Why I write by Margaret Green

There are just a few reliable emotional wellsprings to my writing and these wells never seem to stop flowing.

The most important was my early relationship to my mother. I was a World War II baby and, although far removed from the site of action, I arrived when my mother was emotionally preoccupied with it. She had a sister whom the family left behind in Russia when they emigrated to South Africa. My Dad was also concerned but differently: he wanted to secure some kind of future safeguard in the family fortunes if the Nazis took over in South Africa, and he persuaded my mother's brothers to buy a building in the centre of Cape Town. The deeds were exchanged on the day I was born in 1941. That he always mentioned this when I was a child, annoyed me; but I realised what it meant in later years - my birthday always served as a reminder to him of how scary the times had been.

My mother's stories about a cold Northern land and a band of three brothers and three sisters, powerful in their symmetry because they arrived in alternating genders, two years apart with almost mathematical regularity, these filled my childhood. Her life in that Northern landscape also had an interesting geography. It began in a small town in Lithuania at the beginning of the 20th century called Rukeshok, moved to the "heart of Russia" (Yaroslavl) during WW I and then landed up in Wilno – a sophisticated Polish city with a large Jewish population and a vibrant Yiddish culture. Consequently, my mother could speak Yiddish, Russian and Polish.

This history was not very unusual for somebody growing up in the South African Jewish community in my generation but it was completely unknown to the large majority of the population around us, who saw us as English-speaking white people. Now, eighty years later and having lived on three continents, I think I have some sense of how much my mother's history shaped me and created my identity and interests.

I don't know of any woman who doesn't have an ambivalent relationship with her mother. If there is anything interesting, it's all in the details and the specifics – above all how the consequences of what happened in this all-important relationship shape and get played out in the shifting contexts of the daughter's life.

I do have the sense that I did not have her full attention in my first years. Like every young child I accepted this lack as normal. It was wartime, she had a sister in Moscow and two children older than me and then she became pregnant again when I was only 18 months old. But we lived a comfortable middle-class life in Cape Town. There were servants and nannies. It's hard to believe now how safe we felt – walking home from school or to the station. I am sure I did not want for anything.

I was probably angry with her when my brother was born. It was perhaps her first big betrayal. But a few years later came her biggest. On my 4th birthday, Auschwitz was liberated by the Russians. The war was coming to an end. In the ensuing months, the horrors of what the Nazis had done was beginning to be more widely known. This did not affect everyone in the same way and might not have affected me for many years, except that my mom did not tell me that I was going to have to go into hospital for a few days for a tonsillectomy and that I would be left there on my own. My nanny packed a small suitcase and told me I was going on a picnic. This was not however customary picnic behaviour.

When I was left alone with the nuns at St. Joseph's in Pinelands, I assumed this was my new life and I was going to have to figure it out one way or another. No-one had told me anything to the contrary. That was traumatic enough. Then came the confusion of their antisemitic comments and subsequent abuse.

This experience certainly shaped many interests I developed later in life, both in my reading and professionally. How one recovers from early trauma has been of abiding interest to me both personally and in my work as a therapist. In the way that this sometimes happens, my client load in my busiest years comprised 50% survivors of early sexual abuse – most of them only realizing this had happened once they were in therapy. This replicated what had happened to me during my therapeutic training. Discovering what happened however, is only the beginning of the process of healing. It turns out to be a lifelong process – painful and confusing at first, becoming more creative as the pieces fall into place. I was fortunate to discover co-counselling in my early 30's. Its egalitarian and experiential ways of organizing and working on early distresses made sense to me and appealed to me politically. I used it over the years to work through many different kinds of issues. Luckily, I have lived long enough to experience what I think is an endpoint.

When I returned home after this childhood trauma, I longed for my mother's attention. I sought her out and wanted her to, if not ask me what had happened, at least realise that something had. This did not go well – she had no real understanding of how children communicate distress. Instead, I made do with the comfort of her presence, listening to her stories and homilies and becoming mother's good little girl.

I don't know if it was her stories, or trying to understand why she didn't 'get' me that made me so interested in her history and early life. Me and my four siblings all grew up with these stories, but it's not clear to me why I grew up with more of a sense of responsibility for preserving them. Maybe my life allowed me more time? Unlike my siblings, I forgot to have children…

Did I offer to go with my mother to the Soviet Union in 1964 to see her sister because I could, or because I still sought her company? My older sister tells me that that she had wanted to go and felt she was the obvious choice but my mother thought differently and chose me. She felt that I would be less of a problem for her – 'cause her the least fardrus (emotional hassle)' to quote my sister's exact words. So, despite all my rebellious political and sexual behaviour, mostly never divulged I suppose, I was still managing to pass as mother's good little girl. As a result, I was the only one of the next generation who was given such an opportunity and my experience of meeting our Russian relatives at the age of 23 had life-long consequences. I also met my mother's Wilno school friend Fanya in Warsaw, who introduced us to her family and her friend and fellow-Communist, Dina Madejsker. On that same trip, I met Fanya's Indian nephew Muku Hamied who was studying in Oxford. These connections conferred on me a responsibility and a particular role in my larger maternal family which emerges in some of the pieces I have written, especially in "My Brushes with Russia."

Over time, these experiences and connections widened and deepened. I became more interested in Holocaust history and my Eastern European origins. After living for almost 30 years in the Northern Hemisphere, by 1996 I was planning to return to South Africa with my partner. At Easter we bought a house in Cape Town which was rented out. The Soviet Union had collapsed, my Russian cousin was living with her mother and daughter in Israel, the trip to Eastern Europe that previously one could only dream of, became possible. If we didn't go then, I suspected I might never do it. I had never visited a concentration camp, and there were my parents' Lithuanian shtetls – Rukeshok and Vobolnik – as well as the famed Yiddish centre of Vilnius. My parents were no longer alive, but my Uncle Elias still was – he was turning 90 in August. We would try to be in Vilnius around the time of his birthday. I mention some of that visit in an account I wrote recently when I revisited the city 30 years later ("Time Tripping in Vilnius").

In my mother's family, only my cousin Bess has been to these places. The Russian part of the family visited Lithuania sometimes for their summer holidays but they were generations away from their connections to it.

A year into the COVID-19 pandemic, I celebrated my 80th birthday on Zoom. A few weeks later, forty years after I first wrote my and my parents' stories as I knew them for a history writing project (Margaret's Piece in "You'd Prefer Me Not to Mention It"), I tackled my mother's story again. I expected to travel the internet and various data bases but I did not know that it would lead me to visit Israel and Vilnius again. I loved doing the research, but I also had an archive of my mother's papers. I looked at it in detail – something I had never done before – and I discovered some surprises: the unexpected subjects she'd studied at Stafan Batory University, two years unaccounted for, and a grocery shop my grandfather had

before he and his family emigrated. I wrote up this research which was published as 'Manelewitz Family Mayses' – not a title I would have chosen! I also found a card from a Polish doctor and researching that led to my piece called "Finding Borys", an early version of which is on the CHOL website.

Since then, I found out much more – I located two of Borys's nieces who gave me precious information and sent me pictures and I went to Yad Vashem in Israel to listen to his brother-in-law's Holocaust testimony.

At first, I thought he must have been a serious boyfriend of my mother. Later, I got so involved in the history of his family and his in-laws, I was able to dream myself arriving in their crowded quarters in the newly-established Wilno ghetto after a terrible day in the summer of 1941.

What began in Wilno with my mother's girlhood seems to consist of an ever-expanding network of interest and preoccupation for me. Research into Borys' life brought me to the communist partisan in their family – Chiena Borowska – who is part of their story – but also very indirectly, part of mine.

In Berlin this year, I made friends with a historian I knew, who had been researching the family of my mother's school friend Fanya – the Derczhanskis. She gave me access to their translated letters. Their story and Borys's history took me again to Vilnius – a visit conducted with much greater insight and knowledge than on the previous occasion. I have written about this in "Time Tripping in Vilnius". I am thinking that in my next piece of writing, I might try being a maid in the Derczhanski household in pre-war Wilno, with the parents working in their hat-making business down the road, whilst I am witnessing the shenanigans of the three sisters who are all members of the Communist underground! I think this is an opportunity that is too good to miss.

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