In her second volume of inspirational stories, Liz Pearl continues the legacy she began in her first – to bequest insights and observations from one generation of women to the next. One secret to Pearl’s continued success is the endless number of wise, experienced, intelligent, and sensitive women, that guarantees the appearance of future volumes of Living Legacies: A Collection of Inspirational Contemporary Canadian Jewish Women. Pearl’s books give us the gift of assembling in one place the important thoughts, insights, truths, and life lessons we can glean from the people we love and respect. Their ideas become part of us and forge a legacy that is truer than money and property. This is how culture and tradition are passed from generation to generation and becomes entrenched in our collective unconscious.

In trying to find examples to exemplify this point, I was literally overcome by the worth of each special piece in Pearl’s collection. The individual stories are insightful and have the power to reach out to a great number of readers. The topics range from the search for a unique identity to word grudges, to mental illness, to the search for identity, to finding a daughter/sister. Each story is personal, yet will surely find a universal audience.

Some of the stories that moved me were:

Jocelyn Cooper and her husband transplanted themselves from a busy urban life in Montreal to the quiet country town of Peterborough, Ontario. Who among us hasn’t been tempted to chuck it all away, especially while sitting in stop-and-go city traffic, to move to a lakeside house where the only traffic is seagulls and Canada Geese? The challenge for the Coopers was to maintain Jewish links within an environment that had a single synagogue with a “one-size-fits-all” philosophy. The Coopers not only succeeded in adapting to country life, but they have dedicated themselves into expanding that life culturally, spiritually, and traditionally. They are active participants in local musical and dramatic
theatre, author and writing events, fundraising, inter-faith education, and Torah reading. They have made their retirement a full-time career! They prove that you do not need to be an urban Jew to have a rich and rewarding Jewish life.

Irena Karshenbaum was born in the Ukraine to an Armenian mother and a Jewish father. As Irena writes, she was given her mother’s name rather than her father’s because of the rampant anti-Semitism there at the time. Hiding her Jewish identity became the backdrop to her daily life. Ironically, while in transition in Austria, Irena’s mother took on her husband’s name and Irena became Irena Karshenbaum, a young Jewish girl. Her Jewish education began for real in Calgary in the I.L. Peretz School, but once again, fate intervened. The teachers went on strike and Irena was enrolled in the Catholic school and was once more advised to hide her Jewish identity. This time the fear was not intolerance, but the possibility of being refused admission to a good university!

Luckily for Irena, her experiences outside school included Jewish summer camp and activities at the Jewish Community Centre where she accessed Yiddishkeit and made Jewish friends. Her life became distinctly different from the one her father had experienced growing up. The anti-Semitism inherent in her father’s life was not a daily reality for Irena and she was able to take an active part in Jewish life in the city. Her main joy was to manage the restoration of the last surviving prairie synagogue in June of 2009. Irena is living proof that consequences of intolerance do not have to live on in the next generation.

The power of words comes out strongly in other stories. Lil Blume has found that words link the generations of her family, reaching back to her grandmother Esther Halpern whose credentials as a Jewish writer were discovered in a 1936 book called The New Yiddish Literature. This finding led to the recovery of Esther’s work which was then painstakingly transcribed by Lil’s daughter one hundred years after Esther’s words were first written down. “Four generations of women working together finally allowed me to get a snapshot of my grandmother’s inner landscape.” For the members of this family, the legacy is priceless.

Sharon Baltman explores her current inner landscape and wonders which words define her: is she the incarnation of the young Labour Zionist camper or is she the doctor, mom, or independent single woman she later became? Or is all of that wrapped in her persona as a writer? The thought that our
personal realizations are best made through the written page is an idea that we don’t usually dwell on. We are too busy sorting out our daily details to consider their impact on our inner development. In Sharon’s case, her deliberations led to a dialogue with her daughter – a link between generations that could lead in any number of new directions.

All the women who participated in this edition of Living Legacies are defined by different experiences, personal interconnections, changing relationships, and more. But each comes back to her identity as a strong and strongly Jewish woman. And that is what legacy is all about.

Congratulations to Liz Pearl for continuing a job well done. By giving each of these women a place and space to develop her thoughts, she gives each of us permission to do the same. The benefits reach out to current and future generations, encouraging them to do the same.

I would urge all readers to keep a copy of Living Legacies handy. Perusing a single story takes but a minute, but the impact can last a lifetime and beyond.