

Taking a vacation from grief

Coping with a spouse's death by getting away

WHEN I BOOKED my Remarkable Rhine and Historic Holland Uniworld cruise from Basel to Amsterdam, it was just a few weeks after my beloved husband, Ira, passed away. I wanted to take advantage of a rare August flash sale for solo passengers, but was not sure if I'd be ready to travel so soon. I purchased a travel insurance policy with the provision to cancel within 48 hours of departure.

Ira had been diagnosed with glioblastoma—terminal brain cancer—in July 2020. We chose to keep moving and to live our lives without regrets. For two and half years, we were blessed with incredible worldwide travel opportunities that included our fourth trip to Israel. We also made a couple of trips back to Chicago, where Ira and I had lived until moving to Colorado 23 years ago.

Now, after 48 years of marriage, I was engulfed in loneliness and emptiness. High Holiday services intensified my despair. I retreated to the comfort of my home. My days were filled with listening to music and reading books. Mary-Frances O'Connor's book *The Grieving Brain* reinforced what I already knew: "Death changes us, and we cannot function in the world in the same way we once did."

I also agree with Victor Frankl's statement in *Man's Search for Meaning* that "... everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

And so, to cope with Ira's brain tumor, we had embraced a forward-thinking mindset. My hope is that I can remain resilient so that my four sons and their families, which include seven grandchildren, will be enriched by my life's journey.

I have no choice but to face the fears associated with widowhood. As a seasoned travel writer and author, there was no doubt that I could handle an international trip. However, to travel solo, I had to regain a sense of normalcy, along with a desire to embrace life.

For decades, Ira and I had taken dozens of ocean cruises with hundreds or thousands of passengers. I intentionally chose something different for my first solo trip—an unfamiliar itinerary with a small number of participants.

Once on the trip, I found that, with around 100 fellow passengers, I was within my comfort zone. Couples exhibited compassion and widows understood my anguish and heartache.

The ill effects of my grieving process were temporarily put on hold as my attention focused on exploring nine cities—Basel, Switzerland; Strasbourg, France; Speyer, Frankfurt, Oberwesel, and Cologne, Germany; and Arnhem, Lelystad, and Amsterdam, Netherlands—in less than two weeks.

My desire to learn ever more about European Jewish history was enhanced during my journey. Among our stops: the Jewish Museum of Switzerland and the Israelitische Gemeinde synagogue in Basel; the medieval synagogue, women's prayer room, and *mikvah* in Speyer; the historic Jewish Quarter and Synagogen-Gemeinde Koln in Cologne; and the Jewish Museum, the Dutch Holocaust Memorial of Names, and the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam.

Unlike previous trips, when I could recall the day's adventures with Ira, I was reminded of the solitude of widowhood whenever I entered my cabin. On a small riverboat, I had the opportunity to easily engage with fellow passengers whenever I was in a public area. Connecting with others while exploring the world minimized my loneliness and enhanced my solo cruise experience. John S. Shedd aptly expressed this sentiment when he stated, "A ship in a harbor is safe, but that is not what ships are built for."



I was happy that my decision to travel offered a brief respite from my grieving process. ★

Pictured above: The author, with her beloved late husband and travel companion, Ira, in Iceland. At left: The author on board the River Empress after hiking to the Stahleck Castle in Bacharach, Germany, during a recent river cruise from Basel to Amsterdam.



BY SANDY BORNSTEIN

Sandy Bornstein, BA & MA in Jewish Studies and MA in Instruction and Curriculum. She is a Colorado-based, award-winning travel writer and the author of *100 Things to Do in Boulder Before You Die* and *May This Be the Best Year of Your Life: A Memoir*.