

A Little Bit of News-by Sheila Swartzman

“Daddy, Daddy, where do you come from? “

A question that I repeat, many times over, trying to find out where he says his mother and father grew up - "maybe the Ukraine, or Lithuania", he's not sure, he says. They never spoke about the old country, only to say it was so bad that they didn't want to talk about it. And he wasn't curious enough to press them further. He shrugs; his face twists in a wry grimace as if he were shielding me from the secrets of the universe.

Much later, after he finds out the name of the shtetl, we meet a Russian immigrant at the drycleaners and show her the name; she says positively- 'It's in Belarus! For sure, I'm certain"! I am relieved - I don't want to be Ukrainian, in my mind, perhaps unfairly, it seems to be associated with more brutality and innate cruelty than other eastern lands.

His parents, my grandparents died when I was a small child. I never got to meet my grandfather - he died of pneumonia after walking to the synagogue in the rain - a death befitting a religious Jew. "Almost as good as Bing Crosby dying on a golf course in Spain", says my father, an inveterate golfer. "And what about my grandmother"? He is evasive. "She was sick", he says. "What from"? I pester him constantly.

He doesn't like talking about illness - it frightens him, as if the mere mention would cause the dreaded ailment to strike one instantly. "She was silent about almost everything", he says. "She never talked a lot".

I have a fleeting memory, perhaps one of my earliest memories, of standing in front of a large grey-stoned castle, with crenellated windows, and seeing a shadowy figure in a second-floor window. Perhaps it is Rapunzel, waiting in her ivory tower to be rescued by her Prince on a white charger. Who would have imprisoned such a fair princess? I dance on the lawn while the grown-ups go inside. I hope the princess can see me as I prance about her window. I must have been two or three years old.

My mother's cousin drafts a family tree dating back to the eighteenth century, the marriages and births and deaths all neatly documented. No brilliant sages, or rabbis or a Moses Mendelssohn: just millers and tailors and workers, plain ordinary folk.

"And what about you, Daddy? Where's your tree"?

I have one cousin on my father's side, mad cousin Leon - he has a shock of red hair, a demented grin and a collection of tropical fish in his garage. He is diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia years later.

When I am in Medical School my father finally tells me that his mother had Senile Dementia, and the castle was not a castle but the local lunatic asylum. My father tells me that she started cleaning the house in the early hours of the morning. She muttered constantly; the mutterings turned to shrieks and she would run out of the house, naked, screaming. She was living with mad cousin Leon and his parents, and they could not cope with her.

So she was locked away, in the lunatic asylum. Then a letter arrives a few days ago. It is from a distant cousin several times removed. She has translated her grandmother's journals from Hebrew and that my great - grandparents had two children. After his death, my great-grandmother, Chava, left the village and her two children and she went alone to Palestine. The village community took care of her two children. Chava eventually sent for her son Mordechai who remained estranged from his mother because of the abandonment. His sister, my grandmother, Ester, married a boy from the village, and in 1906 immigrated to South Africa where my father was born.

I have one photograph of my paternal grandmother, Esther. She is looking forward into the camera, expressionless. My grandfather, standing beside her, has large luminous eyes with a slight smile on his lips. I think back to that shadowy figure behind the curtained window in the insane asylum, and of the carriage carrying her mother away from her, the coachman slashing with his whip at the child crying for her mother to take her with her to Palestine, the wheels turning, turning, and of myself as a child in a pretty dress, twirling around on the lawn in front of the asylum.

All these years I thought it was the Tsar and his pogroms that scarred my grandmother so irrevocably. I did not know that it was so close to home.

+++++=

A Little Bit of News

Written by Sheila Swartzman in 2011

Posted on the CHOL Share Your Stories Site in April, 2023