FRAGMENTS OF A LIFE

Introduction

On November 3rd 1888, in Vaslui, Romania, a baby girl was born. Her parents, Malka and Jacob Goldstein, named her Celia, Tsirl. She had a sister, Surah-Leah and a brother, Melech. The family was poor. Celia was apprenticed to a tailor at the age of five. At 16, she made her way to America, worked in a sweatshop, became active in the union, married, gave birth to a child, became widowed, struggled to raise her child alone, and on March 12, 1951, at the age of 62, she died alone.

Her story is like countless others, but it is unique in many ways. It is my mother's story, and she wanted desperately to tell it. Unfortunately, when she was growing up in Vaslui Romania, she was not sent to school. She did not learn how to read or write—not Romanian, and not Yiddish or Hebrew. Soon after she arrived in New York, she learned to read Yiddish, but not to write. After her marriage, she went to "night school" and took English classes and struggled to express herself in written English. Her spoken English was very good, and her spoken Yiddish was excellent.

As far back as I can remember, my mother wanted to "tell her story." She wrote snippets describing her feelings, bits of verse, commentary on the world around her. When I was a teen-ager, she asked me to sit with her and she would dictate her "story." This only happened once. The year before she died, after learning that there were recording machines, she instructed me to buy one for her. My mother was thrilled to have something that could record her voice and to whom she could tell her story. She named the recording machine "Malke" her mother's name, and to my mother, sitting with her wire recorder, was as if she was having a conversation with her mother.   Mothers listen to their children. Tragically, it is seldom the other way around. And tragically, I have been unable to decipher most of the recordings.

Nevertheless, taking all the remnants—my mother's papers, photographs, letters, documents—and my memories, here is her story.