

By Isabelle Hauswald

Dear Nelee, Chère Nelee,

When the “Spiritual Counselor” came to visit you a few weeks before you passed away and when he asked you if you thought there is a life after death, you responded, in a confident manner “NO”! The response was unequivocal. You did not believe there is anything after death. The Counselor then said, “Well, I think we can deal with that” and you went on having the most wonderful conversation with him!

Today, because I am writing directly to you, because we are all here to celebrate your life, because I want to believe that there is something after death after all and that, dear Nelee, you are here, among all of us to listen to what we are remembering about you, about your wonderful life, about what a wonderful person you were!

We met in March 1992, our oldest son, Philippe, was almost three years old and Johann, our youngest one was nine months old. You were looking for somebody to help you correcting essays in French. You had also this project of writing a text book. We immediately connected and worked well together. Despite the difference in age, you could have been my mother after all, our friendship developed very fast.

You started telling me your story, how you grew up in Paris, what you had been through during the war, that you had been hidden in Chabanais, 100 kms from Limoges, my hometown in France. I listened to what happened so close to the place where I grew up years later, to facts and details that one never can find in history books. You told me how you learned all the catholic prayers in the convent where you spent some time with Mina, your sister. You used to laugh about the fact that you knew all of them by heart while you never learned the Jewish rituals, you were saying “I don’t know! It’s just too much!” You told me about your life, a wonderful, rich, fascinating, and scary one at times.

After I left Stanford, we always stayed in touch, getting closer despite the distance. You became my confident over the years, always listening, never judging, and always being positive and supportive,

“never a dull moment” as you would say frequently commenting about my recently complicated life!

When I moved back to Maryland ten years ago, you started staying at my house, when visiting Mina. You would always bring dried apricots from the Palo Alto market for Philippe and Johann. I am eating the very last ones you gave me last October as I am writing to you at this moment. I kept those to give me the strength to write to you, to tell you all of this.

In July when I came to visit we had so much fun together with Jenny and Debra, enjoying every single minute of the precious moments we spent together. We laughed, joked, drank some wine, and held hands. We already knew...

The girls called you the Queen! You handled all the details in preparation of your life coming to an end with such a dignity, and a clear mind, handling all requests of friends who wanted to visit, never turning them away even when you were tired. Your room kept filling with flowers, love and life until the very end.

You are my best friend!