

There's a Reason We Eat Latkes

Madison Weiss

I knew that my grandpa was Jewish, but for a long time, I didn't understand what that meant. He had different holidays than me, but that was fine. We went to Christmas at Gramma's, Passover at Papa's. Even after the incident with the gefilte fish, in which I had two helpings to be nice, nearly puking in the meantime, I longed to take part in that ancient remembrance of the Jews' exodus from Egypt. Like the Angel of Death, I learned to "pass over," and skipped the processed fish in favor of brisket or potato kugel.

The Jewish customs of my father's family permeated my childhood home, even though we were very Christian. It wasn't as though the Jewish-ness was "other," or that one religion was more correct. Sundays were for church and Jesus and customs from the old country were for at home. Instead of making pancakes, my dad made latkes. I didn't have chicken-noodle soup when sick; I had matzo-ball. Our cupboards were stocked with matzah crackers, simply divine when smothered with butter for a quick snack. We were scrambling to hold onto the traditions of our ancestors, even if we didn't quite know what they were.

For the longest time, I didn't know that my grandpa had a name other than Papa. I laughed when I first heard it. "Yehuda? But Papa, that's silly!"

"And so it is. That's why in America, I go by Harry."

"Yehuda," I repeated to myself, the taste of the word foreign on my tongue. I dismissed the feeling for many years. He was just Papa to me, someone who gave me candy and occasionally sang in Hebrew.

Years later, when I was in middle school, I asked him about Israel. "What was it like? What do you remember?"

"I was only five when we emigrated. I don't remember a whole lot."

I was a stubborn preteen and I begged him for more. After a while, he relented. "Fine. I can scrounge up some memories for you, but it'll cost you a hug and a kiss."

He sang of orange trees in the backyard, of a house by a train track. The air was hot and sweet and he ran around Ramat Gan with his twin sister and his cousin. But, they left. That is the way with the Jews; they are always leaving.

I was in high school before I thought to ask again. Now, I am ashamed that I didn't ask sooner. What was I waiting for?

"Papa, tell me what happened to your mother and father."

It was a sunny August afternoon, my attic bedroom humid with the heat. I had him on the phone, and the pause was unbearable. Maybe because I couldn't see his face.

"What do you mean?" he finally replied.

It was my turn to pause. I could hardly get the word out, so heavy with its burden. "The Holocaust. Tell me what happened."

And he did.

I laid there for a long while, silence screaming from my throat. He asked me if I was okay, but I quickly hung up. There was a lot to process, and my breathing was stunted with grief.

He told me how his father had been sent off to be a forced-labor slave.

How his two-year-old half-brother and grandparents had been immediately gassed at Auschwitz.

How his father's sisters, Esther and Suzy, died in the camp as well. One while working. One on the way to ambulance during liberation. Papa's sisters are named after them.

How his father's first wife remarried after the war, assuming his father to be dead.

How his mother, my great-grandma, Tova, narrowly escaped a ghetto.

How she lived in a cave in the mountains for a year.

How his parents met, with his father using a new name for a new life and a new wife.

Later, Israel. The birth of himself and his twin. Moving across an ocean. Pushing away the darkness. Not talking about it for fifty years.

Well, we were talking about it now. I wanted to know so much more about my family, and so every chance I got I had him tell me another story about them. I assembled a family tree, contacted organizations throughout Europe, including Auschwitz, to see if I could find records of my family. My searches were fruitless. To the world, my family does not exist.

I felt like I owed it to my family. Without their deaths and sacrifice I would not be alive, and it made for a guilty conscious. I thought that by learning about them and finding their names in a census somewhere, proof that they had lived, I was paying them back. But nothing I ever did was going to be enough. They were murdered, and I was standing because

of it. It felt like I was the result of blood money.

It wasn't until I visited my great-grandma Tova again that I finally found perspective. I had met her a few times in my youth, but after my family moved to the Midwest, we were able to visit her more frequently. In fact, once a year for Passover.

She was tiny in stature, but her attitude could knock down a giant. Tova often joked, her voice thickly accented, about the stupid people in our family. "Idiots," she would say, shrugging in her orange chair. "They're all idiots." Tova also laughed about how dumb her friends were, friends that she had been playing bridge with for over fifty years.

One afternoon, I was sitting on the floor by her knees, rolling about in discomfort after she essentially force-fed us an entire feast (egg salad, fried chicken, blintzes; she was then offended when we were too full to eat the torte cake).

"I wrote something down for you," she said, "but I will not read it out loud. Harry can read it to you." Her veiny hands shook as she pulled out a neatly folded paper. "It is my story."

This moment is poignant as far as memories go. I can still feel the carpet beneath me, the sound of her little voice as she helped pronounce names and cities. Tova is dead now, but her words are echoed in my heart: "I still dream about German soldiers chasing me, but when I wake up I say to myself how lucky we are compared to others who lost [more of] their loved ones. I promise to tell this story to my children, because the only way it will never happen again, is to remember."

The wise words of my great-grandmother transformed me. I had nothing to feel guilty about. I didn't need to repay them. I need only remember. Remember their sacrifice, their deaths, their lives. Remember their courage, their children, their recipes.

Remember, like how we recount the Hebrews' escape from Egypt.

Remember, like how we recall the eight days the candles kept burning.

Remember, like how we mourn the six million Jews of the Holocaust.

Remember, she told me.

And I will.