly found themselves destitute, with their ‘sick’ father on skid row and their mother seemingly having embraced her own second childhood, totally obsessed as she was with her University studies and her new life. They could have no idea of the torment of her daily existence, of her inability to concentrate, to read and understand her class notes or even listen to lectures. They could not have imagined that she had no plans whatsoever for the future, that only the present moment counted and nothing else. While they were struggling to earn money simply for food and shelter, their

mother was spending her evenings in nightclubs where she picked up men from time to time and—if her memory doesn't fail her—told her daughter all about it as well. They may have had next-to-nothing to live on during that time, but their mother—seemingly on a capricious whim—vanished without warning on a fortnight's luxury cruise vacation, without even a single word.

Unaware of the many years of deliberate secrecy and degradation, thoroughly protected from the grim reality of it all, her two beautiful children had not developed the coping skills necessary to deal with the eruption of this 'sudden' family crisis. There was Mort, denying them any financial aid, determined—confronted with the finality of the divorce—that everything he owned in the world was his and his alone. Where was the mother who had assured her children that she would be there for them always? Broken down beneath the weight of it all, she was only dimly aware that the burden had subsequently fallen upon them. As the early weeks then the months passed, in her euphoric state of liberated disconnection, she virtually forgot Mort's very existence. Eitan and Lyn rarely spoke of him; Aya deliberately never inquired. *You are the only divorced person I know who never talks about her ex-husband or the past*, remarked one of her friends. It wasn't difficult—in fact, it was necessary for her own survival; she automatically wiped Mort from her memory the very moment she made her escape.

In time, transported to the 'unreal' world of Sderot in Israel, Aya gradually lost touch with what was transpiring amongst the 'diaspora' of her family in Montreal. In her absence, Mort assumed the permanent rôle of victim of an ungrateful woman who had abandoned him because of his 'sickness.' He began to lean heavily on his children as only

he could do. At that time, totally submerged in his drug addiction, he was living in the squalor of a cockroach-infested apartment with no one to turn to but Lyn and Eitan. Unsurprisingly, the burden on them became overwhelming. On certain days if they caught sight of Mort approaching their place, they would scuttle out the back door in an effort to avoid him. Most often, though, they had no choice but to try to respond to his abject need for assistance and sympathy. They listened—perhaps in silence—to his tirades that went on painfully for hours. In absentia, Aya became transformed to a heartless demon in their eyes. She should have realized that this was going to happen, but she did not. Had she been able to understand things better then, she'd have realized that her children were doing exactly what she had done all the years they were growing up—that is, taking care of 'poor daddy,' at all costs.

Naturally she would be blamed for all that happened to 'poor daddy' after she left, she who had always been fit, strong, and in control. Suddenly, callously, there she was—leaving her children to fend, not only for themselves but for their benighted father as well. Of course, not a soul in the universe would attribute the least blame to Mort himself; he got away—almost literally—with murder (she knew she couldn't have survived indefinitely, had she remained chain-locked at his side). Yet no one held him in the least accountable. He was allowed to continue to commit the most unspeakable crimes against her and her children; meanwhile, half way around the globe, exiled in an alien country, she was waging the toughest battle for survival of her life.

The reality of losing her children's affection didn't get any easier, but a better understanding of the underlying reasons made her more accepting, and also helped restore her faith in their innate goodness. By gaining deeper insight, she

learned to truly exonerate them and assume the blame herself, if need be, since they could not be held accountable for a situation created by their parents before their birth. Her psychiatrist helped her to accept that children always remain children, vis-à-vis their parents, regardless of age. In an indirect way, even if by default, she herself had helped to create a situation that caused them years of hardship and suffering and, for this, they'd been completely unprepared. After a while she stopped asking the painful question, why had they rejected her? In time she was better able to withstand the desolation, the dreadful emptiness of her heart. Reaching backward, she tried to retrieve the memory of the warmth and love they had given her naturally from the moment they were born. It was that love that had kept her going during the many storms of her existence. Once again she could feel proud of her children and her grandchildren, who happen to be the most beautiful people in this world.

Then, for the first time, Aya began to probe for answers that had eluded her throughout her adult life. Why was it that—from the moment Mort first crossed her path in Italy, luring her away under the pretext of showing her the sights, then seducing and parading her publicly through that squalid military camp—she had never once protested, nor even thought to question her fate? Granted she was very young and so she could forgive herself, *the first time*, for having fallen victim to the man. Not only had he plotted and schemed to get what he wanted from her, but also he had the 'chutzpah' to announce their engagement to the whole camp without so much as requesting her consent. Why had she allowed him to behave as though he owned her, taking brutal advantage of her innocence and youth, while both taking—and deserting her in disgrace, the stain of which would live with her forever? What she could never comprehend, much less

forgive, was the fact that two years after her first encounter with Mort, she had allowed him to reclaim her like a forgotten package, wresting complete control over her life without her even uttering a whisper of dissent. What was it that made her mind and body become paralyzed by the force of his presence? As soon as he arrived at the Kibbutz, he wasted no time before leading her into a deserted field where he pushed her to the ground to satisfy his bestial needs. Not a word was exchanged between them. How could she have even put a name to such an act? What had given him the right to claim ownership of her life, then lead her away like a lamb to be sacrificed on the altar of his psychopathic needs?

If at least she could put it down to stupidity, it might have been easier but—on the contrary—she had always considered herself to be extremely intelligent. Delving back into her earliest conscious years, she relived the emotions of her childhood, the early isolation from her natural family, then being thrown in with a tribe of pseudo-relations who wanted no part of her. Despite, or even because of this, she excelled all the way through school, a formative epoch in her life in which her inner and outer world split apart, forming a radical schism: her private tormented ‘Self’ fronted by her public intellectual ‘Self,’ devoid of feeling. It matter little how well she coped with the daunting challenges, nor did it matter what honors and public recognition she had received during her lifetime, Aya carried that fragile tormented self within her always.

It was this same tormented young girl of twelve who was sent to Budapest to confront the world on her own and who, a few years later, was forced to endure the terrors and hardships of the war. Ironically, living so intensely from day to day, battling for each moment of survival, she was able to avoid—or at least defer any contemplation of her inner self. In a

strange way, these tumultuous times brought with them their own relief, for Aya could steadfastly elude her inner snake-pit of suppressed conflict. Instead—publicly—she created for herself a life of ideas, becoming immersed in ideologies, social concerns, world politics, Zionism, gradually demonstrating acute knowledge and understanding of these issues. She became known as the one who invariably came up with the right answers or knew how to ask the right questions. This was because she involved herself in what was going on around her, engaging in—sometimes even leading intellectual discussions with her friends and comrades, despite the fact that she was often the youngest among them.

All this was going on—before Mort chanced to cross her path.

It took years of searing reflection before Aya had to acknowledge—finally—that Mort's reappearance in her life that fateful day at the Kibbutz had hurled her violently back to the powerlessness of her childhood—perhaps even of her infancy. With one blow he managed to wipe out all that she had diligently accomplished in the intervening years. He was the one who reawakened the fearfully obedient, tormented child she once was. He—with the gut instinct of the brute—must somehow have sensed it in her. Was it written all over her body, could it be interpreted so easily in the expression of her eyes? Somehow, unmistakably, he recognized her secret infantile weakness and the ease with which he would be able to take over her life.

Still, the question remains how was it possible for this man to have invaded and poisoned her very essence? Who was he? Was he a mastermind, a 'James-Bond' style villain with a diabolical master plan of pillage and destruction? The answer was definitely no. So what was he then? In the final analysis, he was insignificant. He was a man who existed and

fed on deceit, a man who hadn't the slightest regard for the truth. He was a man who did not recognize or acknowledge the existence of other people, except as in relation to himself. He was a man, devoid of self-esteem, who compensated for it by reinventing both his public image and private self-image. Around him he raised a dry-rot edifice of lies and deceptions, and this was the hard coin upon which he mounted his empire of material wealth. Of course, it became essential for him to believe in his own counterfeit coinage—and perhaps, in the end, he genuinely did. Paradoxically, it was only Aya who knew the real man—the one who was afraid of his own shadow, who was fearful of going anywhere or doing anything alone, who had never had a true friend, and whose crowning ambition was to line his living gravesite with dollar bills.

How was it possible, then, that Aya had tolerated all his abuses without protest? The answer was slow in coming but finally it became clear. As Mort, cunning and rapacious, led her through that hell so many years ago, somehow she must have reverted to the five-year-old child she once was, feeling defenseless, eclipsed and entirely without protection. Once he vanished from the scene, she had managed to rouse herself back to normality. In all likelihood, she would have continued to do so, but for the fateful moment when he reappeared in her orbit, and she recognized and responded to his unspoken hold over her—with a kind of dread. Why hadn't she questioned what was happening? Why did she do all that was demanded of her? Why didn't she say no—why hadn't she simply walked away?

After twenty years of living side by side with Mort's mortal sickness, his drug addiction, Aya was close to extinction herself. She remembered feeling nothing but relief as she reached the very end of her strength; at least she would

no longer be forced to go on. *I don't want to take any pills*, she'd said, believing that her doctor was simply trying to drug, and then marshal her back to her marital 'duty.' Surely, it wasn't possible that the physicians had *her* best interests at heart! Meanwhile, alarmed that Aya wanted a divorce, Mort was already cunningly trying to steer her 'into care.' She remembered later on, with a sense of bemused wonder, how she'd actually welcomed the notion of being committed, if that meant finally being able to break away from him.

With anger and shame she recalled how long it took her to make the final break herself. After all, she had never loved Mort. There was no sense of respect, no sentimental attachment, just a lingering servility, an unquestioning bondage to a man who had done nothing to merit or earn it. And so she had to acknowledge her part in her own misfortune. Mort had no real power; he had just taken, although in the guise of robbery, what was freely offered to him. Not only did he not have any true power—he was, in fact, the essence of weakness. For decades Aya believed in the legend of his war wound until a cousin revealed that Mort had never been injured and, furthermore, he had never even served on the front line. Instead he had spent most of the war years languishing in hospitals, claiming to be sick and consuming powerful drugs for his pain. Ironically, by the time Aya discovered the truth, she had already left it all behind—and it really didn't matter any more.

This retrospective journey into her childhood helped her to recognize and honor the little girl who still lived on inside her, the one who had been abused, crushed, shamed and made to feel shameful—of herself and of her family. Despite all this, it was this same little girl who picked herself up and kept going. It was she who studied diligently although no one seemed to care a trifle about her achievements. Later on, it

was she who managed a household against all odds and, after the final breakup; it was again she who pulled herself together and made things happen in her life. If ever there was a heroine of this saga, it was the tenacious little girl who refused to give up.

Having found certain answers to the enigma, the search for inner peace still eluded her, despite all attempts to resolve the conflicts of her present and her past. Aya's doctor proposed a new experimental method of therapy, which she rejected—at first sight—on a number of grounds. Not only was it more intensive and more costly, despite being uncertain, but it was also a precarious step into the unknown. Clearly, all she had accomplished in her life would be meaningless unless she could reach the equilibrium of inner peace, beyond the quest for mere survival. Nevertheless, she feared the very notion of relinquishing control, of succumbing to the debilitating force of rage and buried trauma. Only when it became evident that the traditional therapy was no longer working, did she decide to give the new method a chance.

As of the first session, Aya achieved a sense of peace and tranquility that she had never experienced before in her life. Her mind normally bombarded with conflicting images and thoughts became peaceful. The perpetual knot in her stomach that felt like a malignant tumor was suddenly eased. "Am I competent to carry on?" she asked; despite the initial sense of disorientation, even disconnection, she realized that this tranquil state of existence was entirely unknown to her. After several additional sessions, she felt more focused. She regained her sense of direction as well as a feeling of inner freedom, which she wished to retain at all cost. Inner peace can be understood simply as the absence of inner turmoil, but

inner freedom is far more dynamic—it is an active energy that is creative and alive.

Even though these exhilarating moments could be transitory, they remained in her memory as something to strive for. If she could draw on her reserves of inner strength, this desired state-of-being would always be within her reach. At this moment in her life she was in transition; she also had the rare luxury of being able to reflect peacefully on what she wanted to do. Faced with an infinite array of choices, she found herself back in school, signing up at l'Université de Montréal for a French language course where she succeeded in accumulating fifteen credits within the year. Then Lyn brought her attention to the McGill Institute for Learning in Retirement Program, the MILR. When Aya read the prospectus, she felt like a kid let loose in a candy store; her first choice was a course entitled 'Search for Meaning,' the next was, 'Write the Story of Your Life.'

"Would you like to read us something, Aya?" asked the instructor, with an encouraging smile. It was a friendly workshop atmosphere of sharing, discussion and critique. How was she going to summon up the courage to reveal her private thoughts and reveries in public? Aya tried reading aloud her first piece, but choked up almost at the very start. As the weeks passed, it got a little easier and finally she started to write her autobiography, something she had thought of doing many times before. The work became too intimate and too painful however and, after the first semester, she quietly dropped out of the course. Privately, she continued the writing in earnest.

Writing was a new experience for her, untried and strange and some days, facing the proverbial 'blank page' she had no idea what to write about. Then there were those difficult moments, coming face to face with the part of her life that she

had been running away from forever. Yet, having begun the mammoth task of encapsulating her life's experience in words, she knew there was no turning back. The text flowed almost like spurts of automatic handwriting. A notepad was left open on the desk for her to jot down any stray thoughts as they emerged. Sometimes she even got up in the dead of night and switched on her computer without having the slightest idea what she was going to write about. Once the words began to flow, however, they seemed to emerge effortlessly from the tips of her fingers. Not so, those passages which touched on buried traumas that she dared not speak, or even think of—these were the times when her writing became rattled, disconnected, repetitious and judgmental. She couldn't continue for long stretches at a time because she became too upset. The effort exhausted her beyond description and she could rarely bring herself to re-read anything that she had written. Opening that forbidden door threatened to release all the fanged demons of her past. It both terrified and demoralized her. Yet, writing these memoirs did eventually become the center of her focus and, as the pages increased in number, her narrative assumed a life of its own.

It was no longer just her story; it became the story of a life of the Twentieth Century, an epoch that brought incredible advances in science, technology, space travel and communication, while unleashing the spectacular savagery of its two global wars. In the act of setting down her story, Aya became both spectator and participant. Her character, the little girl who had lived through and witnessed such extraordinary times, became like an entity apart—as, ironically, Aya had always been, in some fashion, from the start. As the narrative grew and took shape, it seemed more and more to be about people, places and events that were entirely new to her, as fascinating as if she were hearing them for the first time.

With an on-going effort of the will, Aya succeeded in forging a busy and comfortable life in retirement, a life centered on her writing, her studies, playing social bridge with close friends, rambling on the mountain and enjoying her ritual swim. Was this sufficiently meaningful, though? In time, she felt that she needed to do more. Volunteering to help out at a nearby community center for Sri Lankan immigrants, she discovered that teaching young people still worked its magic for her. Just as in Israel, she would always leave the classroom with a feeling of accomplishment, a sense of well-being and a smile on her face.

Having dared to set out on her own personal odyssey into the past, Aya decided to embark on another adventure, a voyage into Roman antiquity. She headed off on a group tour of southern Italy, the cities of Sorrento, Naples, Capri and, most awesome of all, the ruins of Pompeii. How to do justice to this phenomenon—the experience of actually treading among the remains of an embalmed city? Covered by dust and rock from the eruptions of Mount Vesuvius, it had preserved the character of its two-thousand-year-old existence by means of an atrocious and final freeze-frame—a diabolical act of Mother Nature. It was a ‘live action shot,’ more of a documentary than a city. Everywhere were signs of wealth, intellectual achievement, high culture and leisure, yet tainted by evidence of the cruelest of public entertainment—a race of enslaved gladiators, sacrificial ‘superstars’ chained indefinitely to their quarters, released only to fight to the death.

Naples she found to be a tired city, beset with innumerable problems, whose only glory seemed to belong to the past—a host of fabulous museums and palaces where art, history, tradition and culture are preserved on display for the benefit of mankind. They visited Capri, the island

romanticized by so many writers and artists known to Western culture. They traveled along the Amalfi Coast, considered to be the most beautiful coastline in Europe, and walked to the village of Positano with its unique shops filled with locally crafted merchandise—a beautiful pair of jeans, in particular, that she bought for her granddaughter, Marianne.

The group's permanent residence was in picturesque Sorrento where they attended a series of lectures on the sites they were scheduled to see. There were on-going discussions on the problems of the South compared with those of the North, within the wider context of Italian society in general, both present and past. Aya returned home after the voyage in an elated state of mind, having discovered once again that life can be beautiful despite—and even with its imperfections.

Reaching the end of this tale of *'A Life of the Twentieth Century,'* she would like to express thanks to her doctor, not for saving her life, because the life she had wasn't worth saving. She would like to thank him for helping her to discover things about herself that were unknown to her, and for encouraging her to face the many challenges of the years ahead. It is difficult to do justice to the profound impact his guidance has had on her over a lifetime. The turning point was when he asked, 'What do you want to do?' It was the simplest question imaginable but, for Aya, it was an opening portal, the possibility of change, the beginning of a journey to a life worth living. Until that moment, she had been beyond hope. She had given up on her life—on life in general—and it did not matter in the slightest what would happen to her; she had, in fact, given herself up for dead. This is why the timing of that question was so vital. Had it occurred any later, it might well have been too late. 'What do *you* want to do?' he had asked.

'Nothing,' she'd responded at first, and then a few days later—in a fragile voice from somewhere deep inside, she said, *'I want to go back to school.'*

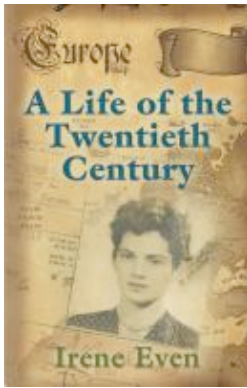
Even now it seems incredible that, at a time when nothing mattered to her any more, such a notion should have entered her mind. She no longer cherished any hopes or dreams—except perhaps this one; deep within her subconscious, she must have clung onto this sole desire. After all, school was one of the few experiences that left her with good memories; it was the only place where she had achieved anything of which to be proud. A few days later, she had already enrolled in an evening class at Sir George Williams. Of course, at that time, with no fixed plans, no ambitions or goals in mind, she could not have known what her passionate desire for learning would eventually achieve. Nevertheless, this was the first step of a stupendous journey through University and beyond; it was her buried dream of childhood reawakened and realized.

‘Aya, tell me, how do you feel about it?’ This was another of the doctor’s questions that left an indelible mark.

‘Well, I think—’

‘No, don’t tell me what you think, just tell me how you feel—’

At first, she hadn’t understood what he meant; his questions left her puzzled. It took her such a long time to be able to feel things again. Feelings were painful, after all; yet it was only by revisiting—and transcending her pain that she understood she was gradually being reconnected to the human race. Again, she would like to express her gratitude; in this final act of writing her life story, it is appropriate to acknowledge the support of her doctor, without whom she wouldn’t have had a life to write about.



*A **Life of the Twentieth Century** is a fictionalized biography depicting the life of Aya, which started in a small village in the Carpathian Mountains. From there, she went to Budapest where she survived the Nazi occupation. After the war, she went to Palestine and experienced life in a Kibutz. Later, she immigrated to Canada where she graduated with a B.A. and a teacher's diploma from McGill University. Ava spent the rest of her life teaching.*

A Life of the Twentieth Century

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