

MY MOTHER'S ASHES

And it came to pass that the hard and painful life of my mother, Celia Goldstein Schlitt, came to an end on March 12, 1951, at the age of 62. Whatever caused that end was unclear. Something to do with the intestines, bile, pancreas. Complications which the doctors at Lincoln Hospital were unable to deal with. She had gall stones which caused her pain, but I was unaware of any other problems.

I was organizing for the ILGWU in Cleveland, and I received a call telling me that my mother had died. In a trancelike state, I flew back home, and called my cousin Louis and asked him what I should do. He told me that his brother-in-law, Max Kavenoff, had my mother's will, so the first thing I should do was get a copy. I did, and learned that my mother wanted to donate her body to science, specifically to a medical school. The will read as follows: "It is my wish and I so direct that upon my death my body be offered to an institution of medical study and research...for such scientific pursuit as may be for the best interest of mankind." I started calling medical schools, explaining that my mother had died and she wanted her body given to a medical school so they could work with a cadaver that had a medical history. Nobody wanted it. Not NYU nor Columbia nor anyone else. I told this to Louis and he said we should immediately make arrangements for a funeral. He called Riverside Chapel and took care of it.

My mother's will stated that she wanted to be cremated: "It is my wish that after the medical institution completes the study of my body, that they arrange for a cremation of my remains with the ashes to be delivered to my son, JACOB, and cremation to be arranged either at the expense of the hospital or the expense of my son, if he is then financially able to pay for it." I told Louis, and he said the funeral home would take care of it. Instead of having the casket, with my mother's body, buried in a cemetery, it would go to a crematory. And after the funeral, that is what was done. I received the ashes with certificate number 25,576, from Ferncliff, acknowledging that it was my mother's. I put the ashes in my desk drawer, and returned to Cleveland to finish my assignment.

Over the next several months, I tried to figure out what to do with my mother's ashes. I had heard that some people keep ashes in an urn, which is placed in a prominent position in their home. Other people cast them out to sea, or go to a place that the deceased person loved, and either bury the ashes there or strew them about. I finally decided to divide the ashes in two, and took one half and placed them on my father's grave in Montfiore Cemetery in Queens.

Over the next several years, I tried to figure out what to do with the remaining half of my mother's ashes, which was still sitting in a box in my desk drawer. Finally, it came to me. Ever since the creation of the State of Israel, in 1948, my mother expressed the hope of visiting the Jewish State. She looked forward to her retirement and making such a trip. That was her dream. I will figure out a way of getting my mother's ashes to Israel.

In 1957, I was working for the Jewish Labor Committee, and I learned that our director, Jacob Pat, was going to Israel. I impulsively asked him if he would take my mother's ashes with him. He looked at me incredulously, and said as gently as he could, that he was unable to do it. I realized later that it was a strange request, that I hadn't thought through what I wanted him to do with the ashes, and that it might even have been illegal.

And so the ashes remained in my desk drawer. Until 1975. I was going to make my first trip to Israel. Twenty-four years after my mother's death and cremation, her ashes were going to go with me to Israel. I had transferred the ashes from the box to a plastic bag, and hidden it in my valise. When I arrived in Israel and checked into my hotel in Jerusalem, I unpacked and surreptitiously slipped the plastic bag into my pants pocket. That first day, as I walked the streets of Jerusalem, I sprinkled my mother's ashes around the old city, and the new city, the Jaffa Gate and the Western Wall. Ben Yehuda Street, the Tower of David, the King David Hotel. Hadassah Hospital and Hebrew University, Yad Vashem and Mea Shearim. From Jerusalem, my mother's ashes and I went to Ashkelon and Ashdod and Tel Aviv and Herzliyah and Netanya and Hadera and Haifa, We visited Acre and Sfad, and my cousins' kibbutz, Ayelet Hashachar. And the Sea of Galilee and Bet Shean and the Dead Sea and Masada. We did it all, and after two weeks, there were no ashes left. I would tell my mother each place we came to. And sometimes I cried, and sometimes I laughed at what I was doing.

My mother used to say: "Better late than never." I suspect it applies here in some strange way.

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