

Magazine

Stirring Up the Past

Lives

By JUDITH MATLOFF SEPT. 2, 2009

When I turned 50 and my mother 80, I decided it was time to fetch Grandma Leah's ashes from the garage. She had been stored in a rusted Maxwell House can for 37 years, an unworthy purgatory that I felt called for resolution. My mother was perfectly happy to let Grandma's remains stay there, but hitting the half-century mark made me think about my roots and my own mortality. I knew that I wouldn't want to end up in the garage, and so I resolved to return my grandmother to her native Ukraine.

My sensible sister had doubts. After all, Grandma fled the pogroms that pillaged her birthplace, Elisavetgrad, and being a toddler at the time, she didn't even have memories of the town. Her parents abandoned their house with the flush toilet — the first in town, they claimed — and escaped with their lives and the nickel-plated samovar. Grandma might not want Ukraine to be her final resting place, my sister was saying. I conceded the point and resolved to take just one bone chip or a pinch of ashes. I needed something tangible to connect with the past, and Grandma would be the pretext to get there.

The airlines suggested that I carry a certificate from the funeral home that cremated Grandma, but the new owner told me that he inherited no records. "Leah Ruchkin. Nothing," he said with regret. Undeterred, I came up with the idea of smuggling just a tiny bit of the remains in a cosmetics case. It would be such a small amount.

Yet a sweep through the garage didn't turn up anything except an old flowerpot. ("We could pretend it's her," my young son said, pointing to the gray soil.) My husband looked a bit sheepish. "I may have thrown her out during that big cleanup," he mumbled. My son ran inside to ask my mother about it. "I moved her," she said irritably. "She's somewhere in the house."

My mother wouldn't reveal where she had stashed Grandma, but I decided to go to Ukraine anyway. By now my curiosity about the past was uncontrollable, and besides, I couldn't get a refund for the flight. A week later I drove with a translator to my destination, a depressed agricultural city, renamed Kirovograd, in central Ukraine. The congregants at the synagogue were eager to help, but there was no record of Grandma Leah in their documents or the state archives. We checked possible spellings of her Anglicized name, Spolane, but *nichevo*, nothing. I searched the photos of people whose names approximated hers, especially of a poet named Spolansky. I couldn't find a resemblance. It was as if Grandma never existed.

The woman at the archives tried to console me with the region's history. She explained that in the pogroms that occurred between 1881 and 1905, the Stalinist-era famine of the 1930s and the Nazi occupation of 1941, hundreds of thousands of Jews died. Many records were destroyed. "Your grandmother is lucky she got out," she said. "You probably wouldn't have been born if she didn't."

The woman suggested that I visit one last place for a trace of my putative past — the old Jewish burial ground. When she explained to the driver how to get there, he glanced nervously in my direction. We drove up to a housing project with a dirty courtyard that seemed to be a favored spot to walk dogs and drink alcohol.

"Ask someone for directions," I suggested, thinking we were lost. "It's here," he said, avoiding my eyes. "The Soviets built apartments on top of the Jews."

Right then a babushka approached and pointed to the ground. "The dead are coming up," she said. "I was walking here a few months ago when it rained, and my foot got stuck. The police came and dug up the bones."

A beer drinker rose from a bench, offering that the graves were from around the time of the 1905 revolution. That was the year Grandma left for the United States.

“The authorities took the bones away,” he said. “But there are more under there. Look, you can see the edge of the tombs.” He nudged his foot at the corner of a brick sticking out of the earth.

The driver said a prayer. I thought back to my mother’s garage: Grandma had it good, comparatively. Mom was right. It was better not to stir up the past.

I still don’t know where the ashes are. My mother refuses to say. But now I rather like the idea, even if it’s an illusion, that Grandma Leah is safe with people who love her, near the storied samovar. One thing I’m certain of: I’d rather end up in a coffee can than anywhere near Kirovograd.

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