

Esther Safran Foer

I WANT
YOU TO
KNOW
WE'RE
STILL
HERE



*My family, the Holocaust
and my search
for truth*

Esther Safran Foer

I Want You to Know We're Still Here

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Foer E.

I Want You to Know We're Still Here / E. Foer — «HarperCollins»,

A moving and powerful inter-generational memoir about story and memory. Mine is a family of readers and writers. Our house is filled with books. There are contemporary design books on the coffee table in the living room, legal books in my husband's home office, and piles of children's books for when my grandchildren visit. However, the side table next to my bed is piled with books about the Holocaust. Framed maps of shtetls line my office walls and pictures of relatives killed in the Holocaust are displayed on our family gallery walls. Sometimes I feel like I exist across two polarized realities, experiencing great fulfillment from family, friends, and a meaningful career, and, at the same time, finding the joy of my life tempered by its shadows. In the darker corners of my mind live ghosts and demons who visit me from the shtetls in Ukraine where my family came from. Some of the details that make these visions so vivid are imagined because I grew up in a family where memories were too terrible to speak of. This is the true story of four generations who have been dealing with the Holocaust and its aftermath. We are four generations, survivors and survivors of survivors, storytellers and memory keepers. And we're still here.

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I WANT YOU TO KNOW WE'RE STILL HERE

My family, the Holocaust and my search for truth

Esther Safran Foer



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

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An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd

1 London Bridge Street

London SE1 9GF

First published in Great Britain by HQ in 2020

Published in the United States by Tim Duggan Books, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

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Source ISBN: 9780008297626

Ebook Edition © April 2020 ISBN: 9780008297633

Version: 2020-02-10

Dedication

For my parents, and those who came before them. For my grandchildren, and those who will come after them.

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1

My birth certificate says that I was born on September 8, 1946, in Ziegenhain, Germany. It's the wrong date, wrong city, wrong country. It would take me years to understand why my father created this fabrication. Why, each year, my mother came into my room on March 17 and gave me a kiss and whispered, "Happy birthday."

Piecing together the fragments of my family story has been a lifelong pursuit. I am the offspring of Holocaust survivors, which, by definition, means there is a tragic and complicated history. My childhood was filled with silences that were punctuated by occasional shocking disclosures. I understood there was a lot that I didn't know, besides the secret of my invented birthday. My parents were reluctant to speak of the past, and I learned to maneuver around difficult subjects.

When I was in my early forties, preparing to give a talk at a local synagogue, I decided that this might be a good opportunity to fill in a few gaps of our family story. I sat down with my mother in the pink kitchen of her 1950s-suburban tract house, on a street where most of the other homes were occupied by families of Holocaust survivors. Sitting at her faux-marble laminate kitchen table, I could see the carefully cut coupons sorted into neat piles by the refrigerator, ready for the next shopping trip. In the cabinet below, there was enough flour and cereal, all of it purchased on sale, to withstand a major catastrophe.

I started with a few questions about my father and his experience during the war. He had been an enigma, a mercurial figure that all conversation danced around, even in my own head. My mother took a sip of the instant coffee that she loved and casually mentioned that my father had been in a ghetto with his wife and daughter. He'd been on a work detail when they were both murdered by the Nazis. Absolutely stunned, I blurted out, "He had a wife and daughter? Why haven't you ever told me this before? How can you be telling me now for the first time?"

I had grown up surrounded by ghosts—haunted by relatives who were rarely talked about and by the stories that no one would share. Now there was a new ghost that I hadn't even known about—my own sister. I pressed my mother for more, but she made it clear that the conversation was over. *Genug shoyt*. Enough already. I'm not sure how much she even knew about his family—I suspected that she and my father didn't speak much of the past, even to each other. Life was all about moving forward.

I walked out of my mother's house in a daze.

I didn't know it then, but this was the beginning of a search that would define the next phase of my life.

Determined to learn more, I scoured online Holocaust databases to see if I could find a birth or death record for my sister, to no avail. I hired researchers in Ukraine. I even hired an FBI agent to analyze photographs. My searches came up empty. I talked to everyone I could think of to see what they knew, and I got the same response: "There were so many people killed, so many babies, how can we remember all of the names?"

I didn't want all of the names. I wanted the name of my sister.

Of the person closest to me killed in the Holocaust, my half sibling, I had not one detail, not a name, not a picture—not one piece of a memory. Here was a child, one among at least six million Jews, one of almost 1.5 million children who were murdered during the Holocaust, and there was no way to remember that this child had even lived.

How do you remember someone who has left no trace?

The search took me to places that allowed me to more deeply understand the Holocaust and how it continued to reverberate long past the liberation and into future generations. It was ultimately a search that took me to places inside myself that scared me.

It has been said that Jews are an ahistorical people, concerned more with memory than history. A curious fact: There is no word in the Hebrew language that precisely connotes history. *Zikaron* and *zakhor*, used in its stead, translate to “memory.” The word for “history” in modern Hebrew is lifted from the English word, which was originally lifted from the Greek *historia*. History is public. Memory is personal. It is about stories and select experiences. History is the end of something. Memory is the beginning of something.

“Jews have six senses. Touch, taste, sight, smell, hearing ... memory.” This is the way my son Jonathan summed it up in his 2002 novel, *Everything Is Illuminated*. “The Jew is pricked by a pin and remembers other pins ... When a Jew encounters a pin, he asks: What does it remember like?”

Parsing this intersection of history and memory may seem an abstraction, a mere matter of linguistics, but for me it is quite real. I have spent much of my life trying to excavate the memories that elude me.

On the mantel in my living room is a curated still life of glass jars. A casual visitor to my home might think I have created a shrine to dirt and debris, and they wouldn't be entirely wrong. Inside each carefully labeled jar is a sliver of memory: a piece of earth from my mother's shtetl in Kolki, Ukraine; sandstone from the massive Uluru rock in Central Australia; remnants of the Berlin Wall; rubble from the Warsaw Ghetto. Once, on a trip to Sardis, Turkey, I noticed that a piece of the marble mosaic floor of an ancient synagogue had come loose, and I discreetly slipped a fragment of tile into my bag when my husband had turned the other way. Despite his frequent admonitions to please not abscond, let alone cross international borders, with my purloined ruins, my husband, Bert, knows that getting me to abide is hopeless. I'm an aggressive collector, a woman with a mission, who walks around stuffing pieces of personal history into Ziploc bags.

Memory is everywhere in my house. The twenty-one jars in my living room are part of a larger collection that spills into my kitchen, where along the window ledge are nearly forty more.

This obsession runs in my family. Who knows, it might even be genetic. As improbable as it sounds, the youngest of my three sons, Joshua, was the 2006 U.S.A. Memory Championship winner. It's a subject about which he wrote a book: *Moonwalking with Einstein: The Art and Science of Remembering Everything*. Frank, my oldest, a writer and historian, recently spoke on a panel in Kiev, Ukraine, our ancestral homeland, titled: “Can memory save us from history? Can history save us from memory?” Jonathan, my middle child, managed to elicit the words “holy shit” from fire inspectors who paid a routine visit to his dorm room at Princeton in the late 1990s, where they saw, along with the usual collegiate fire hazards of tangled electrical cords and DIY lighting, a collection of Ziploc bags carefully tacked to his wall in rows—his own receptacles of memory.

Even when entombed inside a jar, memory is both tangible and shape-shifting. Memories aren't static; they change with time, sometimes to a point where they bear only a passing resemblance to what actually happened.

Even so, I feel a great responsibility to keep the past alive.

“How will I know who these people are?” my oldest grandchild, Sadie, asked me one day, while we were sitting in my home office, which overflows with photographs, documents, and maps, some neatly organized in labeled boxes and others in piles around the room.

Sadie's question haunts me. I haven't bothered to identify the people in these photographs, because I know who they are. My mother, interestingly, took the time to label and categorize all of her pictures—not just the old ones, but even those of her children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Sadie's query made me want to cast aside all other obligations and tend to my vast messy archive. In those crammed boxes, most of what is known of my family's past resides. The photos are all that

remain of long-dead relatives with no direct descendants to tell their stories or even to remember their names. They are not just photos of those killed in the Holocaust but even of family in America, such as the one of my young cousin Mark, whose grandparents and parents took my parents and me in when we arrived in Washington, D.C., in 1949, after almost three years in a displaced-persons camp in Germany. Mark, an only child and an only grandchild, died shortly after this photograph was taken, after a routine tonsillectomy, at the age of four—just a few months before we came to the United States. We left behind the deprivations of the DP camp and the horrors of war only to slip into the wake of this other quiet tragedy. Now that his parents are gone, too, it is up to me to keep the memory of this wisp of a boy alive.

To know me, you would think I am a happy woman with an easy smile—which I am. But at the same time, my joy is tempered by the shadows of the past. In the darker corners of my mind live the ghosts who visit me from the shtetls in Ukraine where my family once lived, and where most of them died. Some of the details that make these visions so vivid are imagined, because I grew up in a family where memories were too terrible to commit to words.

My parents, Ethel Bronstein and Louis Safran, were the only members of their large extended families to survive the Holocaust. My mother spent the war on the run. I don't know how my father survived, although we know he was hidden by a family for at least some part of it. Their parents, siblings, nieces and nephews, aunts and uncles, and cousins were all murdered. I can't bring myself to use the common euphemism "perished."

Children can bring down walls and open doors for their parents. Jonathan's first novel, based on a journey to Europe before his final year of college, did just that. He was in search of a topic for his senior thesis, and I urged him to visit the shtetl Trochenbrod, in Ukraine, where I thought my father had come from. Before he left for Europe that summer of 1998, I gave him forty copies of a tattered black-and-white picture of four people—my father, an older man, and two women—the people who my mother thought had hidden him in their house for some part of the war. The hope was that Jonathan might find the family that gave my father shelter.



A black-and-white photo of my father, Louis Safran (top, left) and the family that hid him during the war.

Jonathan found nothing. Lacking facts, he spent the rest of the summer writing a work of fiction based very loosely upon the few details we knew of our family history. The novel opened doors that filled in many of the most important memory holes in my life, as fiction mysteriously generated facts.

In Jonathan's novel, the self-declared hero, whose name is also Jonathan Safran Foer, is in pursuit of a character named Augustine, who is thought to have hidden the fictional Jonathan's grandfather. It is fiction layered on possible fact layered with more fiction. It's a dazzling, playful Rubik's Cube of a book that spins on its head our family history and leaves even me a tad confused. It's fiction, yes, but here Jonathan, unwittingly, had touched a nerve. My family's deeply buried memories, their tendency toward silence, would have its own tragic repercussions. Jonathan writes of a suicide that echoes one in our own family—something he was unaware of at the time that he wrote the book.

The release of the book, and the film that followed, sparked new interest in the shtetls our family came from and opened the door for new information from a variety of sources. My own obsession grew accordingly. I began working genealogy websites, picking up new clues during travel in Brazil and Israel.

There was only so much I could do from afar. Like the character in Jonathan's novel, I armed myself with maps and photographs and eventually boarded a Lufthansa flight to Ukraine in 2009. I brought with me, of course, a supply of Ziploc bags.

I set out to find the family that had hidden my father during the war and to see what I could learn about the sibling I had never known. I set out to find a shtetl that, by all accounts, was no more. I set out to learn about my father. I set out to know about my sister. I set out to let my ancestors know that I haven't forgotten them. That we are still here.

2

One morning in early July 1941, as Nazi parachutes rained down from the sky, as people froze and watched, or raced home to barricade themselves inside, or collected their families and prepared to hide, my mother decided to flee.

But first she ran back along the dirt road to her house to grab a pair of scissors, a few items of clothing, and her winter coat.

In my imagination, it was a beautiful, temperate summer day, but she nevertheless thought to take her winter coat, along with the scissors and a change of clothes. Her own mother stood by and watched in silence. They parted without saying goodbye.

My mother's younger sister, seventeen-year-old Pesha, ran after her, chasing her down the dirt road that led from their small wooden house to the main street of Kolki.

"You are so lucky to be leaving," Pesha said, as she took off her shoes and gave them to my mother so she would have an extra pair. Pesha then turned and walked home barefoot along the same dirt road.

My mother almost immediately lost one of the shoes.

This was one of the foundational stories I grew up with—Pesha and the shoes. My mother came back to this again and again. As with the stories about my father, she would every now and then let slip some astounding detail and then refuse to elaborate. *Genug*. Enough. It was too painful to recount, but in this case, I suspect her reluctance was infused with the guilt of leaving Pesha behind, of not saying goodbye to her mother. They were two strong-willed women, and there had been plenty of recent tension.



My mother Ethel with her younger sister Pesha, their grandmother Rose, and my mother's cousin Freika.

I wanted to know Pesha, to hear her, to see her, to know what she was like, but my mother wasn't willing to tell me more, other than repeating over and over again the story of the shoes. I have a photo of Pesha from when she was maybe five or six, standing between my mother and their maternal grandmother Rose. She is a cute, impish child, with short brown hair, wearing a shirt with a long bow, more a tie than a bow. She is holding her grandmother's hand. On the other side of their grandmother is my mother's cousin Freika. The photograph looks somewhat formal—or what passed for formal in those days—with a makeshift curtain in the backdrop, and it's the only photograph of Pesha that survives. The photo, with an inscription from my mother on the back, was sent to my mother's Aunt Chia in the United States. The few photographs I have were sent to American and Brazilian relatives. I am grateful because it is the only thing that enables me to see Pesha as something other than a ghost.

If you asked my mother how she survived the war, she would say it was luck and intuition. She was always on the lookout for four-leaf clovers. She visited fortune-tellers. Late in her life, she kept a pencil and paper with her to play inscrutable games of chance. Tiny scratchings, numbers that she jotted down and then crossed out, appeared at random on scraps of paper or even in the middle of greeting cards she received. A small table in her bedroom was full of elephants brought to her as gifts, their trunks tilted upward, a sign of good luck. She was full of old-world superstition: If you bragged about your good fortune around my mother, she would tell you that the evil eye, or *gatoyik* in Yiddish, would see you and bring on troubles.

So perhaps luck and intuition helped save her, but I know that it was more than that.

For most of her life, my mother didn't call herself a Holocaust survivor. In her mind, the term was reserved for those sent to concentration camps. My family was part of the Holocaust that people didn't know about or understand at the time. Of the six million Jews killed during the Holocaust, somewhere between one and a half and two million were rounded up from their homes in Eastern Europe and taken to open pits, where they were shot by *Einsatzgruppen*—German mobile killing squads—sometimes with the help of local collaborators. This is often referred to as the “Holocaust by Bullets.”

From shtetl to shtetl, there were small variations in how the murders occurred. Sometimes Jews were first herded into ghettos and into forced labor. Some were led into synagogues that were then set on fire. Some were beaten to death, or raped, or forced to walk into open pits, or transported to their grave sites in trucks. Sometimes the graves were already dug; other times the Jews were required to wield the shovels themselves. The narratives differ in detail, but all end on the same unspeakable note.

So, yes, something bad was indeed coming, and my then-twenty-one-year-old mother was not relying entirely on her gut on the day that the Nazis invaded her shtetl. In addition to the parachutes, there were trucks rolling into the village, with soldiers in uniform. You might think others, even if they lacked my mother's intuition, would look at these signs and flee, as well. There was some warning—the incursion onto the Soviet territory had begun two weeks earlier, on June 22, at 4:00 A.M. on the dot. And yet, as we know from the tales of survivors, from our knowledge of history, from our understanding of human behavior, it was not easy to abandon a home, to spontaneously pack up and leave behind all that you had ever known. And even more difficult to imagine the fate that awaited if you did not.

My mother had another reason for knowing that it was best for her to leave. As a teenager, she had been involved with a local Communist group, and she suspected this affiliation would not serve her well when the Germans arrived. She had once even been arrested, dragged out of her house in the middle of the night, taken to the police station in a horse and buggy, and thrown into jail. Her widowed mother had to send her son-in-law and a lawyer to get her out. When my mother finally came home, her mother wouldn't talk to her. That was her punishment and presumably part of what contributed to their steely farewell.

My mother would tell her grandchildren that she wasn't really a Communist, that she just believed in “equal rights.” Nevertheless, we know that she went to meetings. Who knows—some of

that might have even been self-protection, because whether it was the Russians or the Germans or the Ukrainians who were worse to the Jews had a fluid answer, dependent on the moment in time. And for a while at least, during the Russian occupation of Kolki from 1939 to 1941, she was rewarded by the Russians, first with a job in an office and then as a manager in one of the larger regional stores.

It's also possible that my mother's political leanings had to do with her resentment of her paternal grandfather. Shtetl life is rendered idyllic by Marc Chagall and turned into fable by Isaac Bashevis Singer, but one thing I have learned from piecing together my family narrative is that the place was just as full of drama—family tensions and divorce and unwanted pregnancies—as any modern-day soap opera.

Nissan Tzvi Bronstein, my mother's paternal grandfather, was one of the richest men in town. In addition to owning the flour mill that stood behind his large multigenerational house, he was an exporter of dried mushrooms and bristles for brushes. He was so wealthy that he even had a piano, which was quite a luxury at the time. He built up an international business, and about every six months he traveled to the United States for work and to visit his two children, Necha and Max, who had settled in St. Louis.

My mother and her sisters, Pesha and Lifsha, had been living in Nissan's house with their parents, Srulach and Esther, while their own house was being built. Then Srulach contracted tuberculosis. He hoped to travel to a sanatorium in Italy for a cure, but a visa was denied, so he and Esther headed west to a sanatorium somewhere near Warsaw, which is where he died.

When Esther returned from burying her husband, she and her father-in-law had a dispute; apparently, it had to do with the inheritance for her and her children now that her husband, Nissan's son, had died. The argument turned sufficiently bitter that my grandmother and her two daughters moved out and into their unfinished house. Lifsha, Srulach's daughter from his first marriage (his first wife had also died of tuberculosis), was sent off by her grandfather to live in another town with one of her aunts.

This resulted in such bad feelings that for the rest of her days in Kolki, my mother would cross the road when she walked down the main street so that she would not have to walk in front of Nissan's house. She tended to see the world in black and white and did not forgive easily.

Even when it was still difficult to get my mother to talk about the war, she would open up about Kolki, and detail by detail I was eventually able to construct a version of the shtetl in my mind. I could envision the houses, the animals, the stoves, my grandmother, and my aunts. I knew where everyone lived. I could see my mother in a fashionable dress that might have been sent to her by one of her American cousins, walking down to the river for a *shpatzir*, a stroll, with friends. Or she might have come down to the sandy banks, near the canoes, to wash the dishes before Passover.

Other stories began to emerge, often toggling between harrowing war stories and the minutiae of everyday life. The horrors become familiar with time, but the banal details can take on an almost magical quality, which might account for the instinct of artists to make the shtetl into a fairy tale.

It was a wonderful little town with nice people. Plain people. Hardworking.

We had a library. We had a doctor. We had a dentist.

The houses were made of brick.

And of wood.

They were nice houses.

Next door to us lived two brothers.

They were butchers.

We had horses.

And wagons.

We had nice clothes and beautiful shoes.

On the Sabbath, there was chicken, beef sometimes, turkey maybe twice a year for the big holidays.

Schmaltz was a big thing. Here, you don't want the fat, you throw it away. There, when you go to the butcher—I remember this—they used to beg the butcher should give them a little bit of fat ...

And Trochenbrod, where I went once in a while, in the summer, because there was everything: fresh milk, fresh sour cream, like yogurt. Smetana. From the smetana you made butter ... Very tasty ... everything was fresh there, fruits ...

We continued to press my mother for details, sometimes conducting formal interviews. Frank decided to write about his grandmother for his high school senior project, and over the course of six weeks in 1992 he spent several days each week with her, a tape recorder running as he took her shopping, with all of those coupons in hand, in search of that week's bargains. She has also been interviewed by volunteers from the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, by writers and filmmakers, by other family members, and by an anthropologist cousin, who was interested in details on Kolki. I have hours and hours of taped interviews done during different stages in her life.

There were recurring motifs: the winter coat, the sister who ran after her, the pair of shoes. Beautiful Lifsha, my mother's twenty-five-year-old half sister, and Lifsha's two daughters, and her husband, David Shuster, who had been conscripted into the Polish army to fight the Nazis.

My mother remembered going with Lifsha and the rest of the family to see David off. "We all cried and cried," my mother said, "because we thought we might never see him again."

David survived; Lifsha and their daughters did not. Lifsha was killed in such a terrible way that my mother hesitated to speak of it, until she did, cryptically, referring to a million rapes. It's not entirely clear to me when Lifsha died, but from what I have been able to piece together, she was one of the first killed in the initial days of the invasion, as was my mother's maternal grandfather, Yosef Weinberg. He had been in one of the four synagogues in the village for morning prayers when the Nazis came. The doors were bolted and the synagogue set on fire.

Pesha and her mother, Esther, and her paternal grandmother Chava, along with Lifsha's daughters, ages two and five, were taken to a ghetto set up for Jews, where they survived for about a year. Pesha managed to sneak out of the ghetto to see whether she could trade some silver spoons for food for the family and was shot on sight. Not long after, Chava and Esther, each holding one of Lifsha's children in their arms, were shot over an open pit.

And then, amid the horror of these awful stories, my mother took a poignant detour:

Before the war, there had been a man. A dentist. He asked her to go for a ride in his canoe, but she did not go, even though she liked him. He came to visit her, but nothing happened—she seemed both intrigued and a little frightened by his attention. He was about ten years older—or maybe five or maybe twenty years older. The age gap seemed to vary with each rendering of the story, and once she opened up about it, I heard it many times. I might ask my mother a question about the river and it would lead her back to the dentist, the man who asked her to go with him for a ride in the canoe.

And here—in this man with his boat—it is possible to see the genesis of just about every sweeping wartime love story. Apparently, there was another, more serious boyfriend, who at some point later, after the war, after he enlisted to take revenge on the Nazis, after he was badly wounded, somehow managed to find Ethel's address, to write, or have someone else write, a postcard with the message: "Don't wait for me. Go and get married." And she did. She married and she buried her husband and then she married again, and somehow, after my mother had been maybe fifteen or twenty years in the States, this man's sister, remarkably, found Ethel and told her what had happened to him. "For two, three days I couldn't eat," my mother said.

What *had* happened to him? I don't know. It's one of many questions, another fragment of another story, that I'll never have an answer to.

Even with just these sketchy details, I can still imagine the scene, my mother overcome with emotion, now remarried, living in suburban America, running a grocery store. She has children and stepchildren; she has a complicated and in many ways difficult life. And now this unexpected news

from the past, information about a long-lost love. I can see the telephone receiver pressed to her ear, her fingers nervously playing with the long looping cord.

She communicates with the sister for a while, clandestinely. But then, whatever it is that is going on, she decides to let it go.

“This is what happened,” she says simply, years later. “You know, what a terrible war.”

I would later learn this was only one of my mother’s postwar suitors. David Shuster, who had been married to Lifsha, asked my mother to marry him after the war. This is an old Jewish shtetl tradition—a widower marries the unmarried younger sister. But my mother refused him; she told me she couldn’t marry her sister’s husband. David seemed to understand and was respectful of her answer—he even gave her money for a new coat.

They saw each other years later in Israel. By that time, David had remarried and he now had another daughter and a stepson. He told my mother that he always kept a hidden picture of Lifsha with him.

Kolki. It was a wonderful town, with nice, plain, hardworking people, my mother said.

In the prewar years, there were few cars. If one came through, everyone ran after it, because it was such a wonder.

There was no indoor plumbing and no electricity, except in two or three homes, including my great-grandfather’s—the one with the piano.

The ovens provided heat.

Water came from the nearby Styr River or from wells. If you could afford it, water was delivered by a man who carried it in buckets on his shoulders.

Laundry was washed by boiling some of this water on the stove.

Wednesday was market day, when most of the shopping took place. My mother described it as a kind of bazaar or flea market, where you could see everything from horses and cows to blueberries and butter. There were little stores, usually attached to people’s houses—tailors, shoemakers, bakers, carpenters—and a doctor and, of course, the dentist.

There were a number of different synagogues in Kolki—at least four small synagogues that my mother could remember, some organized by profession. For example, there was the schneider’s shul (the tailor’s synagogue) and one for the more prosperous merchants, like my mother’s rich grandfather, and there were synagogues based on the rabbi’s orientation. My mother, when asked, couldn’t remember ever actually going into one of the synagogues, although she recalled playing outside during the Jewish High Holidays.

My parents were born in the same region—in what is now western Ukraine and was then eastern Poland—but not the same town. Trochenbrod and Kolki were only about thirteen miles apart, and there were lots of family overlaps and visits between the towns.

There really is such a thing as Jewish geography. If you are a member of the tribe, you learn not to express surprise when you realize that your next-door neighbor is related to your best childhood friend or that his daughter has just married your cousin. Or that the boy in your son’s fourth-grade class is in fact a distant cousin.

“This town is a shtetl,” you might say. Except it’s more than just one town. It’s the world.

My mother had an anecdote she liked to tell about a visitor from the United States who was walking down the street in Kolki when a woman stuck her head out the window and yelled to him: “Do you know my Benjamin? He lives in New York.” As if America were such a small place that everyone knew everyone the way they did in Kolki. No punch line survives, but the answer could very well have been yes.

Like me, my mother had a confusing birth date. She knew that she was born in 1920 in Kolki on Lag B’Omer, a minor Jewish holiday that is considered a “happy day” in the middle of a period of sadness between Passover and Shavuot, a day for parties and bonfires. In the shtetl, dates were easy to mark if they coincided with a Jewish holiday. In 1920, Lag B’Omer fell on May 6. All of

my mother's official documents from the displaced-persons camps and her U.S. citizenship papers, however, show a birth date of June 15, 1920. When I pressed her on why the mix-up of dates for her and for me, she said that my father did it—that he scrambled all of the dates. In retrospect, since he clearly changed my birth date intentionally, my guess is he decided to mix up the others, as well.

Stories handed down from one generation to another change our behavior, but whether that leads to a desire to learn more or to silence the past, who can say. This question is central to a body of thought called *postmemory*, a term first introduced by writer and Columbia professor Marianne Hirsch. The idea is that traumatic memories live on from one generation to the next, even if the later generation was not there to experience these events directly. She suggests that the stories one grows up with are transmitted so affectively that they seem to constitute memories in their own right. That these inherited memories—traumatic fragments of events—defy narrative reconstruction.

Like so much else in our family story, scrambled birthdays seem to me one more detail, one more traumatic fragment of events that defy narrative reconstruction.

And yet piling fragment upon fragment is the best I can do, in the jars that line my mantel and in the story of my family, and it does add up to a picture that is something of a whole.

Like the recitation of names at a Yizkor service, a prayer for the departed, I am compelled to recite these fragments of my family history, to simply list the names, because sometimes that is the best we can do. There are no tombstones to mark the graves, so at least on these pages, the names reside.

There is my maternal great-grandmother Rose, or Reizel as she was called in Kolki, who would sometimes take my mother to Trochenbrod to visit her sister-in-law Sara Weinberg Bisker, who happened to be married to my father's cousin.

And my mother's older half sister, Lifsha, who was married to David Shuster. They met when he came from Trochenbrod to Kolki on business. Apparently, it was love at first sight. I have a number of pictures of Lifsha, with groups of friends, playing a balalaika, pictures with her husband and with one of their daughters, and a beautiful picture of her walking elegantly down the main street of Kolki with two of her aunts, her husband, David, her grandmother, and some cousins. "Shabbat walk in Kolki 1937" is written on the back of a photograph of a group of my female relatives, all of them wearing black, looking glamorous and carefree. If not for the inscription, I would have thought they were in Paris.

My mother's parents were Esther Weinberg and Srulach Bronstein, or Braunshtein, depending on who is doing the spelling. They were both widowed, their first spouses having died of tuberculosis.

My widowed grandmother Esther had a son in her first marriage who died and whose name I don't even know. My grandfather Srulach had a daughter, Lifsha, who became part of their new family.

Ethel, my mother, was the firstborn of my grandparents' second marriage. Her life was a new start for this fractured family.

Four years after my mother was born, Esther and Srulach had another daughter, Pesha—she of the shoes. Pesha was the quiet child, which is about the most I could get out of my mother, who almost never talked about her younger sister, other than to keep going back to the shoes.

My grandmother Esther came from a religious family that lived in a dorf, or village, called Kolikovich (Kulikowicze), near Kolki, along the Styr River. It had only a handful of families, and my grandmother's family may have been the only Jews.

My great-grandfather Yosef Weinberg was a tall, religious man, known for a fierce temper.

My great-grandmother Rose, or Reizel, was a tiny gentle woman, revered by her children and grandchildren. Like almost all of the Jews of Kolki, my great-grandparents and even my grandparents were related, either as cousins or through marriage.

My great-grandfather Yosef Weinberg's first cousin Itzak Sahn was married to my great-grandmother Rose's twin sister, Feiga.

Yosef and Rose's oldest daughter, Chia, sister of my grandmother Esther, married one of my grandfather Srulach's cousins. Two sisters married two cousins. And it goes on.

I wish I had more stories to attach to these names. A name is not a life, but sometimes it's the best we can do, and even in flattened form, this recitation is my way of merging memory with history.

One night recently, when I couldn't sleep, I went downstairs to my computer and started googling the name of the sanatorium in Poland where my maternal grandfather sought treatment and where he ultimately died. Remembering the name my mother had once mentioned, I tried several different spellings and finally stumbled on the TB sanatorium in Otwock, Poland, sixteen miles from Warsaw. The town apparently had a microclimate that made it a perfect place to treat patients with lung diseases. Isaac Bashevis Singer wrote about Otwock and its "crystal clear air." Following several links, I found the Otwock Jewish cemetery, which had a database of graves. One of those graves was that of "Israel Shlomo Bronstein, son of Natan Tzvi," whom we knew as Nissan. My grandfather's nickname was Srulach, although his given name was Israel. He died on March 14, 1927, and to my surprise, the website included an actual picture of his tombstone. I had a match! Now I had the exact date of his death and even my grandfather's middle name, Shlomo. I ran upstairs to tell Bert, who did not entirely share my enthusiasm in the middle of the night. My husband may be interested in my discoveries, but for him they can wait for sunrise.

As it happens, this is the only surviving tombstone of any of my immediate ancestors in all of Europe. Generations of my family lived in this part of the world, but all of their graves have either been destroyed or plowed over, or their bodies rest in mass graves, with no record of them anywhere other than in the Yad Vashem Holocaust database, if someone thought to enter their names.

My mother remained haunted all her life by the fact that she never said goodbye to her mother, who stood silently as she packed her things. She left without a plan. Just a winter coat, a pair of scissors, a change of clothes, and Pasha's shoes.

In the town square, she joined four of her girlfriends, Sura Kleiman, Bryna Weiman, Kittle Dricker, and Sura Mechlin. Together they followed the retreating Russian army and stayed ahead of the approaching Germans. But the five women were quickly separated in the chaos of their exodus. Three remained together and my mother ended up with Sura Mechlin, the one she knew least well. They spent the rest of the war as virtual sisters. All five of them survived and built new lives in Israel, Canada, and, in my mother's case, in the United States.

My mother and Sura traveled by horse-drawn wagon for a few days on the road east, with a Russian man my mother had worked with at a store in Kolki. But as the Soviet troops retreated, they saw the horse, wagon, and able-bodied young man and immediately requisitioned him. Before he left, however, he handed my mother a small suitcase and told her not to open it until he was gone. And here my mother did indeed have luck: The suitcase turned out to be filled with money that the man had taken from the store as he left. It was enough to get my mother and Sura started on their journey, even if it didn't last long.

The two "new sisters" kept moving east, following the retreating army, sleeping in barns and fields at night. They figured out how to hide stolen potatoes in the lining of their pants. People they met along the way sometimes gave them food. From the farmers, a little milk and maybe honey. Sometimes they just had to go hungry.

One difficult day's quest for survival led to another as they moved ever farther into Russia. They wandered the country for the ensuing three years, walking, hitching rides, sometimes hanging off trains. The grueling pace took a toll. My mother's legs swelled from all the walking. At one point, she developed sores from malnutrition, and Sura tended to her, sometimes helping her to dress. They became dependent on each other as they traveled, eventually making their way into Asia and figuring out how to survive moment to moment.

During the war, about one million Jews from the former Soviet Union, including Poland, managed to escape into Russia, with a significant number making it all the way into Central Asia,

like my mother and Sura. It has been estimated that about 300,000 of these died due to disease and starvation, while others died as Soviet soldiers.

“I was the lucky one,” my mother would say. “The others were in very, very bad shape, the ones I left behind.”

My mother was the boss, Sura told me years later, when I first met her in Israel in 1999. Sura brought me a Kiddush cup, celebrating life, from her home as a gift to remember her by.

“If there were just ten grains of rice to put in water to make soup, Ethel insisted we save two for the next day,” Sura said. They walked for miles, mostly by night, sometimes exchanging a little rice with local families for soap to wash themselves. My mother repeatedly told Sura that they had to save something so they could buy new dresses when they went home to see their families again.

They worked on farms and even in factories, making gun parts for the Soviet army. They found themselves in Kazakhstan and then, for a while, they worked in a city near Tashkent, Uzbekistan. The distance from Kolki to Tashkent is nearly 2,600 miles, if you use a direct route, about the same as the distance from New York to Los Angeles. Ethel and Sura hardly took a direct route, and much of the trip was on foot. But they were determined to make it, even as they watched people along the way giving up.

Sometime in 1944, when the war was not yet over, my mother and Sura heard that Kolki and neighboring shtetls had been liberated, so they immediately began to calculate how to go back home. They finally obtained a permit to leave Uzbekistan and go to the front lines in the west to offer medical support. Having survived this long, they had no interest in going to the front lines. Along the way they met a group of teenage Jewish girls who had become experts at forging documents and who produced falsified documents that would allow my mother and Sura to avoid the battles and go to Kolki.

They wrote a letter to Stalin—or at least he was the intended recipient—and somehow, somewhere, they received a letter from the Russian authorities saying all the Jews in Kolki had been killed. My mother and Sura refused to believe it. Even though the war wasn’t actually over, they went home.

When they finally arrived in Kolki, they met Sura’s brother-in-law, who had survived by hiding in the woods. He recounted everything that had happened to their families, person by person. After he told the handful of other returning survivors who returned to Kolki what had happened to their families, he left for Palestine, where, according to my mother, who met him years later, he literally never spoke another word.

I wish I knew more about him. I wish I had more details—my mother told me that she wished she’d had paper and pencil to record their journey, but she was too busy surviving. I can at least tell you what I know.

When they returned, my mother was able to identify her house—or her former house—which had been burned down; the wheel from the “oil factory” in the backyard was still there, sticking out of the ground.

As my mother wept, a woman on the other side of the street walked by, wearing her sister Lifsha’s dress. There was no mistaking the dress, because it had been sent by an American relative.

My mother and Sura wanted to say Kaddish for their families, but the mass grave was in the forest outside the village, and they were warned against going into the woods.

A neighbor my mother knew, seeing that she and Sura were hungry, offered them a meal that included a piece of meat. Sura ate, but my mother wouldn’t touch the meat. She recounted this story for Jonathan, when he was writing his book about vegetarianism, *Eating Animals*.

“He saved your life,” Jonathan said.

“I didn’t eat it.”

“You didn’t eat it?”

“It was pork. I wouldn’t eat pork.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean why?”

“What, because it wasn't kosher?”

“Of course.”

“But not even to save your life?”

“If nothing matters, there's nothing to save.”

3

My father's story proved more difficult to excavate. He died when I was eight, an event that is still difficult for me to talk about. Even as I have pieced together a plausible history, he remains an enigma; the more I learn, the less I know, both about him and his experience during the war.

There are no pictures of my father growing up, none of his prewar family, of his parents, who are my grandparents. No pictures of his sister and her husband, who are my aunt and uncle.

Bits and pieces of information have come together over the years from cousins in Israel and from other Trochenbrod survivors, in Brazil and Israel, from conversations in Ukraine, and from documents that only recently were made available through the Holocaust Museum. I have utilized every available ancestry tool I could find and have located long-lost relatives as well as ones I didn't know existed but none directly linked to my paternal grandfather's family. I have pieced together an impressive archive, but the reality is that it is easier to find information on—or at least references to—the fictitious shtetl that sprang from Jonathan's imagination than it is to find details about the place where my father actually lived.

I have come to accept that I will never know my father's full story: how he survived the war, the precise details of what he endured, of what haunted him and continued to cast shadows even on the new life he made in America. What I do know is that solving the mystery of the black-and-white photograph of my father and the family that hid him during the war, and of finding Trochenbrod—or at least assembling fragments of events, piecing together a narrative of the sister that I never knew—has been, for me, the way of finding my father.

I am writing today in my chilly basement office, wrapped in my Trochenbrod hoodie. It was given to Jonathan on the movie set of his adapted novel, which, were one to write a fairy-tale end to this tragic story, would pretty much sum up how strange and unexpected this journey for my father's past has proven to be.

"Memory beget memory beget memory," Jonathan writes of his fictitious "Trachimbrod," and it is in fact in these memories that my knowledge of the real Trochenbrod resides. Over the years, this search has led me to voraciously absorb every detail and anecdote that I can find, to assemble information about Trochenbrod piecemeal, like the shards of memory in my glass jars:

We know that after the rain fell, the air smelled like wildflowers.

That there was mud.

And geese.

And snakes.

And these snakes, according to one survivor, were so plentiful that they would come into the houses and the children would play with them and feed them at mealtimes, like pets. Once, a rabbi came to Trochenbrod and, hearing the complaints, said, "I will drive them away!" The rabbi went out into the field, tore up some grass, and threw it into the next field while uttering some words—a prayer, or a spell, or a shopping list, or a curse. Whatever it was, it worked, and that was the end of the snake infestation in Trochenbrod. Or so the story goes.

We know, from the interviews and memoirs of survivors, there were good solid houses, on high foundations, rectangular, with dirt floors.

A prosperous town, the population was 99 percent Jewish.

A thriving commercial center, it was *the* place to shop.

Some believe Sholem Aleichem visited Trochenbrod and drew inspiration there for his character Tevye the Dairyman.

The smell of freshly baked bread infused the air as the Sabbath approached, and in the summer, with the windows open, it might have been possible to hear everyone in town singing the same songs on the Sabbath, as though the village was one big family at one great meal.

The shtetl is gone and yet it still shapes my life. I have spent what seems like a lifetime gathering testimony from books and documentaries, from the few family photos that remain, from survivors' accounts, from oral histories, from reunions of survivors, and from the visit to Trochenbrod that I would undertake in 2009, with my son Frank. My home office overflows with papers and photographs, with large three-ring binders labeled "Trochenbrod," with boxes and folders full of documents and family stories. With map reproductions—some of such ancient provenance they look like they ought to be peopled by dragons and mythical beasts. With letters—tucked inside a folder, one of them five pages long, in neat, handwritten Yiddish from Itzhak Kimelblat in Brazil, eager to tell me his story, to maintain a connection to this vanished place.

While much of what I know about my family history has been deliberately and painstakingly assembled, a lifelong research project that has sent me on a scavenger hunt through libraries, the Internet, and around the globe, the broad outline of Trochenbrod's history requires no excavation—the arc of its inception to its violent decimation is readily accessible from the history books.

Trochenbrod was part of the Second Polish Republic before it was part of the Soviet Union before it was occupied by Nazi Germany as part of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact—or the German–Soviet Non-Aggression Pact or the Nazi German–Soviet Treaty of Non-Aggression, depending on which Wikipedia entry you prefer or where you stood in relation to the tanks.

Without getting too deep into the weeds of history, it is worth considering how it is that Jews wound up cultivating this marshy parcel of land, with its remote location, its poor soil, and its many snakes. Avrom Bendavid-Val, who was driven by a similar compulsion to explore Trochenbrod, notes in his book *The Heavens Are Empty* that Jews were not historically known as farmers, perhaps because of the conflict between religious practices and the demands of agrarian life—or maybe simply because of prohibitions against Jews owning land.

The short answer is that this part of Ukraine wound up, in the late 1700s, in what was known as Russia's Pale of Settlement, which stretched from the Baltic to the Black Sea and was home to between five and six million Jews.

It was in many ways idyllic and in more ways not. Jews were subject to heavy taxation, conscription into the Russian army, and were denied many civil rights. But they could avoid some of the more draconian measures if they agreed to cultivate farmland, which is what resulted in the creation of the Jewish shtetl of Trochenbrod.

These things I know from history books. What I have been able to gather from piecing together family history is more prosaic:

I know that my father's mother, Brucha, and her family lived in Trochenbrod, one house away from where her brother Yurchem and sister-in-law Sosel lived.

That a few houses farther up, on the same side of the road, were cousins Avrom and Sara Bisker.

That next door to them was Peretz Bisker, father of Ida Bisker Kogod, grandfather of Bob Kogod, whom we met in the United States. On the other side of the street were the Kimelblats, whose son Shai married my father's half sister, Choma.

I know that in Trochenbrod everyone had a nickname, something I learned later was important in identifying people. I would also learn that nicknames were derived from either a shortcoming or a profession. Accordingly, there was Chaim Nutta, the shoemaker. And Shaul Avramchick, who was known as the big eater; "Belly Button" Itzy, who was a government-appointed rabbi. There was Leib "the big one" and Leib "the small one." There was Itzy "with the nose" and Helchick the butcher and Ephraim "who cries in the synagogue" and Pinchas the carpenter and Yankel the blacksmith and Chava the midwife and Ydel "the dumb one," and I could go on and on, and perhaps I should, because part of the point of this narrative is to keep these stories alive.

Despite my efforts, it remains the case that I know virtually nothing about the Safran side, my paternal grandfather's family. I don't know whether my grandfather had any siblings or where he came from. I hired a researcher in Ukraine in 2005 to try to find documents that might shed light on my grandfather's family. He found nothing and believes my grandfather Yosef Safran came from elsewhere, probably a larger town. The only record that I could find is a 1929 Polish business directory available on the Internet, which lists a "Szafran" doing business in Trochenbrod.

Actually, I learned years later that my grandmother's family, the Biskers, didn't exactly come from Trochenbrod but from its adjacent sister village, called Lozisht. The two were connected, along a single road, and always thought of together.

While my father had some distant cousins in the United States, none of them knew him before he immigrated. His closest relatives were three first cousins living in Israel. From them I learned that my grandmother Brucha remarried and my father had a half sister, Choma or Nechoma. My father's cousin Shmuel Bisker told me that my father was not only his cousin but his best friend.

I know that, according to Shmuel, my father was the best student for miles around and that he always had "a head for business."

I know, from my mother, that my father was always running: building a business, going from one store to the next. In the end, maybe there was finally no more running left in him.

I know, from reflection, that outlasting the war didn't necessarily mean surviving.

There is only one picture of my father taken before my parents met: It's the black-and-white photo of him, another man, and two women. My mother told me that she met the other man in the photograph twice, when he came to see my father in Lutsk. She remembers my father taking great care of the man, and she thinks the man was always smiling—in her mind this was because he was proud that he had helped to save my father. She said the man came to Lutsk because he wanted my father to return to their village to live and to marry his daughter.

When I asked my mother why she didn't know more or ask questions, she said that after the war people didn't want to talk about the past. This must have been especially true when survivors, like my father, remarried and started new families. They wanted to move on and focus on building new lives. Then, when they came to the United States, no one asked questions. American relatives were either afraid to ask or afraid to hear what had happened in Europe. Maybe they didn't know how to ask. Or maybe they felt guilty for not having done more to help their families.

And yet, after the passage of all this time, there is a need to remember, to take whatever fragments I can find and piece together a vanished shtetl where the living quarters and the stables for the horses and cattle were sometimes one and the same, and where the chickens were kept behind the stove, and the potatoes under the bed, and in the winter, during the heavy freeze, the calves were kept inside the house. Where there were not only snakes but a flame. And every evening the flame could be seen glowing near the forest. Sometimes the flame would be large and sometimes small. Sometimes it would appear low down near the ground, and at other times it would leap high. As with the snakes, the people in Trochenbrod grew accustomed to it. When a person went up close to take a look at the flame, it disappeared. Whether or not there really was such a flame, or the snakes were pets, or Trochenbrod was an inspiration for Sholem Aleichem, this vanished shtetl was so colorful, so magically rendered by its former inhabitants, that it's no wonder my son Jonathan turned it into a work of fiction.

We know there was a strong work ethic and fertile soil in Trochenbrod.

There were dairy farms, leather factories, a glass factory, retail shops, school buildings, synagogues.

The children who grew up in Trochenbrod were strong and healthy—a "Trochenbrod boy," it was said, "could knock out ten peasants!"

There was only one Christian family—under Polish law, the postmaster could not be Jewish.

Jewish families from neighboring villages sent their girls to Trochenbrod for fattening before marriage.

The entire town came out to celebrate weddings.

Gentile women came from nearby villages to milk the cows on the Sabbath.

The town had one main, unpaved road, running through Trochenbrod and up through Lozisht. It was lined by bollards meant to prevent the horses from slipping into the drainage ditches alongside the thoroughfare.

Menorahs for Chanukah were crafted from halved potatoes (the ones, perhaps, that were kept under the bed) into which a small hole would be made, and oil poured, and a piece of cotton lit.

Behind each house was farmland, behind which was forest.

There was no electricity.

Mud bears repeating twice.

When the Germans arrived in 1941, the Trochenbroders did not, at first, panic. They had lived under German rule before, and in fact many remembered that, during World War I, the Germans served as quasi-protectors from the Russians.

We know that even if the people of Trochenbrod did sense that something was about to happen, the way that my mother knew, a certain stasis may have set in. It is easy, with hindsight, to sense that one should flee, but when I try to imagine myself in that situation, I understand how hard it would be to leave behind everything I had ever known. To simply walk away from your life, your friends, your home, your few possessions. Besides, there was the possibility that some of the stories circulating at the time, about what had happened to others, were perhaps not true. Or maybe they were true, but whatever had happened to them couldn't possibly happen again.

This is why the people of Trochenbrod were later referred to as *luftmenschen*, which translates to "airmen" or to "one who is not a realist," because they did not believe the truth.

Some of the Jews were employed by the Germans to police their own, and they were called *Judenrat*.

The Ukrainians from neighboring villages were encouraged to rampage.

On August 9, 1942, twenty men from a German extermination unit arrived: *Einsatzgruppe C*.

There were eleven army trucks.

The Jews were ordered to the center of town. This included Trochenbroders and Jews from eastern Poland who were escaping the Nazis.

They were told to line up and to put a hand on the shoulder of the person in front of them.

The Germans took pictures and measured the length and width of these people standing in line, the Jewish population, so that they could then use those measurements to calculate the depth and width of the necessary graves.

But the calculations would not be entirely accurate, because some of these Jews were shot, randomly, along the way.

They were told they would now relocate to a ghetto.

On August 11, people were taken two hundred at a time to the pit and shot in what is known as the first "Aktion."

Five hundred to one thousand people remained alive.

Some of them fled into the forest. But then, on Yom Kippur, September 21, many of them emerged from the woods, hungry and frozen, to celebrate Yom Kippur together, and the Germans were waiting.

By the time this was over, roughly sixty Jews were left.

Germans worked the land for a while, after the Jews were gone, until the Jewish partisans, who were resistance fighters, came back and destroyed some of the village.

We know from Israelis born in Trochenbrod that, after that, the Soviets destroyed the rest of what remained. The Soviets wanted to erase physical evidence of a Jewish settlement, so they carried

off any remnants and incorporated the land into a kolkhoz, a Soviet collective farm, ironically named “New Life.”

What I know about how my father managed to escape the massacre of his ghetto is largely because of his cousin. Ida Bisker Kogod, meeting my father for the first time in the United States, dared to ask him how he survived. He told her that he and a friend, another Jew in their ghetto, were sent by the Nazis on a work detail to repair windows in a train station some distance away. It was during that time that the Nazis decided to liquidate the ghetto in Chetvertnia, where he and his family had been taken. When my father and his friend returned, a Ukrainian with a horse and wagon told him that everyone had been massacred. According to my mother, my father said that his first instinct was to turn himself in and die with the rest of his family. The Ukrainian, as the story goes, told him he could do that later, but meanwhile he hid him in his wagon and covered him with straw. He allowed my father to stay with him for only one night, afraid that if my father was found in his house, the Ukrainian farmer and his family would be murdered.

I don't know where my father was during most of the war. One former Trochenbroder told me that he is sure he went east, all the way to Moscow. I can't imagine how that is possible and I will probably never know. What I do know is that at least at the end of the war he was hiding in the home of a neighbor, the one in the picture that my mother managed to save. He survived because one righteous person risked his life and those of his wife and children by letting my father hide in the barn behind his house. I don't know for how long or when during the time of the German occupation he hid there. The man's children stood guard outside, taking turns pretending to play as a way to keep watch for any approaching Germans. Fortunately, after the exterminations, the Germans entered the village only intermittently.

The picture has some scribbling on the back. Over the years, we tried to make sense of it but couldn't. The one word that we could make out was something like “Augustine,” which we thought might be part of an address. Maybe it was a town. Or a street. Or a person.

This was the photograph that Jonathan took with him, years later, as he left for the trip to Trochenbrod that gave rise to *Everything Is Illuminated*. He had set out to find Augustine.

4

In the wedding photograph, such as it is, my father wears an elegant dark suit and a crisp white shirt. His tie is striped, and what appears to be a new fedora sits atop his head. The camera has caught him with his eyes half open, which is halfway more than my mother's, closed beneath the white veil that obscures her face.

Were they thinking about the past with those hooded eyes or conjuring some better future? Who can say? What is evident from this photo, however, is my mother's trademark superstition. Something, or someone, has been disappeared—literally cut out of the picture. It's no neat job, this erasure. Unlike the discreet photoshopped removals of today, this one more closely resembles a decapitation. When I asked my mother who this was, she explained that two weddings took place that day, one right after the other, which was bad luck. Presumably she meant the other couple had been excised from this photograph, but it's really hard to tell, because there are two other random people visible here, as well as a pair of hands.

I have one other picture that looks like it was taken either right before or right after the wedding. My father is in the same suit and tie. My mother and father look so happy, close to each other, with their heads pressed together. My mother, with her hair pulled back, is wearing a beautiful dress with a large brooch. It is my favorite picture of my parents, and this is how I like to think of them, looking radiant, even if their happiness was brief.



My parents on their wedding day.

At least I have these mementos, along with the tattered ketubah, a Jewish wedding contract, mended over the years with now-yellowing tape. This I found tucked inside my mother's sturdy secret cardboard box, carefully covered with decorative Con-Tact paper and always hidden in the back of a closet until I was able to retrieve it many years later. Part of the ketubah is missing, torn neatly along the seam, but unlike the deliberate doctoring of the photograph, this missing part appears to be unintended, just an unfortunate consequence of age. The ketubah is quite large and decorative, preprinted with blanks to fill in.

My parents married in Lodz, about seventy-five miles southwest of Warsaw, on May 5, 1945, according to DP-camp documents that I found. They had known each other only a few months, after

meeting in Lutsk, in western Ukraine—the largest city in the vicinity of their respective shtetls and a gathering place for Jewish survivors. By the standards of the time, they were practically an old couple. Quick marriages were typical among refugees. Some couples married after meeting only weeks before, according to my mother. “Life wasn’t normal,” she explained. There was no time to worry about normal, whatever that meant or had once meant. These were people who had lost everything and everyone—entirely, tragically, literally. They were eager to begin life again, to start families, or new families. To close their eyes and commit to life.

I was talking with a friend whose parents were also married in Poland at around the same time. When I told him that my parents were married on May 5, he looked right at me and said, “No, they weren’t.” How did he know? He said his parents were married in another Polish city on May 1 and that I needed to check the ketubah carefully. He was right. May 5 was a Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath, a time when weddings are not performed, except after sundown. The ketubah has the Hebrew date of the eighteenth day of the month of Iyar, which is the Jewish holiday of Lag B’Omer, the same holiday on which my mother says she was born. Omer is a forty-nine-day somber period between the festivals of Passover and Shavuot; the origins of the holiday are unclear. But we do know that the thirty-third day of this period, Lag B’Omer, offers a break from the mourning and is the one day during this period when Jewish weddings are permitted.

Jews desperate to start new lives, whatever they may have believed after what they had been through, were waiting for the thirty-third day, for an official Jewish wedding. It is the day my parents got married and the day my friend’s parents got married along with many other Jewish refugee couples. In 1945 Lag B’Omer was on May 1. Interestingly, this was the day after Hitler committed suicide. Just a few days later, on May 7, the Germans surrendered, ending the war in Europe.

Lodz, where my parents married and where I was born, was the second-largest Jewish community in prewar Poland, after Warsaw. Warsaw was totally destroyed in the war. Lodz, however, survived German occupation with relatively little physical damage. One-third of Lodz’s population had been Jewish prior to the war. Of the approximately 233,000 Jews in Lodz at that time, about 200,000 were forced to live in the city’s ghetto, and it is estimated that somewhere between only 5,000 and 7,000 Jews from the ghetto survived. By 1946 the number had swelled to about 50,000 Jews, most from elsewhere in Europe, who saw it as a waystation and crossroads from the east as they tried to escape a Europe that clearly did not want them.

My parents lived in an apartment in Lodz that had once been occupied by a murdered Jewish family; the city was full of empty homes and businesses that had previously belonged to Jews.

They shared their first apartment with another Jewish refugee couple, who were also expecting a baby. Whoever managed the doling out of these vacant apartments must have figured this was a good match: Both women were expecting their first child, without any family members to help, so they would presumably benefit from mutual support.

The couples agreed that the first mother to give birth would get the best bedroom and the other mother would help take care of the new family and cook for them. Then they would change places when the next baby was born.

There is no official record that I have been able to find of my arrival in a Lodz hospital on March 17, 1946. I slid into the world right under the iron curtain. Days before I was born, on March 5, 1946, Winston Churchill gave one of his most famous speeches, at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, announcing “... an iron curtain has descended across the Continent. Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of Central and Eastern Europe ... and all are subject, in one form or another, not only to Soviet influence but to a very high and in some cases increasing measure of control from Moscow.”

A researcher that I hired to find my birth certificate was unable to locate any documents. Apparently, at that time in Poland, births were not automatically recorded. My parents would have

had to make an effort to register the birth, and it's possible that they had seen enough to know that being on any official registry at this moment in history would be unlikely to do me any good.

"Everything is going to be good" was the gist of the messages delivered to my mother while she lay on a bed in the hallway of the hospital, alone, unanesthetized, and ready to give birth to her first child, although I would later learn that I was not my father's first child. My father was not allowed to be with her during her very long labor, but at least he managed to send encouraging notes.

Esther Brucha Safran. I was named for my two murdered grandmothers: my mother's mother, Esther Weinberg Bronstein, and my father's mother, Brucha Bisker Safran Kuperschmit. By coincidence it was also Purim, the celebration of Queen Esther, the unexpected queen of ancient Persia, who saved the Jews.

My name may have been intended to keep the memory of my grandmothers alive, but I seemed to intuitively understand from the beginning that my role was to bring joy. To point my family toward a brighter future while carrying with me the names of two murdered grandmothers. Whether I succeeded I can't say with certainty, but I have tried.

It must have seemed a miracle to my father—a baby girl, alive, with a chest that could rise and fall, after his first daughter, the one he never spoke of to me, was murdered.

Time must have stood still for a little while as we waited in this apartment, the former owners now ghosts. As we went about the business of living, breathing new life into the chunky prewar furniture—the chairs that others had once sat in, the table they had eaten at, the beds they had slept in. We were a long way from the dirt roads of Kolki and Trochenbrod, but we still had a long way to go.

There's a photograph of my parents on the street somewhere in Lodz: My mother is wearing a hat, her arm linked through my father's arm, and another man on the other side. They all look chic in their tall boots, and I like to imagine that this was a happy interregnum, that they were jaunty and carefree, enjoying this more cosmopolitan life, even though I know it was not. Their smiles belie the horrors they have just been through, not to mention that they were surely overwhelmed by such adult concerns as making a living, putting food on the table, getting this family to a better place.

Over the years I pressed my mother for more details about Lodz, but unsurprisingly most of what she remembered had to do with being a new young mother who did not have her own mother to guide her.

Eventually she opened up, and what she told me proved far more colorful than I would have thought. At first she said something about a deli. But then, when pressed, she wasn't confident it was really a deli. I would later learn that although there was in fact an establishment that served food and drink, it may have been something of a front, that the money came from money itself. My parents changed currency and they bought gold that had been melted down for easy transport. They did this for the largely transient population that was moving from east to west in search of a future.

The deli, such as it was, gave free drinks to local police and other authorities, I discovered from one of my father's partners, to keep local officials lubricated and on their side. And the business that propped up the business was so successful that my father and his partners had a Jewish cobbler carve out the heels of old shoes as a hiding place for money and valuables. They used old shoes only so as to be less conspicuous—they didn't want to draw attention with any suggestion of prosperity. I often wonder if this made my mother think of Pesha's shoes.

I learned most of this from Itzhak Kimelblat, whom I met several times in Rio and whom Frank was able to interview separately on a couple of trips to Brazil. The Kimelblats came from Trochenbrod, or actually from Lozisht, our particular "suburb" of Trochenbrod. The map of the shtetl shows them living across the road from my grandmother Brucha's house. Itzhak told me that he went to school with Choma, my father's half sister, and that Choma married Itzhak's cousin Shai Kimelblat, which made us almost family.

When I first met him in Rio, Itzhak was nearly ninety, fit, stylish, and equipped with a phenomenal memory. I asked him about the business the Kimelblats shared with my father and

several other partners, and he said nonchalantly, “Oh, you mean at Seventy-eight Piotrkowska Street?” I searched for the address online—and there it was: the street and the building. I recognized it immediately as the backdrop of pictures of my parents along with their business partners, including Itzhak Kimelblat and his brother, Natan. It’s an elegant old building, with beautiful architecture, located on one of the most magnificent streets in Lodz. Today the street is bustling with cafés and bookstores and shops.

I also learned that this had been the 1887 birthplace of the pianist Arthur Rubinstein. Today there is a plaque on the building and, outside it, a life-size bronze figure of Rubinstein seated at a grand piano.

Across the street, at 77 Piotrkowska, is a former mansion and bank that once belonged to another successful Lodz Jew, the banker Maksymilian Goldfeder. Now it has been transformed into a club. The street is lined with mansions, banks, and textile factories that were once owned by other murdered Jewish industrialists. At one point, the largest building in the heart of Lodz was the “Great” Synagogue, which was burned down by the Nazis in 1939, along with the rest of the synagogues. There’s another chilling reminder of the city’s history: During World War II, the street was briefly renamed Adolf Hitler Strasse.

The business my father and his partners created required quick thinking; they had to memorize fluctuating exchange rates and be able to convert currencies without the aid of calculators. These guys from Trochenbrod may not have had much education, but they were shrewd. I sometimes thought of this as I watched my mother holding up the line at the CVS register, counting her coupons, running the numbers through her head to make sure there wasn’t a mistake.

Given my mother’s wartime heroics, her cross-continental journey made largely on foot, and her ability to intuit the dangers ahead, it’s not hard to imagine her as a successful associate in the family’s shadow trade. She told me she once traveled to Kiev with gold coins strapped clandestinely around her waist. My father told her where to go, gave her the address and the names of the contacts. I’m not sure if she was trading currency for gold or vice versa. She had one close call on the train, when a man tried to pick her up. She was terrified that his advances might lead to him touching her and finding the secret belt of gold, but she managed to extricate herself somehow. Anyway, mission accomplished. I assume this took place before I was born and that after I arrived she gave up these sorts of gutsy missions, but, knowing her, I can’t say for sure.

From what I now know about our time in Lodz, my parents engaged in their deli–cum–currency franchise for about a year and a half. And even though Itzhak helped fill in many details of this period, he and Natan were in business with my father for only a few months. There were other partners who came and went, as evidenced by the pictures outside the deli where my father poses with a changing cast of characters. In one photograph, Itzhak and Natan wear the war medals they received for fighting as partisans, Itzhak still nursing war injuries that have him leaning on a cane.

Other landsmen came through Lodz, looking for whatever family they could find, including my father’s first cousin Gadia Bisker. When I met Gadia in Israel many years later, he bragged that he had been my first babysitter. My parents helped him get back on his feet, bought him new clothes and shoes, but apparently he was not all that eager to find real work, much to my father’s frustration. It’s not hard to imagine how he might have lost his will. He was the only one of my father’s cousins to survive the massacres in Trochenbrod. Gadia’s sisters and their families, as well as his mother, were all killed, probably alongside my own grandmother and Aunt Choma.

Two of Gadia’s brothers had left before the war. Shmuel and Yehoshua Bisker were among the Zionists from Trochenbrod who went to Palestine in the mid-1930s, and Gadia was focused on getting out of Poland to join them, which he did, eventually. After the war, more than 70,000 Jews arrived illegally in British Palestine on more than one hundred ships that picked up refugees who had moved through Europe by foot or in disguised vehicles to ports along the Mediterranean Sea. Not everyone made it: Many more refugees were stopped by British patrols and sent to internment camps in Cyprus.

My parents may have managed to begin a family, to run a business, to wear fashionable-looking boots, but there were constant reminders that this was not where they were meant to stay. Between 1944 and 1946 there were a series of anti-Semitic incidents in Poland, occurring at a time of general lawlessness and civil war against the Soviet-backed Communists. And, it was increasingly clear that the “iron curtain” was going to make it difficult to leave. Itzhak said that a young girl sent by Brihah (which literally means “to escape” and was the name of an organization that worked to get Jewish refugees across closed borders from Europe to Palestine) came to their store one day and told them it was time to get out of Poland.

Itzhak and Natan, both young and unencumbered, made their way through Europe to Italy and ultimately to Rio, where they had relatives. Once in Brazil, Natan began life as a peddler and went on to build one of the largest jewelry chains in the country, launching a brand of watches bearing his name. My husband, Bert, still proudly wears his Natan watch today. In fact, Natan arrived in the country shortly after two other Jewish immigrant jewelers—Hans Stern and Jules Roger Sauer—who were also fleeing persecution; all three built major international brands.

We stayed in Lodz a little longer. Escaping for us was complicated because I was a baby. But there were constant reminders that we needed to leave, including individual assaults and pogroms, such as the one in Kielce, on July 4, 1946, where forty-two Jews were murdered and many more injured. It was time to get out.

When I was close to six months old, in August or September 1946, we finally left Lodz. We had to employ some spycraft to slip away undetected. My mother traveled light, packing only a few things, and told her neighbors that she and I were going away for a few days. My father went to work as usual. At some point during the day, my father said that he was going out for a break, or maybe he said he was running an errand. He never returned.

They met up at a designated location, where they had arranged transport from the middle of Poland to the middle of Germany and then to a displaced-persons camp in the American zone. My mother remembered a covered truck with a false bottom, which was where we hid for part of the journey. Among the things she packed were some small silver Kiddush cups, called *becher* in Yiddish, but along the way she started throwing them out, afraid of being caught with them if we were stopped. Knowing what I know now, I’m sure there was money or gold stuffed into the heels of shoes or in the linings of their clothing, and possibly other valuables hidden, as well—all easier to disguise than bulky silver cups.

The biggest challenge, my mother said, was traveling with a baby. She had to stuff cloth into my mouth to keep me quiet as we made our way through dangerous territory. We traveled this way from Lodz to Berlin, which on a direct route was about three hundred miles. Today, on good roads in a modern vehicle, the trip would take about five hours, so I can only imagine how long and harrowing our journey was. My mother recalled few details, apart from how awful she felt having to gag her child. It’s probably just as well that she couldn’t remember more; surely these were not memories to preserve—apart from that we made it.

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