

Hannah Brodsky

Avrom-Osher and Beila: The Missing Link of my Soul

Hannah Brodsky explains how handicapped she felt because she had no grandparents.

'Some of my friends (not many) had grandparents with whom they used to talk, play, go for a walk, go visiting, etc. I looked at them and felt very strange; as if I was missing some part of my body. It wasn't an arm or a leg. It was something much more important, something from inside me, from my soul. In simple words - I felt handicapped.

As a child I found it hard to understand what exactly was missing but when I saw an old man or woman sitting on a bench in the park, holding a child on their knees and reading a story, I felt envy. Sometimes I used to hide behind a tree, trying to hear what they were talking about, sometimes I would walk in front of them as if I wanted the old person to say to me, 'Come here, listen to the story.' But it never happened.'

I always had difficulty in finding out anything about my grandparents. My parents didn't want to talk about it, which was very upsetting, because other teenagers and children had grandparents, while all we heard was, 'Why do you want to know? It is none of your business.'

One day the portraits of my paternal grandparents appeared on the wall of my parents' apartment in Ramat Gan (Israel). Apparently one of my father's siblings managed to save the pictures and bring them to Israel. Two portraits: two serious people, stern looks, and no smiles - you could see that life wasn't smiling at them. But I still wasn't allowed to know what happened to them and how they died. All that I was told was 'The Germans killed them after they shot their daughter-in-law and two small children in front of them.' But at least I could see their faces. When my mother passed away a couple of months ago I told my sister that the only thing I wanted from my mother's apartment were the portraits. They are my link to the past I never knew.

There was no photo of my maternal grandparents on the wall of my parents' apartment. And there were no answers to my questions about their fate. Much later I have found out that my grandfather was not only responsible for his own death, but also responsible for the death of many other members of his family. Apparently, when some of the Jewish partisans came out of the forest in October 1941, and wanted to take with them his youngest daughter Zlata, who was only 16, and other young people from the small town, he said 'The Germans are not going to do anything to us.' He believed they would be safe because they (the German soldiers) had not harmed anyone during World War I. An old friend of the family told me that because my grandfather was highly respected; most people listened to him and stayed on in the little town instead of fleeing to the nearby forests. I asked many times if there was a photo of my maternal grandparents and always received a negative response, until last year when my mother found and showed me a picture of my grandparents taken during the Shiva Broches of my parents in 1938.

On the photo you can see two small elderly people (Beila and Avrom-Osher) sitting in front while their two daughters (Gita and Rysia) stood behind them with their respective husbands. I asked my mother to tell me something about her parents. She told me the following (and only) story. My great-grandparents married very young, but did not have children for 18 years! They kept travelling from one shtetl (small town) to another, visiting different zadikim (wise men) for blessings to help them have children. Finally one zadik said that if they will give most of what they owned to charity, they would be blessed with a child. And so my grandfather was born! He was called Avrom-Osher. Two years later a girl was born - Rivka. The boy was so precious to his parents that until he married food was cooked for him separately and he was fed separately - special food prepared only for him. He had his own cutlery, his own dishes, and generally he was treated like a king. While the daughter also had special meals, cutlery, etc. the son held a special status as is traditional in religious Jewish communities.

Every morning my great-grandmother would cook my grandfather's favourite breakfast dish: blinis. They are made as follows:

BLINI (THICK PANCAKES)

4-5 glasses milk 2 eggs

40 g yeast 1 kg wheat flour
1 ½ teaspoons salt 3 tablespoons melted butter or oil
2 tablespoons sugar

To the milk or warm water add yeast, salt, sugar and eggs. Mix well. Add the flour and mix until the mixture is of even consistency. Add the warm oil, fold in and put the dough to stand in a warm place until it rises.

Mix it up again and let it rise once more.

Heat a thick-bottomed frying pan, smear the base with butter or oil, and immediately pour enough of the mixture to cover the base of the pan. When one side is golden-brown, flip it over, fry for a few minutes on the other side. Place on a warm plate and cover with a tea towel. Continue frying until all the blinis are ready.

Usually the blinis are served with melted butter, sour cream, cottage cheese, herring, white cheese, geese schmaltz, turkey breast, caviar, smoked salmon, etc. But my grandfather liked his blinis with fried hemp. He was the only one served that delicacy.

The hemp mixture was made in the following way. The hemp was crushed and mixed with water until it had the consistency of porridge. The mixture was put in the blini, then the blini was folded and put on a greased tray in the oven to bake.

The rest of the family used to get a chance to try the delicacy during the popular festival of Hanukkah.

I asked my mother if this tradition of special meals continued after her father married; she told me that no one made special blinis for him and he ate together with the family, but for Sabbath morning he, and only he, got the delicacy that everybody wanted: baked milk that was made for him in his special horlachik (glazed pottery dish)!

Because food was and is such an important and significant part of Jewish life these simple recipes are my path to understanding some of my family's past and my own roots. Once a year - on the Yahrzeit of my maternal grandparents, 11 November - I make blinis and share them with my family (if any of them are around), or friends.

This simple story my mother told me last year and the photos, found many years after my childhood ended, made me feel not as naked as I had for a long time. For a long, long time it seemed as if a part of me was uncovered (I feel the same way about earrings - I can't leave home without something in my ears). I feel some thread coming from my grandparents, some connection, but it is not complete yet. I hope one day when I find out a bit more it will be.

HANNAH BRODSKY was born a couple of months after the beginning of World War II on the outskirts of Moscow. In 1941 she and her family were evacuated to Samarkand in Uzbekistan, then they moved to Riga. In 1959 she enrolled at the Philology Faculty of the Uzbek State University in Samarkand, specialising in German Philology. Then she transferred to the Latvian State University in Riga, graduating in 1964. From then until she left Riga in 1975, she taught part-time at the Riga Polytechnic University, at a number of high schools, did translations for the Riga Institute of Scientific and Technical Information and worked as an interpreter.

She arrived in New Zealand in the middle of 1976. Two months later she started working part-time as a cataloguer in the Auckland University Library. In February 1977 she started teaching Russian part-time in the Germanic Languages and Literature department as well as teaching part-time German at Tamaki College. In 1988 she left the cataloguing department and moved full-time to teaching.

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