My Mother's Jewishness

I clearly inherited my sense of Jewishness from my mother. This encompassed a pride in being Jewish (I am an American Jew and I am proud of it too); an interest in Yiddish—not to the extent of my mother's love of all things Yiddish: literature, poetry, theatre, the language itself; and support for Zionism and the creation of a Jewish State. I suspect that my mother had mixed feelings about organized religion and had her own definition of an "observant" Jew. She knew about the Chasidim and the Misnagim, and the Conservative and Reform movements, but it was of little interest to her.

My mother was fiercely Jewish, though she had never been to a Cheder, or a Talmud Torah. That was for the males. Her family was observant, as were all the Jews in her shtetl in Vaslui. Romania. She knew she was doubly discriminated: as a Jew in an anti-Semitic country, and as a girl in a Jewish community that denied her an education. She learned by watching her mother—how to prepare meals according to Kashruth, how to act and dress as a modest, God-fearing young lady. But she did not learn the "aleph-bais" or how to pray.

My mother learned to sew; she was apprenticed to a tailor at the age of six. She also learned that Jews are persecuted in Romania, and as a teen-ager, she learned that there was a country called America where Jews had opportunity and were not persecuted. So, at the age of 16, she joined a small group of young people, known as "fees--gayers" (foot-goers) who walked across Europe to various port cities, and went by steerage to the New World.

My mother landed in Toronto in 1904 at the age of 16. She had the address of a cousin who had preceded her. She found work as a seamstress in Eaton's Department store and began to make a life for herself. My mother was a skilled tailor. She could not read or write—not Yiddish, not Hebrew, not English, and she could only speak Yiddish and Romanian (She preferred Yiddish.) But she could work, and began to learn English. After several months at Eaton's, the foreman came to her on Friday and told her that she had to work the next day day—Saturday. She reminded him that she does not work on Saturday. He told her that if she wanted to keep her job, she will work on Saturday. She then told him to pay her the money she had earned. She was leaving. The foreman, seeing she was serious, changed his mind and told my mother that she won't have to work Saturdays. My mother didn't change her mind, telling him that she no longer believes him and insisted that he pay her off. To my mother, being Jewish meant that you did not work on Shabbes.

From Toronto, my mother made her way to Pittsburgh, and then to New York: a teen-age girl with a bunch of addresses of family and "Landsleit," and the ability to sew. She also had a craving to make something better of herself. This was the land of opportunity, and at the time, the only opportunity she found was the opportunity to be exploited in sweatshops, and to rent a furnished room in a cold-water flat on the lower east side of New York.

By 1909, there was a growing dissatisfaction with the terrible working conditions in the garment shops and factories. The ILGWU was in its infancy. Its efforts to organize garment workers were ineffectual. There was a great deal of resistance on the part of the shop owners. Workers lived in fear. If their bosses knew they were union members, they were fired and blacklisted—denied jobs at other shops. Finally, there was the "Uprising of the 20,000" the strike of the young women waistmakers. It was followed by the 1910 Cloakmakers Strike in which my mother participated. She became an active member of Local 9, the Cloak and Suit Tailors Union. She was elected shop chairlady. She participated and spoke out frequently at union meetings, which were conducted in Yiddish.

At the end of one meeting, a member approached her and asked if she was familiar with the works of a certain writer; her remarks were similar to his writings. She casually said she wasn't, and thanked him for his observation. The next day, she found someone to teach her to read and write Yiddish. She quickly learned how to read, and from that time on, was never without a Yiddish newspaper, journal or book. Early on, she discovered, and fell in love with the Yiddish theatre. She put together a collage of photographs of the outstanding playwrights and performers of the Yiddish stage.

In 1916, my parents married, and my mother left the shop. I am sure that she created a "Jewish home" from her perspective. On Friday night, she lit candles (I doubt if she said the traditional blessing) and made a Shabbes meal: chicken soup, chicken, vegetables, challah and compot for dessert. She bought Kosher meat and did not mix meat and dairy. She made all the appropriate meals for the different holidays. I don't know if she originally had two sets of dishes, or separate meat and dairy pots and pans. I do know her expanation for not having two sets of dishes when I was growing up: "When it was decided in Biblical times that there should be separate dishes, it was because they were using wood, and wood absorbed the flavors and fat of the food, which remains, even after they are washed. Now that we have China, this is no longer a problem."

We never ate shell fish or pork products. My mother was convinced that these prohibitions were based on health considerations. One can get sick from these foods. I also believed that one could get sick when drinking milk with meat, or putting butter on bread that was being eaten with meat. My mother accepted the idea that Kosher slaughter was kinder and less painful to the animal, and always patronized the Kosher butcher. In the early 1940's, an A and P Supermarket opened in our neighborhood. We had never seen anything like it. Twenty times bigger than our neighborhood stores—carrying groceries, fruits and vegetables and MEAT. When my mother saw the meat in the display cases at the A and P, she was astounded. It looked better than the meat carried by Mr. Margolis, our kosher butcher, and the prices were one-fourth. She bought some lamb chops as a test. They passed the test. She tried a few other selections. They were as good as Margolis's. From then on, my mother bought all her meat at the A and P. She explained to me: "It is better to pay Kosher prices for non-Kosher meat, than to pay non-Kosher prices for Kosher meat."

My mother's Jewishness was manifested in her commitment to social justice, though she may not have called it that: in her concern for those less fortunate, in her opposition to cruelty, to bigotry, to injustice and to war. It was as a Jew that she supported unions, democratic socialism, Debs, Thomas and FDR. Her condemnation of war was modified by the rise of Hitler, but she maintained that if there had been an effective League of Nations, Hitler could have been stopped by the concerted action of a world body. There would not have been the senseless killings and the Holocaust.

My mother knew the Ten Commandments and observed them. She may have been ambivalent about God's existence, but never took God's name in vain. She observed the Sabbath, but it didn't prevent her from riding or shopping—just from working in a factory. She opposed stealing, murder, adultery, bearing false witness and coveting. And she honored her father and mother, especially her mother. She had left them at 16, and never saw them again. When my mother began her memoirs in 1949, through the use of a recording machine, she named the machine Malka, and it became a one-way conversation with her mother, in Yiddish, of course.

My mother was tolerant of almost every sector of the Jewish world: the religious, the agnostic, the humanist, the secular. As long as they did not deny their Jewishness. She was horrified that there were so-called Jews who claimed Jesus was the Messiah. They weren't Jews. She was also horrified that there were Jewish gangsters and crooked Jews in legitimate businesses. And she was ashamed that there were Jews who changed their names so that they would not be recognized as Jews. But she recognized that it was because of anti-Semitism. She was a Zionist, but did not condemn those who were non Zionists. However, she couldn't stand the anti-Zionists like the American Council for Judaism.

My mother's world was, for the most part, a Jewish world. She read a Jewish newspaper regularly, The Tog; she listened to a Jewish radio station, WEVD; she belonged to a Jewish union, the ILGWU; she lived in a Jewish neighborhood, the East Bronx; she would go occasionally to the Jewish theatre; and, given the choice she would have preferred to converse in Yiddish.

In 1947, my mother wrote her will. She knew that religious Jews opposed cremation. Yet she wrote: "…upon my death, it is my wish that my body be offered to an institution of medical study …for such scientific pursuit as may be for the best interest of mankind…After the medical institution completes the study of my body, they shall arrange for a cremation of my remains with the ashes to be delivered to my son, Jacob." After my mother died in 1951, my efforts to offer my mother's body to an institution of medical study proved fruitless. We had a funeral and my mother was cremated, and the ashes were delivered to me. I divided my Jewish mother's ashes into two parts. One, I placed on my father's grave; the other, I brought with me when I went to Israel, 24 years later, in 1975. Visiting Israel was my mother's most cherished dream, which went unfulfilled. Everywhere I went—Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Haifa, Beersheva, Ayelet Hashachar, the Galilee—I scattered my mother's ashes. I felt it was a very Jewish thing to do.

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