

A Letter to my German Great Grandfather, Georg Leonhardt Rengert (1838-1925)

From Maggie (Margaret Elizabeth) Rengert born 27 May 1947

I expect they welcomed you here in England, when you first came over, along with so many of your fellow countrymen. You travelled on that big boat, with just your brother, I believe, probably not much more than teenagers, in the eighteen hundreds. You were needed here, and I think your family may have been experiencing poverty in Germany. Your dad made boots in Hamburg. I wonder how you got on with him, given that I've sensed a distance, certainly a lack of physical warmth between father and son handed down right through to my own late brother.

You must have had a good business head on your shoulders; you started up butchers' shops in south-east London, where I still live, and most of your sons went into the business, owning their own shops. Rengert's sausages came to be known internationally. How hard you must have worked. Perhaps you had resolved never to go back. Maybe your steely determination to succeed in this foreign land coloured your whole attitude and outlook on life. I think you were strict with your children, although the face I see in your picture looks kindly.

You made a lot of money, but you were deeply religious, a Methodist, and I believe most of your profit went to the church. I know that you never allowed Granddad (Andrew) a light on at night, and his whole life he remained terrified of the dark. Mealtimes were prefaced with passages from the Scriptures. The only books in the house were the Bible and the Meat Trades Journal. Dad (Cyril) remembered you in an olive green velvet smoking jacket and cap, great grandmother swathed in black lace. Dad used to put your slippers on for you. He was rather scared of you, his granddad. Fancy that.

I'm either too sad or too lazy to look into all the nitty gritty of dates and details, like some of the family, who caught up with me on the internet, but I think you must have lain awake at night yourself, worrying for your family, as you witnessed the storm clouds of war building over England. I suppose you couldn't have foreseen how your very name, and the success which drew people to your door, ('Hot Beef and Pork dishes supplied every evening at six o' clock' says the tattered old card in my drawer) was to turn England so cruelly against you and your family. Did you live to regret the day you and your wife chose to name one of your boys Fritz (Friedrich)?

'Look out for your German neighbour', 'the only good German is a dead German' became popular

cries. Germans were supposed to have been poisoning the food of the English. It seems you were treated as enemy aliens. I hear echoes of these old sentiments, even now. While visiting my friend in hospital, a stressed and overworked nurse on the ward was being rude to a patient. The patient in the next bed turned to me, hand cupped to her mouth, and whispered conspiratorially, and with obvious disdain, "She's German, you know".

I happened to ask my friend, during one of our chats, if she'd ever heard of the Rengerts. I had only known Gwen a year, and was still using my married name, then. Gwen was ninety five. "Oh yes," she said. "It's funny, but do you know, this past year or so, that picture of Mr and Mrs Rengert in the butchers shop next to the Middle Woolwich Arsenal gate keeps coming into my mind. Now why do you think that is? How could I ever forget his lovely, red cheeks, I can see him now, his big smiling face looking down at me. I was only about four", she said, "running errands for my mother. And his wife used to come out from the back to say hello. She had glasses on, and her hair tied back in a bun. Lovely people, they were. Everyone liked them."

"That was my family", I said. Gwen was blind, but she must have sensed my growing excitement; even joy, I suppose, albeit tinged with some trepidation as to what might follow, as my friend continued to add flesh to the bones of my family story. "Well, it was so sad what happened to them" she said. "I just couldn't believe it. I used to listen to my mother talking about it. They all started attacking the shop; smashed all the glass, they did, trying to get in, trying to get at them. It was horrible. They had to hide in their refrigeration unit. I never even knew they were German."

I imagine your son, my great uncle, and his wife, cowering in the icy chill of that place, seeking what refuge they could amid those bloody carcasses. She may not even have had a German bone in her body. Naturally, given the circumstances of the First World War, I can understand why you all bore the brunt of the fear which so easily turns into loathing and hatred. And England was suffering a lot of poverty at that time. It must have added salt to the wound to see German-named businesses thriving. I can see why German butchers became a particular target. And the authorities often turned a blind eye. I witness the same sort of attitude now, where people of Muslim faith become feared and persecuted. Did your religion help you and your family through those times? Were you able to forgive the hurts you and your family suffered?

Granddad said in his diary "we were not a happy or united family". There were thirteen children. In the family Bible, only twelve names appear around the sides of the first page of text. You added that you now had your 'full quiver'. Andrew, my granddad became the thirteenth, and apparently always felt unwanted. His main solace in life was his violin, and he loved words, and poetry.

Granddad didn't go into the family business, and chose a series of different professions. I believe he was a cabinet maker for a time. But still he was frequently attacked, both physically and verbally, for bearing your name. I remember being told he was beaten up quite badly outside Cannon Street station one morning, on his way to work. He had two children, but though there are pictures of him with his sister Aunt Dora, there are none of him with my dad. Dad never really said much about his dad to me; I don't think they were ever close. Dad, too, put his soul into his music, playing the 'cello, and always listening to Radio Three.

I am a great grandmother myself, now, and as I peer deep into your face in that photo, and study the face of my own great grandmother, Emma, as well as your dress, I try to take in all your features. As I study the cast of your eye, the curve of your nose, which looks a bit like mine, you don't seem as distant to me as I always imagined you were, when I was a child. I reach out to know you, to understand you, and as I do, I get more of a sense of your being, somehow, within me. Things that have happened to me make me sure that genetic memories linger in every cell.

I'm convinced I was born carrying some innate sense of shame, which has been passed down through the generations; perhaps my brother felt the same, and it may have contributed to his alcoholism; though mum's Catholic upbringing, and the guilt we felt over anything connected with the body, has to take some credit for that, I'm sure. I think my brother yearned to feel Dad's love and approval. I expect Granddad did. Maybe you did, too.

Getting to know you helps me to understand myself better. Finding out about you, and the rest of the family, helps the knot of shame that binds us all to slowly loosen. I learn to like you. I think it is because of you that I feel rooted in this area. It is one of the most multicultural in London, I believe, and I think most of us here celebrate that. I wonder if this was the atmosphere that prevailed locally when you first started up, so full of enthusiasm. Your story gives me a particular reason for embracing the cultures of the new immigrants to our area; all the new shops springing up. I learn about new vegetables and fruit; herbs and spices from across the globe, and different celebrations, like Diwali. We have Polish grocers locally, and a Halal butchers just down the road; though I don't eat meat, I'm afraid.

I wish I knew more about the lives of the women in our family, and how they were affected by what went on in the wider world. I know Gran and Granddad hated Dad marrying mum, such was the strength, at that time, of anti-Catholic feeling. The story goes that you married General Gordon's cook. I know that one of your daughters always wiped the taps before turning them on. She suffered from what was then called 'neurasthenia'. Of your sons, I know one committed suicide by walking into the sea at Southend. Fritz had to turn himself into John.

I expect you all just tried to make the best of it, get on with your own business, but how hard it must have been to bear your name. You didn't change it, though, did you? I think you might have been sensitive enough to feel terrible about what was happening in Germany, and may have done what you could do make whatever recompense was in your power. Since my divorce, I have taken back your name. Atrocities are being committed by my government in places like Iraq, yet I hate the thought of its many victims thinking it acts in my name.

I think you threw yourself into the life of the church, and it seems you did become heavily involved in politics. You were a staunch member of the British Labour Party. I wonder what you would think of it now. I always knew Dad's family to be Labour people. Your big house not far from where I live was used as the Labour Committee Rooms. My dad told me he was just a baby, with scarlet fever, locked away in a cot upstairs when Ramsay Macdonald came to tea, a memory shared by my aunt. Carpet was lain outside to deaden the noise for dad. I don't know how effective that would have been. Horses must have brayed in their stables outside, awaiting summons to and from Smithfield Meat Market. That house was eventually destroyed by a high explosive bomb in the Second World War.

Your money, along with that of other local businessmen, built a Wesleyan chapel in William Street, Woolwich for the families of the soldiers stationed at the garrison of the nearby Royal Artillery. My aunt remembered it becoming your family's place of worship. It is now a beautiful Sikh temple. I visited one Sunday afternoon, along with another of your great grandchildren, Brian Ash, and his son David. We were given the warmest of welcomes. Brian, a vicar, had held a Church of England service that very morning. We took our shoes off as we entered and were shown around. A large, white-painted stone outside is chiselled through with your name: 'Mr Rengert'.

I hope that you had your own joys; that you found happiness, even though I know nothing of the rays of light in your life, which must have been hard in ways that could never have been anticipated when, as a young man, you travelled across that sea on your great adventure. Full of hope, perhaps some fear, but willing yourself, I'm sure, to make your own way in the world. Did you feel you could never return? I loved my granddad dearly, and I know that he ploughed his own furrow, too, as did my own father, whom I loved dearly; my ex-husband told me he was the nicest man he'd ever met. Dad's Holy Bible sits here on my desk in front of me. It is inscribed: 'To Cyril Rengert, on the occasion of his retirement as verger from the Royal Military Academy Chapel, Woolwich'. That chapel was housed within the grounds of the very garrison whose families were called to prayer by your own building.

I think that your name and your life's work and purpose, to God's glory, might be etched into those who came after you, in ways that extend far beyond my understanding. You were a man, doing your

very best as you saw it, I am sure, with whatever tools you had, amidst struggles I can only imagine. I think I can be proud of whatever legacy you, and your family, have passed down to me, and which passes in some way right through to my own dear great grandson, even though, from Earth's vantage point, I may not live to see him grow into a man.

From your great granddaughter,

Margaret