

Ian Morrison

Morris Morrison: Father and Son

Ian Morrison writes his first-ever poem about his father's experience. As Ian looks at himself in the mirror he sees his father. As he thinks about his father's family loss, he too feels the effects, 'and so he stares back at me, reminding me of who I am'.

In June 1993, on a flight from Auckland to London, I wrote a poem. To be more precise, I wrote most of it in that iconic New Zealand place of half-rest, the transit lounge at Los Angeles International Airport.

As I jotted down the lines, I realised that I was responding to a pressing inner need dating back to my father's death a few years earlier. This was the first period of sustained and enforced leisure I had enjoyed since then. It was clearly time for some sort of mental and emotional reckoning.

I doubt whether I was the first zonked-out, trans-global traveller to be moved to elegy whilst staring vacantly at a jungle of tailfins. I also know that my poem, whatever its emotional significance to me, is bereft of any claim to literary merit. How could it be otherwise? It was, after all, the first poem I'd ever been moved to write, apart, that is, from some best-forgotten schoolboy doggerel.

Moreover, anyone who pens a poem about a deceased father stands in the giant shadow of Dylan Thomas. It takes excessive chutzpah to voice one's own weak, piping 'rage against the dying of the light', when Dylan has already uttered a mighty roar which still echoes on behalf of all bereaved sons.

Having said which, friends who share my Central European Jewish provenance have told me that my poem resonates for them. Judge for yourself whether it does anything for you. I hope it does.

Yom Hashoah

For my father Morris Morrison who died in 1991 and my uncles
Sam and Hersh Goldstein who perished in the Shoah.

When your father dies, there's something left behind
It enters you if you're his son

It also enters daughters but in different ways.

He stares back at me each morning as I shave

It's not a physical likeness.

His face was square, mine more round, like my mother's.

But there, facing me, is this man I've always known

A certain humour, a certain code,

A certain sad wisdom and a certain jaunty stubbornness.

And today I weep the bitter tears he would have wept

For his brothers lost in the abyss

For the millions beaten, starved and choking on Zyklon B.

Tears came hard to men of his age and stamp

But sometimes they came unquenchably in his sleep.

For the loss, for the loneliness, the stoic's mask no answer.

And so he stares back at me, reminding me of who I am.

He left me many gifts

But this, perhaps, the most important.

My father was born in Lodz, Poland, in 1914. He was orphaned at an early age and, in 1926, travelled to London to live with his much older half-sister. His two older brothers, Sam and Hersh, remained in Lodz. As far as we know, neither of them survived the horrors that engulfed their world in 1939.

Jovial, bustling, energetic and good-natured, Dad also carried within himself a deep, unmovable sadness. The early loss of his parents had been followed by a number of years in an orphanage. This, combined with the loss of his brothers and of so many other family members, made him naturally wary and distrustful of good fortune. My mother, my sister and I all understood this and trod lightly around his memories.

The Yiddish term mensch could have been invented with my father in mind. He was an honourable, responsible, fair-minded man with great strength of character and far more than his fair share of doggedness. A fluent Yiddish speaker, his Polish-Jewish core had a bluff, 'no nonsense' English overlay, which he had probably acquired whilst serving in the RAF during World War II. He also had the breadth of mind of a man who was more or less at home in two disparate cultures.

Dad never spoke much of his orphanage years in Poland. But he did tell me that he used to look forward to his weekend outings with Sam. I have a picture in my mind's eye of a lonely little boy waiting at the orphanage gate for his adored grown-up brother and of the two of them walking off together, perhaps playing football, having a snowball fight or just talking and laughing.

Six years after my father left Poland, Sam set off for Palestine but was arrested in Vienna during the bloody aftermath of Chancellor Dolfuss' crushing of the Socialists. My father learned of his brother's fate when two mysterious strangers visited him and asked for money to get Sam out of gaol. My father, a far from affluent apprentice cabinetmaker, gave them all he had and Sam was able to continue on his journey.

A few years later, Sam decided to return to Poland. I'm not sure why but I suspect that he had quite a hard life in Palestine as an illegal immigrant. Then war came and Dad lost contact with his family.

During the early Cold War years, contact with Poland remained problematic, particularly for those, like my father, who had never gained formal release from Polish citizenship. He wanted to go back to look for clues to his family's fate. But it was 1963 before he was able to make the journey as part of a group travelling to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the razing of the Warsaw Ghetto.

No clues emerged and, needless to say, the journey proved harrowing. For some time afterwards, Dad cried regularly in his sleep. Yet it was not until some time in the 1970s that he was willing to accept the near certainty of his brothers' deaths. Only then did he start saying Kaddish for them.

My father died suddenly of a heart attack in February 1991. The year after his death was one of the hardest I can recall as I found myself working absurdly long hours, commencing at 3.30 in the morning.

Somehow, during that long, hard year, I discovered a strength of which I had never before been aware. It was as if my father had crept inside me, lending me his own formidable energy and resilience and helping me get through. I was no longer the indulged and self-indulgent baby-boomer but was drawing on the fortitude of other, less pampered generations.

Was I just being fanciful? Had I just invented a useful personal myth to help me survive a time of strain and unhappiness? Or was there something going on which I didn't fully understand and which wasn't susceptible to rational analysis? Who knows? I've lived long enough to be sceptical about most things, including scepticism.

On Yom Hashoah, the annual 'Day of the Holocaust', Jews across the globe mourn the millions who did not survive the nightmare years of the early 1940s.

Yom Hashoah 1993 had an added significance as it marked the fiftieth anniversary of the destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto. I was living in Wellington at the time and remember the day as appropriately cold, wet and autumnal. I also recall walking past an electrical retailer that had several television sets in its windows. All but one of these was tuned to a major rugby fixture and a small but enthusiastic crowd had gathered to watch the play.

My eyes, however, were drawn to the remaining screen. It showed scenes of Bosniak Moslem refugees being 'processed' by the Bosnian Serb militia. The men were being taken off in one direction and the women and children in another. Not long afterwards, we started seeing news footage of skeletal figures staring out from behind the barbed wire. So now we knew for sure what had happened to the men! It was all so dreadfully familiar.

It seemed to me that we had returned to the harsh planet my father had known as a young man. His generation had defeated Hitler and, in Western countries at least, had built safe, free and comfortable societies in which I and most of my contemporaries had enjoyed privileges

unimaginable in previous epochs. But now, old Adam was turning back to his wicked ways, making apparent nonsense of all that my father and his generation had achieved. And so my unresolved grief for my father and all the grief that he had carried with him for his dead kin seemed suddenly one with an overwhelming sadness at the miseries we humans impose on each other. Somehow, it was all connected and this was indeed a solemn and sombre Yom Hashoah.

Shortly after that day in Wellington, I found myself in Los Angeles, writing my poem. Perhaps it served as a form of catharsis. Perhaps it was also time for me to re-acknowledge that being my father's son was and remains a matter of huge significance for me but might not be the alpha and omega of my existence.

Life goes on, grief subsides and there are always new problems and challenges that don't quite fit the template of heritage. But every time I'm present at a synagogue service, I say Kaddish for Sam and For Hersh, as well as for their little brother Moishele, who grew into a model of what a man should be.

IAN MORRISON is an Auckland-based public relations consultant and a former radio journalist. He was born in London in 1946 and emigrated to New Zealand in 1985. He has worked for a number of international broadcasting organisations, including the BBC World Service and Deutsche Welle and is a former news editor of Radio New Zealand International.

Both of Ian's parents lost family members during the Shoah. However, several of his mother's cousins survived, thanks to the courage and humanity of a Belgian farming family that sheltered them.

'When I was asked to contribute something to this collection, I thought immediately about the slaughter of my father's relatives in Poland and the impact this has had on me,' he says. 'But I also think often of the gift of life my mother's cousins received at the hands of people who risked imprisonment, torture and death for their sake. That, too, is part of my heritage.'

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