

## LOOKING FOR MY GRANDMA

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It was the first day of spring, March 20th, and the sun was beaming at me as I hopped and skipped to my Dad's fur shop. I was wearing a favorite orange and brown plaid silk skirt and shirt with a sailor collar in honor of my sixth birthday. My father greeted me with hugs, kisses and six birthday "spans" and one for good luck. I always wiped my cheeks off with the back of my hand when he wasn't looking because his kisses were so juicy.

"Happy, happy birthday! Now that you are six, I have a surprise for you. I am going to teach you the combination to the store safe. Come with me to the back of the store." My father was wearing an old pair of gray pants with a well worn faded black leather belt that was no longer holding its shape. The belt had a silver buckle with his initials B. R. engraved in a florid Old English script and an ornate scroll design framing the initials. The light gray cotton shop jacket that he wore had stray hairs of the furs he had been crafting from Persian lamb and mink pelts into coats. The combined scents of an astringent after shave lotion and the animal skins commingled. I stood very close to my father as he said "Now watch carefully. You turn the knob of the lock left until it points to zero on the black dial, and stop. Then you do it again. Now you go past zero to the right until you reach eighteen, then left past zero to thirty six." This made me feel that I was to be trusted with the secret combination to the safe where the furs and other valuables were kept, so I was growing up! It was almost like watching a magician perform an illusion to see my dad turn the silver knob on front of the tan safe door to the proper numerals. After repeating the maneuver several times he said "OPEN SEZ ME" and the huge vault door swung open.

Inside amongst bundles of mink, beaver and Russian broadtail skins was a package wrapped in very thick brown paper.

"This present just came from your grandmother, Karoline, who lives in Krakow, Poland," he said. The box my father handed me was small, about two by four inches. My name was written on top of the care/of with my father's name and store address, but Alice was misspelled to Elise.

My feelings were hurt. I heard so many stories about this grandmother who was so smart. I asked my dad "How come grandma doesn't know how to spell my name if she is so smart?"

My father said "That is the way it is spelled in Polish," his eyes crinkled at the corners as he smiled at me through his frameless eyeglasses. I knew that my father's diction didn't sound like other American men, particularly when it came to sounding words that started with a "w" like wonderful. It always had a "v" sound, and the words that began with a "v" like victory had a "w" sound. I accepted the fact that Polish born people couldn't speak English very well, but it didn't make sense to me that my grandmother couldn't spell my name correctly.

I wanted to know more about my invisible grandmother, in Krakow. "What does she look like? Does she have blonde hair like mine? What color are her eyes?"

My dad assured me, "She has green eyes. You are the living image of her. Her waistline is so small that she can put both hands on either side of her waist so that her fingers touch, and that is after having nine children!"

I placed my hands on either side of my waist to see if my fingers could touch, and they did! This was another link to my grandmother. Your grandma speaks French, German and Polish. She manages a big house with three in help to do the cooking, cleaning and to keep the parquet floors polished and the crystal chandeliers sparkling."

"Why can't she do any of these things? Is she sick or too old?" I asked. Suddenly I had a vision of a helpless old lady and I had second thoughts about wanting to model myself after her.

"Your grandmother is a business-woman; she and your grandfather, Wilhelm, own a specialty store in town. She is the brains behind the business."

"How come grandfather doesn't know what to do? What kind of business is it anyway?"

"It's a fabric store. One floor is for woolens, another for silk, a third is for draperies and curtains, and then there is a floor for lace and trimmings as well as buttons and thread. Your grandmother has a lot to say about the colors and quality of the things they sell"

My fingers were still trying to remove the thick outer brown wrapping of the box which was tied with heavy twine. When I did, I opened the cover and saw a shiny gold chain with a four leaf clover in green enamel on the lid of a gold locket. It was my first piece of jewelry. I was thrilled. I opened the locket and it was inscribed "fur Elise". Again, my name misspelled! It was a disappointment that was hard for me to understand. This didn't stop me from wearing my birthday present, nor did I fail to notice the envious glances from my school friends the next day at the object around my neck.

On Sunday mornings over brunch, one of my favorite rituals with my father was to ask him about his life in Krakow as a boy and what he remembered about his mother in particular. "Whenever people were in trouble, she was the first to hear of it. She saw to the needs of the poor by providing food and medicine. Whenever she heard of Jewish girls who were orphaned, she made arrangements for them to be fed, clothed and educated and learn a skill or trade so they could support themselves. When these young women became of marriageable age, your grandmother sought appropriate suitors for them and took the initiative in planning their weddings. The brides all had a dowry and the necessary household items to create a comfortable home. Your grandmother provided all these furnishings."

It made me happy to hear about this wonderful woman who could do so many things for people less fortunate. This paradigm of a grandmother has accompanied me through out my life. She was energetic, smart, and liberated for her time at the close of the nineteenth century.

I vividly remembered my sixth birthday as I was planning a trip to Poland which I was giving myself as a seventieth birthday gift. I wanted to see the beginnings of Jewish resistance to Hitler and the Nazi German onslaught during World War Two. I joined a small group of American tourists who wanted to go to the places of so much suffering and Jewish courage. I also wanted to

visit the house where my father was born and which still stood in Krakow. My grandparents had lived and led productive lives there that were dedicated to improving the human condition for so many in the community.

Our visit began in Warsaw. It was a gray day which was in keeping with the sadness I felt. I stood near the sewer cover in the Ghetto where underground connections were made by the Jewish resistance fighters. I visualized the sewage and could almost smell the stench that these heroes were subjected to. Later, as we went to Umschlag Platz, where 300,000 Jews were channeled to Treblinka and other death camps, I closed my eyes and felt the pain and panic of what those lost souls felt.

I kept thinking, is this the place where Grandma Caroline and forty nine members of her family had to come before being herded on to a cattle car? The official tour guide told us that it took two hours from the time the cattle cars came to a landing platform and prisoners tumbled out, the elderly were stripped of their clothes, heads shaved, and gassed. The younger unfortunate males and females who were selected for work and prostitution went through a similar process. I wondered if German efficiency would have transported Jews from Krakow to Warsaw to sort out the destiny of their victims. Surely, that would have been wasteful of time and energy.

I couldn't help but question whether religion was a solace or a curse for the victims at the moment of realization of what was to be their fate. Really, I was questioning what my grandmother felt. My father had told me often that she was a woman who prayed fervently morning, noon and night. It was difficult for me to think about blind faith in a God who didn't seem to be available for the victims like my grandma. For her sake, I hoped that her prayers and faith gave her comfort.

When I entered through the gate of Auschwitz where the ironic infamous slogan "Arbeit Macht Frei" ("Work Sets You Free") loomed overhead, I clenched my teeth. After seeing the cells and torture chambers there, I went to the "museum" of human bestiality where remnants of what had taken place there are displayed; suitcases which were confiscated, human hair, gold extracted from teeth, the infamous bars of soap marked in Hebrew letters "R.I. F." (Pure Jewish Fat), and the lampshades made from human skin that the infamous Ilse Koch favored as a decorative item for lamps. Was I looking at anything that had been part of you, grandma?

In the afternoon we drove to Treblinka where 800,000 Jews were murdered by the Germans from 1941 to 1943. A powerful memorial of 17,000 different shaped rocks and stones with names carved into them representing all the communities that were annihilated by Hitler and his hordes. I wept uncontrollably with each step that I took as I headed for the one marked Krakow, and placed pebbles as markers of my having visited there. This is the custom when visiting a grave at a Jewish cemetery. At Treblinka there is also a common burial site for some of the human remains that were uncovered at various concentration camps. Above this memorial is a welded steel sculpture created from chromed car bumper parts which were oxidized black. Is my grandmother here with any of her children and grandchildren? Did you cry out, grandma, as you saw Zosia, Chiel, Tulek, beaten and pushed into the groups classified to work or to be murdered? Or did you witness your beautiful granddaughter, Marina, chosen for prostitution for a German officer?

Upon arriving in Krakow the following day, I visited the 13th century Wawel castle, or as my father pronounced it, "Vavel", built by king Kazimierz. It is located high on a hill overlooking the Vistula River, or as dad would say, "Wistula."

The main purpose of my trip was realized the next day when I went to the Kazimierz district of Krakow and actually entered the house at 14 Krakowska Street where my father was born and the whole family lived. The limestone facade of the four story mansion exceeded my expectations. It survived partly because Hitler had wanted to preserve Krakow in particular as a living museum city of what had once been a thriving Jewish community. After World War II the Polish government had requisitioned this house, and divided the interior into many studio apartments, which they rented out to its citizens. The ornate wrought iron supporting the banisters hadn't been removed, and the well worn marble stairs leading from the entrance hall to each landing seemed to have witnessed the life that had been lived there. I pictured my father running down the flights of stairs two at a time not to be late for Hebrew studies at cheder, or perhaps more eagerly to play soccer. Once out in the street he had to be ever watchful that the Polish gangs wouldn't catch him as they cried "kill the Jew!" This was an often repeated story that I heard during my childhood.

Before my father left Krakow permanently to come to the United States when he was fifteen, his father showed him a hiding place on the side wall of one of the fireplaces in their home. After bringing him to the location, he removed a brick and then a metal strong box which contained one million American dollars! It had been my childhood fantasy to visit this house and find the hidden treasure, so that I could donate it to a worthy charity.

These memories came to life as I looked through the stained glass windows of the entrance door. I pictured the family life that took place in this house with my father's three sisters and four brothers. Everything revolved around the Sabbath and Jewish holidays. My dad did manage to play soccer, and he made a deal with his sisters that he would bring back their favorite cookies and candy if they wouldn't tell their mother that he had sneaked off to the theatre or opera.

It was hard to listen to my guide who was beckoning for me to leave my family's home. Across the street was 14 Krakowska where my grandparents business had been located. I still wanted to see the synagogue where I imagined my father had celebrated his Bar Mitzvah, and where my grandparents must have attended daily and weekly Sabbath services, and all holidays. I had no definite information as to which of the many choices of synagogues was the actual one. I went by instinct. I knew it had to be within an easy walk from the house. Was it the Aft Synagogue or perhaps the 17th century Isaac Synagogue? I would never be certain, but the essence of my forebears had entered my soul on my sixth birthday when I opened my grandmother Karoline's birthday gift, and it was reinforced during this trip. My father had unlocked the safe in his store and showed me the combination of numbers that made this happen. Now I had manipulated numbers and opened up the vault to the past. I felt as if I had walked on the cobblestones of a path from the past to the present. The remaining question is "Would the next generation care as much as I do about annihilated families?" The echo of the passage from the Sabbath service repeats itself endlessly in my head, "le d'or vd'or," from one generation to the next. The times have passed and our forebears have vanished. They are the markers on the stones from where we all came. I pray and will do all I can so that they will be remembered.