

Personal Connections

While I was fearfully deciding whether or not to develop my early notions for *Charity Girl* into a novel, I was browsing through a used bookstore on Cape Cod and happened upon *The Story of the Massachusetts Committee on Public Safety*, published at the end of World War I. Curious to know if girls had been detained in Massachusetts, I was pleased (if that's the right word) to find a chapter about the ominously named Massachusetts Committee on Prevention of Social Evils Surrounding Military Camps. My pleasure turned to a fateful tingle when I saw, on the list of committee members, the name of A.C. Ratshesky, my great-grandfather Max's first cousin. I had heard of this cousin, and knew vaguely that he'd been politically prominent, but had no idea that he'd been involved in the anti-vice campaign. I took the coincidence as a sign that a novel on this subject should be written, and that I should be the one to write it.

Finding this family connection allowed me to start imagining the story on a personal, not just historical, level. I decided that one of the novel's characters would be a wealthy Jewish businessman like my great-grandfather Max, and that he would live in a grand house like the one Max had built in the year America entered World War I. My mother had often pointed out this house when she visited Boston — a house in which she had eaten a formal family dinner every Sunday of her childhood, but which had passed out of our family long before I was born. Now I contacted the house's current owner, who was kind enough to invite a stranger to tour the place. It was gorgeous, all mahogany and marble, with Palladian windows and a sweeping bridal staircase.

What would it have been like, I wondered, to live in such opulence, even as most Americans were sacrificing so much for the war in Europe? And what would it have been like especially for a girl of a lower social class who suddenly found herself in this kind of place? My mother's mother had been such a girl: she grew up poor on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, dropped out of school when she was barely in her teens in order to support her family, then fell in unlikely love with a well-to-do Bostonian — Max's son — who brought her home to the lavish house I was now touring. I decided to give my main character my grandmother's name, Frieda. As I was writing, I often asked myself:

What would my grandmother's life have been like if everything *hadn't* worked out with my grandfather?

Setting it in Massachusetts

Although the majority of the government's detention homes were located in southern states, my personal connections were steering me toward locating the novel in Massachusetts. It's the place I know best, and the place where, because it holds my own family's history, history comes alive for me. Plus, the novel would be set in 1918, and as every red-blooded New Englander knows, 1918 was a magical year in Bay State history: the last year the Red Sox won the World Series, before Babe Ruth was sold to the Yankees and our beloved team was cursed to also-ran status. (The Sox finally won again, 86 years later, just as I was finishing *Charity Girl's* first draft.)

As a lifelong Red Sox rooter (a tradition handed down from great-grandpa Max, who had the distinction of having attended 61 Sox home-opener games between 1887 and 1955), I had a superstitious hunch that a novel set in 1918 Boston would tap into a well of magic. Sure enough, when I delved into my research, I discovered an amazing confluence of forces in the fall of '18. The World Series was held early that year — in September — because Secretary of War Newton Baker (the same who oversaw the detention of charity girls) had ordered the baseball season cut short. September was also when the terrible Spanish influenza pandemic erupted full-force in America, and I learned that the country's first major outbreak was at Camp Devens, the army cantonment near Boston. (Some Devens soldiers attended the Series games, and historians have speculated that these minglings of soldiers and civilians hastened the influenza's spread.) Meantime, this was the Jewish High Holiday season, spiritually the most intense time of year for Jews like the characters in my novel.

On the day before Rosh Hashanah, the day that Babe Ruth pitched the Sox to a victory in Game 1 of the World Series, the Massachusetts department of health released initial news of the flu epidemic to newspapers. By the time the Sox won the series, on the day before Yom Kippur, hundreds of soldiers were sick at Camp Devens.

When I learned these facts, I had a sense of being guided by history's sure hand, as though my novel were being plotted for me. Now I had my story's end point, and all I had to do was write it.