

Messages

The story of Rose was a long time in the making. At first I thought that an Edgar Allen Poe sort of poem would be best suited, but narration probably would be better.

I have told the story countless times to good faces that reflected back to me that what I had to relate was exciting and even amazing. Somewhere inside of me there grew a feeling of obligation that I must put the “message” down in some form. And this has been the dilemma; which form to choose?

I think it will probably end by being a mixed media: associations, other stories, personal pronouns. and mixed tenses exchanging roles.. perhaps this beginning is just an excuse for my feeling of inadequacy for the job. Forgive me..

My mother and father were still alive when I first heard the story from a favorite kinswoman of mine who visited me in Jerusalem from the states. I was anxious and excited to make her feel thoroughly at home with me.. I wanted to in all ways convey to her my unending gratefulness to her for her delicacy towards me when I was small odd child visiting her in her magnificent home in San Francisco with my mother. Among other questions about the family and friends of the family in the states, I asked how her sister-in-law, Rose, was getting first years of immigration from Russia to America. Rose was perhaps my mother’s mentor on what is done and what is not done by new immigrants in San Francisco. Perhaps it was Rose who told my mother that she mustn’t speak the enemy’s language in public, Russian, and that Yiddish is contemptible and only English would do. Poor mama, and poor me—my mother became tongue-tied with me and I was almost speechless, knowing no language with any surety. What a shock it was to enter the San Francisco Public School System and realize that though what was spoken seemed familiar, it was not always understandable. While mama coped, papa went out to “make a living” with a loaded truck of work clothes which he peddled to immigrant farmers that came from Italy, Portugal, Japan, Mexico and other parts of the states. Papa was my school, my teacher and of course, my beloved.

I was filled with unimaginable excitement when papa took me along on his three day trips through the San Juaquin Valley, I, his adoring pupil and he, my flattered teacher of instruction about the great, wide world and its infinite variety of ways. I loved his love for the outdoors, and keenly listened to all kinds of not quite understood descriptions of orchards and how to tell what kinds of fruit would be borne in their time. It was pride enough for me that he knew. Papa informed me that his own father was a dealer in future crops from various orchards near their village in the Ukraine. He loved his father despite what papa described as his excessive timidity of loud noises and dogs... He demanded his son’s protection against his terror of all dogs; chained, barking, single or in packs that were inevitably met on countless winter journeys “making his living”. Papa showed me how he kept a dog at bay; he bent down with feet wide apart and picked up a stone with great deliberation and made appropriate noises and gestures showing his intention of throwing with great accuracy that stone at any dog who had the rashness of coming any nearer to his dear frightened papa. It worked then and it did not when we entered the many farmsteads in the valley.

Upon arriving on some huge sprawling farm just before San Jose, papa would be greeted by Italian farmers with hearty shout that “the Jew is here”—and papa through his infinite love of

the outdoors, of farmers, farming and of conversation, learned to speak Italian in order to give back greeting and to converse with any man. This love also taught him to speak Spanish and Portuguese as well as Italian. His great stumbling block, much to his regret, was not being able to learn Japanese. He loved their special order, their way of transmitting their culture to their young, and he had to stand mute in front of them and dumbly convey by gestures his goods and his prices. All his love of talk bound up in his uncomprehending ears that couldn't catch one single sound, so that he might imitate it if only to show his admiration for their particular peoplehood. Once, when papa took me around to the cowshed of Italian farmers, he saw a cut out picture of Mussolini nailed to a wall of the barn. He was outraged. He tried to explain to me that he, whom the Italians call Il Duce, was not a good leader for his people. He was part of a terror called "Hitler", hunters and killers of Jews. He strode out to find the owner and in swift excited Italian tried to convey his passion and his outrage.. If he was understood or not I couldn't know, but it didn't stop us from coming to this farm often to wash our hands under an outdoor water tap, shaded by huge oaks in the farmyard and finding a rock to sit on to eat marvelous food prepared by mama at home for the trip. Everything was carefully packed into Mason Jars; pickled green bell peppers, gedemte flais, and even prepared lettuce salad with papa's favorite Italian garlic dressing, and for me artichoke hearts mashed with mayonnaise. All in large, clean glass jars. While we ate with appetite and thanksgiving for living in free American in those early "thirties", we watched preparations being made for the noonday meal set out on the supported large wooden planks under the shade trees for the hired hands.. Soon iron struck iron announcing that their meal was ready.. When we arrived on a farm of Portuguese farmers, they too would hail from a distance that "the Jew is come"----and my father would point out to me their wonderful eyes that were black olives swimming in oil----and surely they were all once Jews and he would tell me of the Marranos of Spain that escaped into Portugal who probably don't remember their origins anymore, and though they wear the cross on their breast they may light Sabbath candles and perhaps repeat some strange words while lighting them----and they wouldn't know why, but it was a sacred legacy handed down from generation to generation----and that they will continue to do so. I know that papa tried to tell them in their own language of this legacy, but they giggled and went out to the truck to finger and ask about the work clothes piled in my father's special doored truck.

When I wasn't a small adoring companion for my father on his "making a living" trips, he had special friends he loved and many times he took me along on his frequent visits. They were an immigrant couple that came from the Urals of Russia who never knew Yiddish, only Russian, and thus perhaps less encumbered, they learned English very quickly. They were owners of a nursery in the Mission District. When we entered the nursery my whole self became covered with the coolness of potted plants, sacks of black earth and fertilizers with the peeling pictures of flowers glued onto the walls advertising seeds—broken terra cotta pots in one corner, large sheets of green maxed paper and tin foil on a wooden table—baskets with outsized loop handles hanging from the low ceiling----and always the coolness, the delicious smell of earth an growing things.

They were different, wonderfully different. Instead of the seething unrest of other friends and relatives making themselves into "modern" Americans and never having time for the oddness that was me, Mr. and Mrs. Schick would greet us with their special tangy voice that rang welcome. While they carefully finished some chores, I watched and smelled and wondered.

Papa spoke excitedly to Mr. Schick about Palestine, both being lovers of Zion, they exchanged news of European Jewry with its terrors and curses. Mr. Schick showed papa a letter from Jesse Sampter, a Jewish-American poetess living in Palestine. He exchanged flower seeds with her and with pride he had a bit of Palestine growing in his own nursery. He showed me the stamps, the handwriting, the seeds with relic reverence.. it was love, one of the infinite variety of loves I learned to identify as I grew more conscious in my growing up.

Mrs. Schick put out warm “just baked” cookies on a platter and a mug of cold milk for me, with friendly detachment she went to one whole wall of cages housing every kind of singing bird imaginable She offered food with sweet bird talk, while shuffling about her comfortable worn slippers from cage to cage calling out proper names for each bird. Sometimes she requested a little song in return, or she begged them to wait patiently while she poured seed into their tiny white porcelain dishes clipped onto the wire of their cages, or scolded them for their impatience or poor manners toward other brethren birds. She was square in a cotton print shapeless dress. Her small blue eyes amazed me, so few of us had such a color shooting out from our eyes; we were of the brown, black, hazel. Green, greenish, grey eyed ones. Ms. Schick’s hair was steel grey, short, combed back straight from the top of her head and held by a simple brown comb at the back of her head. She was simple and clear to me, who was always seeking whys to endless whats. Her pink cheeks, black broken finger nails, her body sweet smelling of earth and green was a sanctuary in generally not understood world.

Mr. and Mrs. Schick had two daughters, Rose was the eldest. Beautiful Rose, whose good fortune brought her at an early age to America and she could speak English without a trace of accent, which was considered a great virtue by immigrants who came at an age that defied losing gutturals and nasals. She, Rose, had her mother’s startling blue eyes. She had blonde hair always carefully finger waved, a slim body always clothed in the very latest and smartest fashions. She married into the wealthy Licht family who owned a furniture store in the Mission District, There was a large neon sign on the roof of the store in the shape of a star radiating red and blue lines shooting skywards---The Starlight Furniture Company. One of the many signs that indicated wealth in my collection of childish definitions.

Since Rose was mama’s friend, there were many visits to another part of the city where bungalow type stucco houses stood unsquared by neat hedges, carefully tended pink rose bushes with vines climbing high up the corners of the houses, broad stone steps leading to handsome entrances. The pastel stucco made pleasant this city block in contrast with the grey concrete of my own block which felt dull, cold and endless. I was, and still am today, sensitive to the interiors of houses and of the interiors of people. The interior of Rose’s house felt good—it was lived in, entertained in, tastefully furnished and frequently changed, her house and her interiors----and why not. Ben Licht could afford her needs for change. I knew that houses and neighborhoods were clear definitions of where one was at on the social ladder, climbing up for falling down or maybe stuck.. Rose clearly wished to show her climb up. It was difficult for me to connect Rose to her own mother and father. On more than one occasion, when filled with contempt, papa would criticize by mimicry and sarcasm the frantic and ludicrous clambering up that ladder by his kinsmen, always mixed with bitter asides on their illiteracy and miserliness especially toward fellow Jews agonizing in Europe In their eagerness to cut ties from the “old home”, they thought that meant everything Jewish as well as fellow Jews. There was no end to papa’s recriminations against callous replies given to him

by Jewish merchants with whom he dealt when purchasing merchandise for his “making a living”. When he came with requests for donations for the Jewish National Fund, or for the Histadrut, the Jewish Labor Union in Palestine, or for the United Jewish Appeal which dealt with community problems and with the dreadful problems of Jews in Europe throughout the “thirties” and “forties”----they already gave---“they might give later---” “they can’t give now---” “they won’t give ever---” were the wretched answers papa heard too many times. For his suffering sake I hated their answers too..

From Mr. Schick’s love of Zion and Rose’s total indifference, (to papa this was absolutely crucial), two separate worlds were created in my mind, one world of steaming loves and hates, and another, filled with cool scheming ambition.

To my question how Rose, her sister-in-law was getting on, my favorite Aunt (or rather my favorite kinswoman by marriage) answered rather reluctantly that a strange thing happened to Rose. I waited for an explanation that came with difficulty. One day Rose entered her home and hadn’t left it these last four years. I felt the shock pick its way through my body and I asked for more whats and if she knew any whys. She had gone on a trip alone by train from San Francisco across country to somewhere east. Ben, Rose’s husband and my kinswoman’s brother, hated trips, he was always miserable when on Sundays and holidays there was no store to tend to. Any sort of Sabbath was a torture to him. Rose must have decided that since “time” waits for no one, now she wanted to take a trip. If Ben wouldn’t go, then, she would go by herself.

How old is Rose?

Oh, about sixty, I would imagine.

So, what happened?

She made her preparations and started out, and somewhere halfway to her destination she felt that she couldn’t continue alone and came back home.

Is that all ?

When she entered her house she has since refused to leave it.

But that can’t be all? What might have happened? I couldn’t stop all these questions, even though I saw how reticently the answers came. Her natural delicacy was the light of my childhood.

Well, you know her father died some time back, he was quite elderly. Her mother was lonely and was finding it difficult to manage by herself. She begged Rose to let her live with her----but somehow Rose found her request to be impossible.

Why impossible?

Well, she didn’t think she could properly take care of her mother, nor provide companionship for her throughout the day, in a word, impossible. She promised her mother that she would find the best home for the elderly that exists and that it would be best for everyone. But you probably know that the very idea of a “home” is abhorrent to most people----there is something terrible about being with strangers at a time when I supposed one wants only the familiar about oneself. Her mother refused her daughter’s offer, but evidently her health deteriorated, because Rose, one day, brought her to a home. Though its grounds were pleasant enough, the home wasn’t for Jewish people, and this must have made Mrs. Schick wish to die, and she did while Rose was on her trip to the east. It must have been upon her arrival back to her own home that she learned that her mother was dead and already buried. Since that time she hasn’t left her house. And it’s interesting, she’s gotten heavy and square as her mother

used to be, her usually dyed blond marcelled hair is not steel grey, short and combed back straight from the top, just like her mother used to wear her hair----and she wears only some cotton print shirts and shuffles about in worn out slippers. She allows me to visit her occasionally, and just a few friends come over to play cards or just sit with her. It is strange. I didn't think it was strange. My lovely kinswoman came all the way from San Francisco to Jerusalem to give me a very vital message, and I was listening. I took the instruction to heart. I knew what had happened..... It was her mothers spirit that called her back, because there was something that the spirit was bound and determined to do. Mrs. Schick came to live within her daughter. If she couldn't live with her while she was alive, then----well-----then she could take up residence while being dead..

It was four years later that I heard that Rose was released by her mother. And that now it's as if nothing, absolutely nothing had happened, I am told. She must have felt like Rip Van Winkle---- her blue startled eyes must have seen dust and carelessness and backwardness, because I am told that she redecorated her house, every room. She began to lose weight. Her hair is growing and again blond and that she had opened her mouth and hasn't stopped talking since. How was this an instruction to me? How did I know that it was specifically addressed to me, for me to understand and to interpret? As you must have guessed my sympathies are with the spirit that needed eight years to regenerate and strengthen for an unknown journey into worlds I might imagine but don't really know much about, and as for Rose? She was taken out of our reality for a while, apparently none the worse for wear.

A year after I heard from my kinswoman about what happened to Rose, I received a telephone call from papa who was living in Netanya. Netanya is about 100 kilometers from Jerusalem where I live with my husband Moshe, three growing children, dog, cats, turtles and very good friends. Papa rarely phones, he usually enters our home unannounced, always carrying with him all kinds of good things from mama's kitchen, laughs, looks around and begins immediately to woo his grand-daughters, who were then one and two years respectively While watch him and living his huge storage of living----I remembered how I dreamed my last Oedipal dream at the age of twelve. I was bent on destroying in some unobtrusive way his wife, my mother----I knew that no one would ever love papa as I do. I was bolstered with hope by poor mama's indiscrete confidences to me that she didn't enjoy papa's love-making, he simply wasn't romantic enough. He countless stories of her youthful beauty, her delicacies, her love for poetry (which she could recite by heart with passion and tears, her favorite being Pushkin) and romantic novels hidden from her own papa's eyes gave me a real hope that my love was far deeper than mama's-----while dreaming myself into the kingdom that belonged to mama, her kitchen, in comes that big laughing form of papa, announcing that he is very hungry and that he hopes there is Gefilte Fish. My heart sank and I woke up knowing that with mama's Gefilte Fish I would never be able to compete-----and that was the end of my active desire to marry papa. Mama had a plaintive litany, a life's complaint confided to me in my growing years. The shock of her transplant in American was too great for her to assimilate. She withdrew into her dream of her youth in Russia. She fretted about small romantic triumphs and embroidered the settings with dreamy variations. Always intruding these small tales were the nightmarish account of the frantic escape from Russia. Running from border to border, imprisonment in Rumania, giving birth on this anxious way to my brother who had to share her shock and fright on a slow

cramped boat that sailed the Atlantic grey sickening sea to the New World whose demands neither could fulfill effectually.

Rarely did mama venture forth from her home for purchases since papa enjoyed playing the hunter and provider. She complained----what is it all about?----this life that is like a dream----what is it all for?----we have children to play away the years and the emptiness is filled with dreams of another time when a tomorrow seemed fresh and filled with high expectations----what is it all for?

Papa's dreams were stronger and when my brother Avraham and I ended our ancestral wanderings to come to Palestine, since become Israel, papa and mama came after us to finish their life cycle on the hallowed land..

Papa asked over the phone how I was?

How are the children?

How strange, these questions----I heard the sound of whirring wings and I in a fever of wonder asked him the same questions.

Are you alright papa?

I felt chill and didn't understand. How uneasy I became

Are you alright?

Are you alright?

The next morning papa was dead.

How can I tell of my grief? What did I know of grief?

Some years after World War II papa received news that his parents had lived through that horror in their own home in a small village in the Ukraine, Kapaigorod, but perished later from hunger. I watched this big, loved man weep. His tears were witness to endless suppurating feelings of guilt of omission. He never managed to persuade his own parents to take flight into unknown American----who was to blame? Papa's faint-hearted father rejected all pressures to leave with the rest of the departing families. He wouldn't be budged. Mama used to tell me in a kind of ridiculing way how fearful grandfather was. When he married he lived with his bride, Yocheved, in his parent's home for several years. It was noised around that when the skies threatened with thunder and lightning he fled his nuptial bed for a safe one, running to his own mama's bed! Who was to blame?

I ran unheeding of everyone around me to papa, laid out on the floor, wrapped in his black striped white tallith, a burning candle at his head, his feet toward the door, to kiss his dear face. I touched a hard, clammy shell.

I must have become unrestrained. An old Jew, sitting on a bench in the room, he must have been from the Khevera Kadisha, the Burial Society, he looked at me sharply and in an even sharper tone asked me if I thought my father was going to live forever?

I had huge lessons to learn in a very few minutes. I was shocked into quietness and finally realized----papa is dead. Mama's world collapsed----what will happen to me?----it would be better to die now and lay beside him forever----how could he do this to me?----was my mama's new litany.

I was nauseous. A stain of contempt was contaminating my whole hearted grief. The old adolescent enmity welled up to choke me. And yet looking on while the ritual of burying the dead continued, another stream of thoughts came upon me cleansing out my fetid

feelings.....What horror it must be to bury one's dead and it feel remiss. I listened to my brother's hurried and embarrassed recitation of Kaddish, I felt his sense of injury that it is now too late to repair a poor relationship and past misunderstandings that hung onto the already fading worlds while the clods of falling earth from spades that filled the open grave accompanied his ache. While looking at mama I resolved not to be caught in such a quagmire. I knew I had a mammoth job ahead of myself.

Mama came to live with us in Jerusalem when arteriosclerosis made taking care of herself more and more hazardous. The family was made whole by her presence, mama was in the right place among her own. Part of my effort to reshape our relationship and to try to alleviate her depressions was a demand I made on mama to keep a daily diary for me. There is nothing she could leave to me nor to my children better than her vast store of reminiscences that accompanied me throughout my childhood. They mustn't get lost, what a waste that would be.. Through the years that followed she completed four thick notebooks of daily jottings and memories that came to her during the day. During the last year of life, when memory was almost gone, she discovered her diaries, which then became the receptacle for her fading memory. Nothing else could hold her attention as those pages written in her own familiar hand. In wonder, she commented many times to us that as she reads those pages she sometimes knows what will come next. She would smile with wonder mixed with rueful humor, somehow aware of her condition.

Still, I felt, it was a pity. Life was always a dream for her, a feeling of----what am I doing here? How I argued with her.

How can you say that to me?

To bring children into the world and not have a clue yourself of what life asks of you?

Only your questions of what is the purpose of life?

Dreaming yourself far away from answering or trying to answer any question?

When mama was taken to hospital, she said, "daughter, I know I shouldn't say this, but I am tired of life."

It took another terrible two weeks of deterioration when I often hoped that the end would come quickly after a gangrenous foot had to be amputated. When she came out of the anesthesia, holding my hand, and being blind and hardly aware of what was happening to her body she said, "you know daughter, after living eight years, the only important thing is to do good in this world". I never heard her again, not in this world. How little one can know of the meaning and instruction of suffering. Had mama not come out from under the anesthesia and indeed, died as I had hoped, I would have been deprived of the precious clear jewel she had handed to me. And now, all of us are graced by its light, it is our inheritance.

God bless all of you for peace and for love.

this message was written in April 1974. A time of great distress for my immediate family which counted the deaths of my brother, Avraham Spector, my mother, Annie Spector, Moshe's sister Nasha Ravins, who died at the age of 45 leaving four children, my cousin Eda Kofler (nee Shulman) who had come from Russia eleven years before to settle in Israel, and though she died to cancer, it was preceded by a splintered heart that witnessed the deaths of her family,

one by one in Czernovitz, at the hands of the beasts, the Nazis. And in this little and beloved country, we suffered, all of us, the Yom Kippur war.....

my name:

to mama and papa

Lily

To the San Francisco School System

Lillian Spector

To my comrades in Hashomer Hatzair

Leah Spector

First marriage

Lea Kadish

And now

Lea Hellner

This manuscript was presented to my children, Alon Kadish, Melila and Naomi Hellner on my 55th birthday, Jan 19th 1981.