

Alfred Bader Fonds

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Chemistry and Art  
More Adventures of a Chemist Collector

Chapter 13 -  
A Canadian In Love

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## Chapter 13

### **A Canadian in Love**

One of our gifts that made Isabel and me so happy, without any of the problems that often accompany major gifts, was the Isabel Bader Theatre at Victoria University in Toronto.

The idea of building arose because of Isabel's Canadian/English connections. During her years in England, Isabel had seen many fine plays performed in the Old Vic, one of the oldest theatres in London and famous throughout the English-speaking world. All theatre lovers were very sad when it fell on hard times in the early 1990s. The appearance of the well-known Mirvish family of Toronto as the saviors of the theatre was a matter of great pride to Isabel. Despite major investment in renovations and reorganization, however, and with difficulties in their theatres in Toronto as well, they decided to concentrate their efforts in Canada. Early in 1999, we learned that they wanted to sell the Old Vic. I immediately called Principal Leggett at Queen's to inquire whether Queen's might like the theatre, and his answer was "No thanks, we have enough problems with Herstonceux Castle!"

My next call was to Roseann Runte<sup>(fig.)</sup>, the president of Victoria University in Toronto. As intelligent as she is gracious, Roseann had become our good friend, and so we asked her whether Vic might be interested in owning the Old Vic. Her reply was encouraging: "No, we don't want the Old Vic, but if you are interested in a theatre for us, why not build a new Vic? For close to a hundred years we have had the land right here on Charles Street. It is just being used as a tennis court, because we have never had the





money. Even though Victoria has the oldest dramatic review in North America, an annual comedy show called 'The Bob' and many graduates have become distinguished directors and actors, we have never had a theatre." This idea had a definite appeal. And how much would it cost? I have never had an answer from Roseann that wasn't clear and simple: Canadian \$6 million.

We had previously been involved in only one major building project, the expansion of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre at Queen's University. This had necessitated an architectural competition, at considerable cost, and a great deal of bureaucratic hassle and disappointment. There were no such complications at Vic. Roseann wanted a Toronto architect, Peter Smith, who had designed many other theatres. Smith described the project as "an 'intimate' two-level theatre; it will have basic staging and audio-visual equipment in the first year, with room to grow." The faculty wanted another floor for lecture rooms, and so the university raised an additional Canadian \$2 million. There were no cost overruns.

On 4 June 1999 Isabel, Roseann, and I turned the first sod for the theatre during Isabel's fiftieth reunion. There were some delays completing the building because of strikes of workers supplying concrete, but finally, on 3 March 2001, there was a wonderfully happy celebration for the opening with our families sharing our joy. Roseann said about this largest gift that Victoria University had ever received, "When Alfred gave us the money for the theatre, it was because he wanted to make a gift to Isabel. It's a kind of a double generosity, and a true love story." If only other major gifts led so simply to truly happy endings.





While getting to know, like, and admire Roseann, it occurred to me that she might be just the right person to edit and publish the eighty-two letters Isabel had written to me between 21 July 1949 and 11 August 1951. I had kept all of her letters, and on each 1 November, her birthday, had read some of them. Isabel now often faults me for looking back too much, but how could I not, having met a woman of such inner and outer beauty. It took considerable persuasion to get Isabel's reluctant agreement to let us go ahead. But Roseann did a fine job as editor of *A Canadian in Love*, published in 2000 as a limited edition of one thousand copies by the University of Toronto Press. The eighty-two letters appear unchanged, as do two of Isabel's mother's letters, written in 1951. The book ends with Isabel's brief letter, #83, written in March 1975, and my long reply written after our meeting in April.

Roseann's Introduction, describing our lives and love, is a gem. Some evenings when I am too weary to fall asleep, I read some of the Introduction with a few of Isabel's letters and then fall asleep happily. Isabel thought that she had destroyed all my letters to her - they were too painful to look at. But after *A Canadian in Love* appeared, she did find a few that we then showed to Roseann, who commented that they contained no surprises. Of course, we have kept the hundreds of letters we wrote to each other before our marriage in 1982.

As a wonderful postscript, Roseann sent Isabel:







words of love, for Isabel

*some would maintain that chance runs rife  
that a force beyond set the date  
when twice we met, tourists in life  
in love, a twist of fate*

*yet if only I could utter  
the words I know you wish to hear  
if only I could defer  
if only you were here*

*words rise in my heart, flow steadfast  
course down my veins, oh, my prince of men  
only to be betrayed at last  
by this, my very pen*

*I carried your sad smile with me  
in my mind's eye for many years  
not to be forgotten you see  
or dulled by time and tears*

*in my solitude by the sea  
of you I think and often pray  
can you feel my sighs for thee  
mingling in the salt spray?*

*silence dwells in my heart you know  
where once I heard the chords of love  
trembling in the air so sweet and low  
whisp'ring on the wings of doves*

*it is said, hearts that meet at sea  
must wait out storms, sail mists and more  
yet true soul mates will finally  
return to home's harbour*

*pride stayed my voice, and yet you knew  
of my love, though I spoke it not  
my hand you won with a small blue  
true blue forget-me-not*

*and now where once sadness did reign  
at last two hands in one enfold  
at last, dear heart, I can speak plain  
my love, I do behold*

*thoughts borne upon the wind  
barely uttered may yet be heard  
true love in truth need not be penned  
nor speak a single word.*







*A Canadian in Love* led to a delightful film of the same name, produced by Golden Reed Productions. Sue Read and Jim Golding had made two films we admired. One was *The Children Who Cheated the Nazis*, about the almost ten thousand children who came on the Kindertransporte to England in 1938-39. I had left for England on the first of these from Vienna in 1938. The second film, titled *Rescued — A 60-Year Journey*, described the lives of a few children who were hidden from the Nazis - often under dreadful conditions. Among these was the Nobel Laureate in chemistry Roald Hoffmann, who asked the haunting question, "How many more contributions to world chemistry would there have been had not 95% of the Jewish children in Poland died in the Holocaust?"

The film *A Canadian in Love* depicts our lives, from our meeting in July 1949. It was first publicly shown at the Jewish Film Festival in Toronto in May 2007.

In 2005, we learned that the Music Department at Queen's hoped to build a recital hall and wondered whether we might help. But Queen's had no real campus theatre either. The beauty and simplicity of building the Isabel Bader Theatre in Toronto made us wonder whether we might not fund a Performing Arts Centre at Queen's. This could offer greater facilities for the arts. Building at Toronto had been simple because Victoria University had the land in the middle of the campus, and Roseann chose just the right architect. This was not the case at Queen's. There was very little land available on its campus. Karen Hitchcock<sup>(fig.)</sup>, who became principal of Queen's in 2004, agreed that a center to house music and drama would be great. The City of Kingston owned a beautiful 3.3-acre parcel near the campus and right on Lake Ontario, which Queen's was





able to acquire for C \$1.7 million, the first part of our gift. Now we hope that we will be able to attend a celebration of the opening, as we did in Toronto in March 2001.

If universities knew who is really responsible for our actions as a couple, Isabel, rather than I, would have received more of the honorary doctorates. She has received two, one from Emmanuel College of the University of Toronto in 1995, Doctor of Sacred Letters, the highest distinction a lay person can receive from the college, and one from Queen's University, an Honorary Doctor of Law degree<sup>(fig.)</sup> in June 2007.

We have taken part in so many really enjoyable events. The latest of these was the celebration for Isabel on her eightieth birthday on 1 November 2006. Orchestrated by David Bevan, Sandy Montgomery, and Diana and Shelley Katz, the festivities were spread over two days. Afternoon tea in the Drummer's Room with a few close friends gave us all time to catch up on the latest news at the ISC. Then we met Principal Karen Hitchcock and various friends who had just come over from Kingston to be present at the wonderful concert in the evening. Specially arranged by Diana and Shelley, it began with my favorite "Some Enchanted Evening" from *South Pacific*, arranged by Shelley for Diana and tenor Andrew Forbes-Lane. Andrew then sang his own version of "'Twas on a Monday Morning for Isabel" with apologies to Flanders and Swann. Recognizing Isabel's interest in the theatre, he sang Noel Coward's "Mrs. Worthington" with great feeling, and followed that with two much more romantic Coward favorites.

Most remarkable to us were three moving Hebrew pieces sung by the sixteen members of the ISC Women's Chamber Choir, who had had just a few weeks to learn the texts perfectly. The concert ended with "Libiamo" from *La Traviata* presented by all three musicians and the full ISC Choir of sixty-five students, the largest choir ever at the





Castle. The music was so touching, but so was the students' enthusiasm to honor Isabel. After a light meal and many congratulations, we fell into bed at 11 p.m., happy and dead tired, sent off to sleep by a final goodnight birthday call from our family back in the U.S. What a gala eightieth birthday party!

Fortunately, the birthday dinner was scheduled for Thursday evening, a dinner for twenty-four, carefully prepared by Sandy Montgomery. After drinks in the Elizabethan Room, we went upstairs to a five course dinner that included some of our favorites, lamb, apple tart, and custard. The seating for the three tables of eight had been chosen very thoughtfully - to Isabel's left, the principal talking about the future; to my right, Jane Whistler, who had been so instrumental at the beginning of the ISC, talking to me about the past. Isabel was given some lovely gifts, and there were brief speeches, including one by me, referring to another Thursday, 2 November, the one in 1941 when I was released from the camp on the Ile aux Noix and two weeks later was on the way to Queen's.

Before we cut the birthday cake, we had a good laugh at a funny cartoon from the New Yorker with which it was decorated. It showed one young girl saying to another, "I never thought turning eighty would be so much fun." Nor did Isabel and I. The evening ended with Diana Gilchrist Katz singing some Lieder and ending with "Summertime" from *Porgy and Bess*, one of Isabel's favorites, because it reminds her of another wonderful soprano who sang it at the first concert she went to in Toronto in 1945. How wonderful to have shared our eightieth birthdays together with truly good friends.

