

GOOGLING FOR GHOSTS:
A Meditation on Writers' Block, Mourning,
and the Holocaust

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The author describes her father's experience of being a Holocaust survivor and how his unfinished mourning contributed to her struggle with muteness, her own story being dwarfed by the magnitude of her father's losses. When her non-Jewish mother is chosen to be honored by Yad Vashem, the ceremony proves unexpectedly powerful. The witnessing by community, through the Internet, helps dissolve the shame and isolation, heals some of the trauma, and promotes greater psychological freedom. In creating this paper, the author memorializes her parents and her lost relatives, and succeeds in working through much that had haunted her.

In the daylight of analysis the ghosts of the unconscious are laid
and led to rest as ancestors . . . —Hans Loewald

Whenever we played chess, my father would impress upon me how important it was to count all the pieces as you returned them to the box. I'd pair up black king and black queen, white king and white queen, castles, horses, bishops, and pawns, like so many members of a family. Carefully, carefully, don't leave anyone behind. From as far back as I can remember, I knew that Daddy had "lost his family" in the Holocaust. Perhaps, I thought, my daddy had lost his family because he was careless? And I vowed to never, ever be careless. There was simply too much at stake to ever, ever, take your eyes off the people you needed and loved.

For many years now I have felt that I ought to be writing. Please note that I wrote "ought to be," not "wanted to be" writing. My fa-

ther, Joachim Flescher, a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, wrote prolifically all his life. He awoke every morning very early and wrote for hours before the rest of the family got up. Although he died when I was 23, he has continued to cast a very long shadow. Many years of my own analysis and psychotherapy have not resolved how conflicted I feel about the act of writing. I am aware of how much I identify with my father, and feel connected to him, close to him, when I write, but also how I resist the feeling of still being controlled by him as though I were submitting to his will. On another level I am probably afraid to compete with him and fear that I will fall far short of his accomplishments. On the other hand, I could be afraid of becoming more successful than he was, because in fact not many people read his books! All this self-analysis and intense self-awareness only serve to inhibit me further.

From the youngest age, when asked what I wanted to be when I grew up, I chirped happily, "I want to be a psychiatrist like my daddy," as he beamed approvingly. I have come to understand that I served in part as a narcissistic extension of him and that he did not give me the space to discover my own voice, my own dreams. His dream for me was that I was to be the Anna Freud to his Sigmund, betraying at once his delusions of grandeur and his willingness to sacrifice my happiness on the altar of psychoanalysis, with a capital "P." But I knew I did not want to end up a spinster like Anna Freud, no matter how famous she became: I wanted a husband and children of my own.

In one of my first sessions on the couch, I made a marvelous slip: I said that my father wanted me to write his autobiography. That perfectly summed up my dilemma: I had not been able to sufficiently develop my own voice and my own identity, to create enough distance between me and my formidable father.

What made him formidable? Besides having come from that European cultural matrix where speaking (and writing) five languages was *de rigueur*, and having discovered and fallen in love with Freud at the ripe age of sixteen and then proceeding to devote his life to the religion of psychoanalysis, he was also a Holocaust survivor. In 1924, when he was only eighteen years old, he had to leave his family in Poland to pursue his medical studies, because, under the so-called "numerus clausus," very few Jews

were allowed to study medicine in Poland. He wound up in Vienna, hoping to become a patient of Freud's, but as a penniless student with no connections, he was referred to a lesser colleague whom he saw briefly. He then trained in psychiatry and neurology in Bologna and began practicing in Rome. He rose to some prominence, becoming one of seven psychoanalysts in Rome in the 1930s. He founded and edited the Italian journal *Psicoanalisi*. As the Nazis' extermination of the Jews ramped up, he tried to use any clout he might have to save his family back in Poland, even managing to request an audience with Mussolini's aide. All he got for his pains was a note with Mussolini's scrawl: "This is no time to think of Jews."

My father lost his parents, his two sisters and a little niece, many aunts, uncles, and cousins—a total of 48 family members in all. I do not know their names nor how and where they were killed. I am still trying to come to terms with how this trauma, this devastating life experience, shaped him and, in turn, shaped me.

THE BOAT SHOW

On a blustery winter Sunday, my father and I are riding in a yellow checkered cab, heading to the Annual Boat Show at the New York Coliseum. I am around eight years old and am bursting with excitement: just me and my Daddy on an outing, my pesky younger sister Diana left at home with Mommy. Daddy is wearing his gray fedora, cocked jauntily at an angle, and his beige overcoat with the fur collar. I am decked out in my new red winter coat and warm shiny yellow boots. It is going to be a wonderful day!

We pull up to the huge exposition hall on Columbus Circle. The space is cavernous and noisy. So many boats to look at, it is quite overwhelming! My daddy is only interested in the sailboats; motorboats are noisy and common. I slip my hand in his and share his quiet contentment. Then, out of nowhere, a salesman appears and begins his sales pitch, singing the praises of the boat my father had stopped to look at. When my father answers non-committally, the salesman begins to gush in a harsh, guttural language I do not understand. In seconds a storm cloud darkens my father's face, and he grabs my hand and barks abruptly, "Come, Sylvia, we're going home." I am puzzled and disappointed that

our lovely, private afternoon has been cut short and I try to understand why my father's mood has turned sour in just a few instants. During the cab ride home, I ask, "Daddy, what did that man say to you?" Through clenched teeth, he replies, "He heard my accent and assumed that I was German."

I mull this over for a while. From my child's point of view, it wasn't fair for my father to hate all Germans, just because his family had been killed by the Nazis. How did he know that that salesman had been a Nazi? So I ask, "But Daddy, weren't there any good Germans?" His face becomes even more darkened and rageful and he stops talking to me. I know I have said something terribly wrong, have made my father more angry, and what's worse, now he is angry at me! The silent ride home seems to last forever. As we enter our apartment, he strides off to his office and I retreat to my room, confused and frightened.

After a while, Mommy comes in and tells me I need to go apologize to Daddy. What I'd said to him was insensitive and hurtful. (I'll never know if she really felt this or was "just following orders.") I walk down the hall to my father's office, my heart pounding. He is looking out the window, grim-faced. I approach with trepidation and beg his forgiveness. I feel so guilty for causing him so much pain, reopening that barely closed wound. All by a few carelessly uttered words. In my head I think (as I would go on thinking for a very long time): "I'll never ask the wrong question again, as long as I live. Please don't be angry at me. I don't know what I've done wrong but I'm sorry. I'll never do it again. I can't bear it when you stop talking to me. Please, forgive me, Daddy, and please don't leave me! I promise to be a good girl." I had stepped on a land mine and I determined to be extremely cautious forever after. Much too much was at stake to risk saying the wrong thing. It felt like a matter of life or death.

TOWARD A RESOLUTION OF WRITER'S BLOCK

For many years I did not understand this, but whenever I would sit down to write, I was in a sense haunted, haunted by the Holocaust. As the daughter of a Holocaust survivor, my father's ghosts had become my ghosts, and I had tried in vain to escape them.

Growing up I had a deep sense of having to compensate in some way for my father's losses. I was not free to pursue my own destiny if that meant leaving him, which he could only experience as yet another loss, a terribly painful abandonment by me. Part of my writer's block seemed to be about the belief that I had a duty to memorialize my father and, behind him, all my murdered relatives. If I did not write about them, on an unconscious level it was as if I were killing them off again, making them disappear, but if I wrote about them it was as if they were continuing to take me over, to hold me hostage. I wanted to write about me, about my life, about my dreams, and to find my own voice, a voice that did not have to be shadowed by mourning and cataclysmic loss.

But at last, two major life changes, both occurring in August 2008, seem to have allowed an internal shift to occur. The first was my mother's death, at age 92, which came as a relief after years of chronic disabilities had robbed her of any quality of life. The second was the departure of my youngest daughter, Sophia, for college in California. Unlike my father, I had succeeded in letting my children go, to follow their own destinies, without feeling that they were abandoning me. I was officially an empty nester. To ward off any loneliness, I decided to keep very busy. I joined a poetry workshop where a gifted teacher spoke of her own struggle with being "mute" until her forties, when she began to write poetry. This touched me deeply, that word resonating more directly into my soul than others I had been using to describe my stuckness: writer's block, conflicts over exhibitionism and/or aggression, inhibition. The word "mute" brought it all home with a punch to the solar plexus. I could not afford to be mute any longer.

And so I wrote a few poems.

The pleasure in writing them was unexpected. It felt like I was just having fun, playing with words, trying to capture a moment or a mood, without worrying if I sounded smart enough or talented enough. I just let myself play . . . and it stopped feeling like homework.

Then I had an experience with a new patient which rocked me unexpectedly and helped to open up what I had begun to think of as Pandora's box.

CLINICAL VIGNETTE

He enters my office eagerly, flashing me a warm but shy smile. A pleasant middle-aged stockbroker, he is consulting me for help with insomnia. Mr. B believes it is related to the intense anxiety he is feeling as so many of his clients are losing money in the current economic meltdown. Even though rationally he knows it is not his fault, he nevertheless feels somehow responsible and guilty.

In the first consultation, I had learned of earlier significant losses that I believed might be contributing to his current distress. A beloved younger sibling had been ill with cancer for several years of his childhood and died while he was at college. His own second baby had lived but a few days. Yet those events seemed long ago and far away to him. He recounted his current difficulties in an incongruously cheerful manner, shrugging his shoulders as he asserted, "Look, its not like being in box-cars to Auschwitz."

Now in his second session Mr. B settles into my comfy armchair. After a short discussion about the medication I've prescribed, he leans forward and says, "There's something I must tell you: I was curious about you so I googled you." I feel my body stiffen. Damn that Internet! What has he discovered? This has happened to me a few times already and has always caught me off-guard. A patient's husband found a piece I had written for a small journal on making challah on Shabbat. An ex-patient surfaced after years in response to another piece I'd written about my dying mother. My current male analytic patient, already in the throes of an erotic transference, managed to unearth a class picture of me as a high school junior, declaring "You were adorable." I felt simultaneously flattered and a little as though I'd been stalked. But nothing had prepared me for what was to come.

"Oh?" I murmur in what I hope is a neutral yet inviting fashion.

"What an amazing, dramatic story! You must feel so proud of your parents! Were you born in this country? . . . I hope I didn't offend you when I said last time that thing about 'box-cars to Auschwitz!'"

I am having trouble listening because I am still reeling from the sense of being exposed and vulnerable. From now on will every new patient have so much information about me? Will they

hesitate to come to see me? We had been taught that analysts should be as anonymous as possible, so patients can project their fantasies onto us. My teachers and mentors could not prepare me for how to navigate in this brave new world.

But, wait a minute, what's on the Internet is really my parents' story, not mine! And I have the presence of mind to say something like that to my patient, hoping to leave room for some mutual discovery, to remind him (and myself) that he still cannot possibly "know" who I am simply because he has learned about my parents' past. With some difficulty, I steer him back to his own life and present-day anxieties. I hope I have not betrayed too much distress. I surely do not want to come across as though I were annoyed by his curiosity and initiative.

GOOGLING FOR GHOSTS

This moment in my office proves to be a tipping point. That night after my last patient, I decide to Google my mother's name. Up comes the website of Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Jerusalem. My mother had been honored, months before her death, as a "Righteous Among the Nations," in a ceremony at the museum. I did not know that the event had been recorded for posting on the Internet. A few more clicks, and here are photos of my grandparents, Sallah and Kalman Flescher; here is my young father with his sisters, Zofka and Gusta; here is a dashing Dr. Joachim Flescher in his lab coat; and finally here is my young mother, Anna Riesen, with her Greta Garboesque distant, dreamy air. The fact that my parents' story is on the Internet, and not through any doing of mine, feels deeply healing. My family members are living on after all, contained and legitimized by this impressive institution. It is not only up to me to memorialize them. A certain burden has been lifted from my chronically tense shoulders. I have space to breathe and maybe live more in my own life. Also, I know that everyone around me is struggling to adapt to the new reality of the Internet, which makes information available at warp speed and seems to draw everyone closer, bound for better or for worse, in the cords of the World Wide Web.

I feel less alone.

In a moment of inspiration, a title for my project comes to me: “Googling for Ghosts.” Just those three words make me happy. They feel playful and original. Perhaps I *can* write my story once and for all. My father wouldn’t even know what Google meant! He had died in 1976, of cancer of the pancreas, long before the computer and the Internet came along. In those three words, “Googling for ghosts,” I have found a place for my own experience, perched between the past and the rapidly changing technological present. I know I am onto something that many others can relate to: the odd sensation of not being in control of what the Internet may have “on” us. In addition, I think I have a way of making an old story fresh again. Even I have grown weary of yet another Holocaust tearjerker, with its obligatory evocation of horror, sadness, and guilt. What could I say that would sound original? Here at last is an entry into the often daunting dimensions of my topic. By telling the story of the ceremony at Yad Vashem, I will be honoring both my parents and their losses. I can re-live again and again a magical, transformative moment in my life. And I may finally feel free to tell my own story.

RIGHTEOUS GENTILE?

In December 2007, when my sister Diana first informed me that my mother might be eligible for the honor, I reacted, in my characteristic way, with deep ambivalence. “Righteous Gentile?” My mother? Wasn’t that the honor given to Raoul Wallenberg and Oskar Schindler, who had saved hundreds of Jews from certain extermination at the hands of the Nazis? Surely my mother could not be in that same category? I’d heard the story so many times. But perhaps I needed to hear it again, through new ears.

The new ears were provided by Katya Gusarov, a woman who worked for Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. Her job was to locate non-Jews from around the world who may have performed acts of bravery during World War II and thus saved the lives of Jews. A cynical voice in my head saw it as a publicity and fund-raising function for the Museum. My mother, a hero? Please!

Katya came to interview my mother, who was now 92 and living with my sister Diana in her Jerusalem home. Crippled with

Parkinson's, blinded from macular degeneration, and afflicted with depression, my mother nevertheless rose to the occasion and answered all her questions. I'm told my mother seemed to come to life under Katya's kind, respectful, and patient interest in the details of her history. It took a stranger to create a narrative that I was at last able to really hear in a fresh and somewhat more objective way.

My mother, Anna, born in Switzerland and not Jewish, had left her home at age sixteen, when her stepfather, a butcher, had refused to pay for her continued schooling, even though she had been an excellent student. She found work as a governess in London and then in Romania, eventually landing in Rome, where she was hired by my father as his secretary. She was blonde, beautiful, and smart, and soon they were in love. She moved in with him in his apartment at #2 Via Sandro Botticelli.

As the Fascists rose to power, the Jews in Rome became gradually more oppressed. (Years later, in my father's papers I found the document proclaiming that anyone of "razza ebraica" is prohibited from practicing a profession.) In October 1943 the Nazis occupied Rome and began to deport Jews. Joachim had to stop seeing his patients and go into hiding. But where would he be safe? Various options were weighed. All were risky. They settled on the daring plan to pretend that my father had fled the city while in reality he was hiding in their apartment, which Anna now claimed as hers. As a Swiss citizen, she should have some diplomatic immunity. But any neighbor could be an informant. Joachim had to stay away from all windows. There were two close calls when the Italian "Black Shirts"—their Gestapo—came to the door and my mother had to feign innocence while my father escaped to the roof.

Every morning as Anna went out to do errands, she had to pass a large poster plastered on the wall, which warned that anyone harboring a Jew would be shot on the spot. When Katya asked her whether this had frightened her or caused her to doubt her decision, my mother answered, "But it was the right thing to do!" After Katya had carefully interviewed my mother, she presented the details of her story to the committee at Yad Vashem whose task it was to decide whether someone met the criteria for the

honor of “Righteous Among the Nations,” the newer, more politically correct, title. And they determined that Anna Flescher had indeed risked her life to save my Jewish father from perishing along with the many millions killed in the Holocaust.

I had no way of understanding just how big of an honor this was going to be. I was unsure whether or not to go. I dreaded having to see my mother in her deteriorated state. I felt as if I’d said good-bye to her so many times already. I had written a piece at a writer’s workshop the previous summer that helped me to mourn her, because I’d felt that she had long ago stopped being the mother I once had. And I still worried that it would be hypocritical of me to participate . . . to be part of a myth-making that didn’t conform to my own truth. To my mind, my mother was anything but altruistic and self-sacrificing; in fact, she had been openly hostile to my wish to raise my daughters as Jews and was unable to join joyously in the celebrations of their bat mitzvahs. (“Well,” she said, by way of explanation when I confronted her, “no one ever made a party for me!”) What I knew was that in the nearly three decades my mother lived after my father’s death, she was overly dependent on me, believed she had the right to intrude into my life, and was unwilling and/or unable to let me go. I felt used up and fed up.

It was not always so. Our mother had surprised my sister and me with her resilience when my father died. She seemed to enjoy coming out from under his shadow, dare I say his yoke. She learned how to drive, spent summers alone in our family’s Adirondack cabin, attended elderhostels, and, as the granddaughters began to arrive, rose to the role of grandmother with gusto and loving competence. Her presence in our lives when our children were little and I was practicing full-time was deeply comforting to my husband and me.

It was only then that I began to fully realize how much I had missed by not having grandmothers of my own.

But when old age and infirmity began to set in, my mother started to unravel. I understood that she had no history of her own to fall back on to help her cope. Her own father had died of tetanus after a fall from a bicycle when she was three. Her mother

died of tuberculosis when my mother was thirteen. Disconnected from her siblings, who all still lived in Switzerland, she had never watched a relative age and die. Tone-deaf to and rejecting of any spiritual practice, she was terrified of death.

As she began to lose her sight from macular degeneration, my mother grew more depressed. No longer able to read, or play Scrabble, or to watch television, she gradually pulled even further inward. I alternated with exquisite ambivalence between tender empathy and hateful resentment, locked into that dance with increasing intensity since my father's death in 1976. Since 2003 she had been in an assisted living facility. In 2005, my sister and I agreed to have my mother move to Israel, where the cost of her care would be considerably less and where my sister, an internist, could keep a close eye on her. I brought our mother to Israel for Thanksgiving 2005. It was now my sister's turn to care for my mother, more decrepit and helpless than ever, and to shepherd her through what we all hoped would not be a long and lingering final chapter.

A POWERFUL RITUAL

At the beginning of 2008, as I obsess over whether or not to travel to Israel for the Yad Vashem ceremony, the most compelling reason is how much it seems to mean to my sister that I be there. Just as I needed her to be with me, to share, to bear witness when my daughters became bat mitzvah, so she needs me to be there when our mother is to be honored in this public way. I am still envisioning a small room and a little boring speech of platitudes. And I very much doubt that my mother will even take in what is going on.

My younger daughter, Sophia, a senior in high school and soon to be leaving for college, agrees to come with me. She knows it will surely be the last time we'll see "Grandma Anna." Her older sister, Rebecca, a junior at Barnard College, is not able to take time away from her studies. I reluctantly pack my bags.

Sophia and I arrive in Tel Aviv and are swooped up enthusiastically by Diana, who drives us to Jerusalem. We deposit our things in her house and set out immediately to visit my mother, now liv-

ing with her Filipina care-taker, Adelpha, in a one-bedroom apartment, a mere five-minute walk away. I steel myself as we enter, breathing deeply, unsure of how my mother will look and react to our arrival.

She is not much changed. She sits stiffly in her wheelchair, staring blindly ahead, mouth pulled down in Parkinsonian rigidity, like a true mask of tragedy. She does still know who we are, thank God! I give her a kiss and tell her (only semitruthfully) how happy I am to see her. That first night we eat Shabbat dinner in my mother's apartment. Between our jet lag and the nursing home smell of disinfectant, my daughter and I have very little appetite.

I still have my doubts about how this ceremony is going to go. How will my mother manage in a lengthy ceremony? Will she even make it through the ardors of being transported there? What if she falls ill right before the ceremony? There are still many last-minute details that need to be taken care of, but I decide to just hold my breath and hope for the best.

The day of the ceremony arrives, a nippy Jerusalem morning. It is a great struggle just to get my mother out of the house. The sun is out but has not yet taken the night chill from the air. My mother cannot be lifted out of her wheelchair, so she is pushed down several stairs by Amir, my brother-in-law, and Adelpha. The ambulette is waiting at the foot of the stairs. They push my mother up the ramp into the van, then attach her wheel-chair to a bar in the floor. I wonder what is going through her mind. Parkinson's disease long ago erased any expressive nuance from her face, so I cannot read any emotion there. I hold her hand and ask her if she is all right. She murmurs, "I'm cold," and I try to tighten her sweater around her shoulders and the blanket around her legs. We settle in for the bumpy ride, as my mind races between excited anticipation and anxious dread.

Diana and Amir are waiting for us at the designated spot, and the driver helps Amir to maneuver my mother out and onto the sidewalk. We are now higher up in altitude and the wind has whipped up. In the shade, my mother begins to shiver in earnest. It has always been hard for me to bear seeing how helpless she

looked, but now in the wide-open space of the imposing plaza with its looming buildings she seems even more shriveled and fragile.

The Yad Vashem official, Irena Steinfeldt greets us with a warm, firm handshake and then bends over my mother to introduce herself. My mother nods and smiles imperceptibly. We wheel her to a spot that is more sheltered from the wind, while we wait for everyone to gather. Irena explains that we will enter the “Shrine of the Eternal Flame,” and there my mother will light the flame. How can she do that, I worry. Irena reassures us that Diana and I can help her. It begins to dawn on me that this is turning into a Very Big Deal. We are in the hands of professionals who have planned this event to go smoothly and with a lovely sense of gravitas.

A man with a long beard streaked with gray solemnly shakes our hands. He is Rabbi Nathan Eitan, the Director General of Yad Vashem, who will preside over the ceremony at the Shrine. I become aware of many people arriving. There is a video crew who will tape the entire event. At last it is time to begin.

We are shepherded down into the dark, cavelike first floor. The light is so dim that I can only imagine my nearly blind mother will be in total darkness. Yet she does not complain. The cold, massive Jerusalem stones surround us on all sides. Jutting from the walls are the names of the concentration camps, spelled out in severe iron letters of both Hebrew and English. In the center is the metal burner where the gas will be turned on to light the eternal flame.

Irena has Diana and me stand on either side of our mother, with Sophia next to me. Above us on the balcony overhanging the lower floor I see many dear friends and the video camera crew. I feel as though I am in the middle of a powerful, mysterious dream.

After an introduction by Irena, the Rabbi begins to chant the Prayer for the Dead, “El Ma’ale Rachamim,” God Full of Mercy. As I allow the ancient words with their mournful rhythm and haunting melody to flow into me, a deep, sweet sadness wells up. The Hebrew words are profoundly comforting, at once familiar and exotic. I stop thinking and just feel.

It is time to light the flame. We push my mother in her wheel-

chair toward the lever and help her get her hand on it. Then all three of us pull it toward us and the flame shoots up.

How I wish that that moment could have lasted longer!

In that moment, although I did not know it until later, my ghosts began to stop haunting me. Instead of being turned into smoke going up to the sky, my relatives were being memorialized. That moment made up for all the yartzheit candles that were never lit and all the Kaddish prayers that were never said. In this ceremony honoring my courageous Gentile mother, the extermination of my father's entire Jewish family was entered into the public record. I'd always thought of it as my father's Jewish family, but now I understood that it was my Jewish family, my grandparents, my aunts, and my cousins. Our losses and our grief were being witnessed and validated. We had come to Jerusalem, where all Jewish souls, according to tradition, gather after death, and we had found a way to honor their memory, to publicly memorialize them, to remember them and to mourn. This ceremony at Yad Vashem became the container for all the unprocessed grief that my father (and mother) had carried around with them all of my childhood. Surely my father knew the day of his father's death: My grandfather Kalman, after being beaten by guards in jail, was released only to come home and die of typhoid fever, calling my father's name. My father may not have known when exactly his mother was killed, shot in the back along with my Aunt Gusta as they tried to escape Stanislavov dressed as Ukrainian peasants. In any case, I never saw my father light a yartzheit candle or recite the Kaddish prayer. My father did not understand the power of ritual, whether alone, for oneself, or together in community. Psychoanalysis was his religion, and it was enough for him. But it is not enough for me. He seemed content but lonely. I need more.

I have come to discover how important ritual can be. You need action, lived in real time, prescribed by your tribe, to bind yourself to a tradition and not feel so awfully alone. Lighting a candle and reciting a blessing has always given me indescribable comfort. Such a simple act. The words which I only half believe: God has commanded us to do such and such (light the Shabbat candles, recite the blessing over the bread and wine, wash our hands). Make no mistake: I am at heart an atheist. I believe that

God is a poignant creation of relationally programmed humans, terrified by an overwhelming universe. But the act of committing oneself to a spiritual practice and belief system that stretches back thousands of years is deeply reassuring to me. I am not alone. I am a part of the Jewish people. I may die but they will live on. And I matter because I am a link in that eternal chain.

I have spent a lot of time thinking about my Jewish identity and my relationship to Judaism. In early adolescence my yearning to belong to a larger family propelled me into my lifelong love affair with Judaism and Zionism. Unlike psychoanalysis, which was force-fed to me and was too bound up in compliance and loss of self, Judaism was mine to discover. Throwing myself into studying it helped me fill the void left by no grandparents, no aunts, uncles, cousins. I replaced my lost family with the larger eternal Jewish family. (It was at college that I decided to formally convert to Judaism. I had learned that, by Jewish law, being born of a non-Jewish mother meant I was not a Jew. The details of that experience will be a story for another time.)

At age seventeen, I left home for the first time to spend a summer on a kibbutz. I had figured out that the only way to leave home and not have my Zionist, Holocaust-survivor father experience it as a betrayal was to spend summers in Israel. I arrived right after the heady days of the Six-Day War, and I was swept up in the pride and relief that the State of Israel would continue to exist and flourish.

So, on this day at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, nearly forty years later, in a deep sense a circle is closed. After my mother lights the flame, the ceremony continues as we all adjourn to the synagogue, a lovely, intimate chapel. There is a table displaying family photos and my father's books. My sister gives a moving presentation, chronicling our parents' story and their mounting despair as they realized that our father's relatives (our relatives) in Poland were doomed. With trembling hands, Diana holds the last letter written by my father's family to him. This letter now lives eternally on the Internet.

My mother is given a certificate and a medal, on which are inscribed the words from the Talmud "He who has saved a single

life, it is as if he has saved an entire world.” In my mother’s characteristic laconic way, she murmurs almost inaudibly, “Thank you for all the attention.” (Did she at that moment feel she was finally getting the attention she had craved all of her life but was too shy to seek out?) Then our friends and well-wishers are instructed to board a bus that brings us to the Garden of the Righteous. Upon the beautiful walls of Jerusalem stone that line the paths are inscribed over 20,000 names of non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews. The names are categorized by nationality. We wait in the now warmer noonday sun and the dappled shade from the trees as my mother arrives, transported by the ambulette. We are told to gather by the wall marked Switzerland, where a black cloth hangs. As photos and video are taken, the section of marble wall is unveiled. There is my mother’s name, ANNA RIESEN FLESCHER, carved into the stone. My mother’s name and my father’s name, Gentile and Jew, mother and father joined together and preserved forever in this beautiful, sacred space.

CONCLUSION

I originally planned to end this paper with excerpts of a letter my father received dated January 27, 1943, eight days before the Nazis liquidated the Stanislavov ghetto. These are the letters that appear on the Internet. Now that I have at last found my own voice, it feels right to let the grandmother and the aunt I never knew have the last word. In this way I seem to have resolved my dilemma: I am writing about them and honoring them and having them be remembered, but *through me*.

[*From my grandmother Sallah*] My dear son, this is my last letter to you. We have all been condemned to die. Be happy in the rest of your life. I think not about myself but about my young children. I pity them that they have lived even less than I have. With love, your unhappy Mother.

[*From my Aunt Gusta*] The situation here is so serious that this may well be the last letter you receive from us. . . . No one will survive this hell.

But I found myself unhappy with this ending. It turns out I can’t quite let my aunt and my grandmother have the last word. I do

not choose to conclude on such a tragic note. That is exactly what the legacy of the Holocaust can be: It has the potential to overwhelm, to silence, to numb, and to make all subsequent activity seem trivial and pointless. It has been said: "After Auschwitz there can be no poetry." And I want and need to write more poetry of my own.

So this is where I have come to in my journey of healing. I now understand that my ghosts had been haunting me and that I could only let go of them, and they of me, once I had put faces and names to them, and mourned them in a public fashion. The ceremony at Yad Vashem and the subsequent recounting of the events that continues to live on the Internet, as well as the process of working on this paper, have all played a part in rescuing me from muteness.

Now, perhaps, I can begin to write my own story.

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