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# DIARY

Jacqueline Kent

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## September 18

Arrival in Savannah, Georgia, a town that seems to have at least seven syllables to its name. The heat is grey and sullen: the famous Spanish moss on the trees crackles at a touch. *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* is everywhere; the place gives a general impression of being quite pleased with itself, though both wealth and poverty are sharply obvious. An odd place, perhaps, to look for the pianist and social reformer Hephzibah Menuhin, whose biography I'm in the northern hemisphere to research, especially since she never came here. But Savannah is only a step away from Beaufort, South Carolina, and this is where Hephzibah's daughter Clara Menuhin Hauser lives. Clara is very important indeed.

## September 19

Beaufort is the heartland of the Gullah people, descended from African slaves. But you never see them. 'God bless our troops' signs, white antebellum mansions and American flags — not those of the Confederacy — are everywhere. Clara, who is married with two young children, runs a local family counselling service and tells me that the black teenage pregnancy rate is one of the highest in the South. Clara has been defensive about a biography of her mother, and part of my mission is to reassure her that I'm not one of 'the leeches' (see below). She holds an enormous amount of vital material, including letters between her parents (Hephzibah married twice, her second husband being the social planner Richard Hauser, Clara's father), and an extraordinary quantity of other correspondence, and wants to be sure that everything will be used properly. What can I tell her? After a week's talking and sorting out of letters, I leave feeling that there is goodwill on both sides, as well as shared perceptions of Hephzibah and her life and work. We also like each other very much. So far so good, though I know how fragile such trust can be.

## September 26

Back in New York, where I've been based all this month. Have seen several 'Menuhin people', all of whom have an intense interest in the book. Since Hephzibah died in 1981, this is a tribute to the strength of her personality, though there's more to it than that. As one man, a musician and academic, told me: 'You see, the Menuhins — all three of them, Yehudi, Hephzibah and Yaltah — were such wonderful human beings that people felt *validated*, considered themselves better people, for having known them. Do you understand?' I tell him that Australians don't really go in for that sort of thing, though somehow the over-the-top intensity of the comment seems to suit the culture of New York. As well as strenuous

adoration, what these Menuhin people have in common is a strong opinion about Hephzibah — particularly the ethics of her leaving her first husband and two young children — and a lack of knowledge of the family. (One man who assured me he was always very close to 'darling Yaltah' didn't know she died two years ago.) But they all want to know exactly what I have found out, and from whom, which of course I don't propose to tell them, so our conversations are apt to be rather brief. A fascinating insight into the power of celebrity, though.

## October 2

London, 65 Chester Square, Belgravia. This is Menuhin Central, a beautiful Georgian terrace that is the former home of Yehudi and his wife Diana, and the location of the Menuhin Archive. I'm very lucky to be here: Diana died earlier this year (Yehudi in 1999); the house has been sold and everything in it is being packed up. Another month and the archive would have disappeared into untraceable boxes. But here I am in the kitchen, furiously sifting through Hephzibah's letters to Yehudi, as well as concert programmes, tickets and photographs. Yehudi never threw away a piece of paper, bless him.

I'll be here, on and off, for the whole month.

## October 15

Interview with Zamira Benthall, Yehudi's eldest child, who was very fond of her aunt Hephzibah. The Menuhin descendants seem to be a clannish lot, and Zamira knows about me from Kron (Hephzibah's son in Australia) and from Clara. This makes my job easier, as I feel credentialled. She is frank, very pleasant, and she gives me a cache of letters between Hephzibah and her parents. This is far more than I had hoped for. Delighted, I undertake to sift through them and to return them before leaving London.

## October 18

First interview with Zamira's brother Jeremy, a noted pianist, in his North London house. Very perceptive about the peculiar upbringing of Hephzibah, her brother and sister, the influence of their talent and its pressures. Again, he is very frank, pleasant and surprisingly unguarded.

I have been told how cold, suspicious and unfriendly all the Menuhins are. Am I missing something?

## October 22

Working on Yehudi's letters in the kitchen at Chester Square, and I have never been so cold in my life. The central heating has been turned off. I am wearing thermal underwear originally purchased for winter bushwalking in Tasmania. I open

the fridge occasionally for a blast of warm air.

Peculiar, though pleasant, to be on first-name terms with people you have never met and will never know. What did Aba and Mammina (the Menuhin parents) think they were doing? Why did Yehudi find it so hard to make up his mind? Hephzibah, did you *have* to say that?

#### October 24

None of these letters are in order, and I haven't time to sort them. The effect is jolting. One minute Hephzibah is nineteen and expecting her first child in Melbourne, the next she is working for world peace and playing Brahms at the Royal Festival Hall — and married to someone else entirely — and then she's preparing for her first concert at the age of eight. I toy with the idea of trying to reproduce this effect, somehow, in the biography, and then decide that the result would drive the reader mad.

Sifting through letters, I gain the familiar sense, common to all biographers I guess, that I know Hephzibah's story before she does, even though it finished more than twenty years ago. When she speculates to her sister-in-law about what Clara will be like when she has children of her own, I think: *But you won't be there ...*

#### October 26

Busily interviewing other contacts. They include the 93-year-old rabbi who knew Richard Hauser in the army and who buried Hephzibah; Yehudi's biographer Humphrey Burton; and Gertie Furst, Richard Hauser's first love in 1930s Vienna, who met him again after Hephzibah died. Now *there's* a good story. Gertie worked for the royal couturier Norman Hartnell,

and on her eightieth birthday received a telegram from the Queen thanking her for her exquisite belts, collars and buckles. More vital to the story of Hephzibah, however, is Michael Morgan, a man with Nigerian and Irish background whom Hephzibah and Richard fostered as a small boy and who grew up with Clara. He's the most guarded of anyone, perhaps the most elusive, and he opens up all sorts of other questions.

#### October 27

In the month I have been here, the most common headline, and not just on the tabloids either, has been a version of 'ROYALS IN CRISIS'. The faces of Charles and Diana — bloodhound-puzzled and radiant, respectively — are everywhere. Hard to escape the view that a royal crisis occurs only when the media decides there is one, and that the nature of that crisis may well be the relationship between the royal family and the media.

#### November 7

Book group meeting run by a North London friend. Under discussion is Brenda Maddox's biography of Rosalind Franklin, the brilliant crystallographer whose contribution to discovering the nature of DNA was first appropriated, then cursorily acknowledged, by Watson and Crick. Present are several women with scientific backgrounds, and Colin Franklin, the younger brother of Rosalind, who is now in his eighties. He begins by praising the book highly, then goes on to deliver several key insights into Rosalind's character and personality that should certainly have been in it. He does an excellent job, in fact, of leaving no doubt that he considers the biography to be shallow and slapdash — and all without saying a word against it or the author. Very salutary.