

FAMILY

A first draft

I was born in the Bronx in December 1927 to a mother who had come from Vaslui, Romania and a father who had come from Kishinev, Bessarabia which was part of Russia. They spoke Yiddish; they met in New York; they married in 1916 and moved from the lower East Side to the Bronx where I was born 11 years later.

In 1931, my father died. In 1933, my mother and I moved from a four room apartment on Beck Street to a two room apartment a few blocks away on Fox St. As I grew up, I was aware that what I called a family was somewhat different from the families around me. To me, a family was my mother and me. To some of my friends, a family was a mother, a father, sisters and brothers, grandparents, uncles and aunts and cousins.

I asked my mother about family when I was small, and she told me about our cousins the Goldsteins and the Moskowitzs whom we would visit from time to time. My mother would also tell me about her early life and her family in Vaslui, but I was too impatient and too disinterested to listen.

My mother had a brother in Romania and a sister in Paris, so I had an uncle and an aunt like other kids. (I did not know at the time about my father's family. It turns out that he left lots of brothers and sisters back home in Kishinev, several of whom went on to Palestine after he came to the United States.)

When I was about 10 or 11, my mother had me write letters for her to her brother Meilich Goldstein and his family in Vaslui, and her sister Sura-Leah and her brother-in-law Hersh-Leib Goldstein in Paris. From the mid-thirties until the start of World War II, this correspondence continued. My mother would dictate to me in both English and Yiddish and I would write the letters to the best of my ability. Prior to this time, my mother struggled and wrote her own letters in English. Her brother and brother-in-law would answer in Yiddish.

With the war and the Holocaust, the correspondence ended. We did not know what happened to them. My mother was sick with worry. When the war ended, my mother contacted HIAS and other Jewish agencies for information about her family. After almost a year—a miracle. Her sister and her husband, and her brother survived. But not everybody. Children of both families in France and in Romania had been killed. I later learned that a French cousin had been sent to Auschwitz with her husband. He was executed; she survived. In a Displaced Persons Camp, she met a man from Poland, they married and she returned to Paris with him.

The correspondence resumed. We received pictures of the families as before. And I was less reluctant to write the letters, now in my high school French as well as my mother's dictated Yiddish. In 1948, my uncle Hersh-Leib's sister who lived in Toronto, arranged for her brother to come from Paris to visit. She had not seen him in 45 years. He came by boat and landed in New York and stayed with my mother and me for a few days in our

apartment before taking the train to Toronto. I never saw my mother happier. They talked non-stop in Yiddish. I may have understood less than one fifth of what they were saying. He was a skilled cabinet-maker. (The Toronto newspaper which reported his reunion with his sister, said he ran a small hand-carving shop and that the Germans took his equipment.) He gave me one of the yellow Stars of David that he was forced to wear. I regret that I did not learn more from him about the war and his survival.

In 1951, my mother died and as a self-absorbed 24 year old, I let the correspondence with my family lapse. I did write a few letters informing my uncle and aunt of my mother's death and of my marriage, but that was it. Of course, every few years I would have pangs of conscience and wonder how they were. Both the addresses in Paris and Vaslui were imbedded in my brain.

When my friends Sidney and Barbara Stern were planning to visit Paris in the summer of 1972, I asked them if they would try to find out what happened to my family. Toward the end of July, I received the following letter from them from Paris:

“We have the address of Zalman Goldstein (a son). It's 163 Rue de la Roquette XI Paris. We looked up 6 Rue Victor Letalle (my uncle and aunt's old address) and eventually found an old lady, the sister of Hersh-Leib, who lives in a room with her younger sister, who is now ill and in the hospital. She gave us a choice of French, Romanian or Yiddish, and Barbara, who did most of the talking, chose Yiddish. Eventually, eventually, it turned out that two of Hersh-Leib's and Sura-Leah's daughters were married, had different names, and were completely out of touch. The same for one son. A second son had been killed during the war. Zalman was left. She didn't know the exact address but knew he had a shop that had handbags and stuff like that. With the help of our concierge, we were able to locate it in the phone book. Barbara called, and between fractured French and fractured Yiddish, addresses were exchanged. He expects to write to you. I don't know what language. He can read Yiddish or French, and there's someone who can translate English for him. He seemed pleased and excited.”

Scribbled on the letter by me after talking to my friends were: “Montmartre 110 Rue de Rochecharde Segal.” I believe this is the address of the handbag shop and Segal is the name of the man my cousin married. Also: “Metro-Anvert Pigalle Madeline Claire, daughter.” In 1975, having saved up six weeks of leave time, I took my grand tour: first to Israel, then to Italy, southern France, Switzerland, Denmark, and Holland, ending up in Paris. When I arrived in Paris, I made a bee-line to Montmartre and the handbag shop. I was trembling with excitement to meet my French cousin whom I had never seen—and I believed was the only remaining connection to my mother's sister.

I entered the shop and asked the woman behind the counter if she spoke English. She said no. What about Yiddish? No, however her husband speaks Yiddish. I explained to him in Yiddish that I am the son of his wife's aunt, her mother's sister, from America. My cousin was either Fany Goldstein Grumberg or Claire Goldstein Liberman. I was unable to learn her name. In fact, I was unable to learn anything about the family other than that she had been in Auschwitz, lost her husband there, and that she was treated unfairly by

her brother Zalman. It was an awkward conversation. Very little information was exchanged. Soon after I entered the store and explained who I was, my cousin locked the front door and put out the sign "Ferme". But she told me nothing. After 10 or 15 minutes I left, upset and frustrated. I did not have Zalman's address.

Twenty years go by. The fact that I failed to connect with my French cousins kept gnawing at me. One evening in February 1996, I wrote a letter to Zalman at the address that Sidney and Barbara had gotten. Nothing. Then in August 2003 I received a letter from a Gilbert Goldstein from France.