

REFLECTION

Birthmarks

A Blurred Image

I am a small child. I climb into bed with my mother, and I see the numbers on her arm. “What’s that?” I ask. “My birthmark,” she replies. Some years later, after putting together the stories my grandmother was forever telling us with a realization of the terms of my mother’s life, I suddenly remember that day, and it occurs to me that what my mother told me was not true. Some years beyond that, after spending a great deal of time struggling with the inaccessibility of that life, it occurs to me that what my mother told me that morning years ago was indeed true. As a Jew born in Poland in the 1930s, my mother was marked by history, if not literally by her birth itself. As the daughter of a Holocaust survivor, I was marked by my mother.

Observances, Exposures

My mother, Ida, doesn’t like to talk about her past. Of the members of the family who survived, she was the youngest, the one who remembers least, the one who tries the hardest to forget. She lost almost all of her family in the war; the only others to survive were her mother

(my grandmother, Esther) and three cousins (Edith, Sally, and Helen, “adopted” by my grandmother and treated as my mother’s sisters). After the war, they contacted members of the family in the U.S., and eventually they all came to Detroit. For a time, the three sisters lived with Esther and Ida. Each one married a survivor; my mother was the only one to marry an American—and even this move out of a kind of inner circle was a small one because my father was already related to her through the family in Detroit. Though my father’s father had a respected role, the family always appeared to me as a matriarchy with Esther at the head; she was less our leader than a kind of goddess, a Jewish saint, worshipped and adored by all. She made it her task to tell the children the family history—stories of close calls and survival, repeated so often that they became more legendary than biographical: the time your mother would have died when they rounded up children in the ghetto if Oscar Goldberg hadn’t thought to wrap her in a carpet and carry her back home; the time your mother would have died had her size not persuaded others she was older; the time your mother would have died in the “hospital” in Plashov had not a kind infirmiry worker from their home town propped her up in bed to make her look stronger; the time your mother would have died upon her arrival to Birkenau had not a friend who had a relatively privileged position in the camp whisked her off to the barracks where Esther herself had just been placed; the time your mother would have died had not luck or fate somehow intervened. . . .

My “aunts” did not tell these kinds of stories, or at least not with the same sense of mission and purpose. They relayed their experiences in a more everyday fashion, simply the stuff of their memories of youth. For instance, one Passover, a teasing argument broke out between Edith and Helen (the two forever locked in some kind of affectionate battle): “You were always the clumsy one,” one said to the other when she nearly tripped while carrying a tray into the dining room. “No, you were,” came the reply. “Remember when you almost fell with that bowl of soup . . . ,” launching into a joke about one of their many near-fatal encounters in front of a camp guard. The sisters continued their teasing. The kids from my generation, the second generation, looked on with growing amazement, awe, even fear, as the story progressed and we realized what they were really talking about. As I’d come to expect, my mother, under pretense of tending to the meal, left the room.

A Communiqué

When I was a teenager, it used to disturb me that my mother wouldn't talk about her childhood and her wartime experiences. No, disturb isn't the right word; it used to drive me crazy. "You should talk about what happened . . . it would make you feel better to let it out . . . not only for me but for you." On and on it went. My mother, affected but adamant, refused. I replayed this refusal a million different times, a million different ways. I started to notice that all of the people I was drawn to, everyone with whom I'd fallen in love, had one thing in common: calm and cool on the outside; a mass of seething feelings on the inside, unarticulated and unarticulable. My mother's refusal staged over and over again. Needless to say, however committed I was, none of these relationships ever ultimately succeeded. Over time, however, my relationship with my mother became less fraught. I still do not know why. Perhaps, as with the birthmark, I began to realize that what I had once taken as untrue was true after all: I wanted my mother to tell me what happened; in her own way, she did. One day, after it no longer pressed on me as it once had, I received an envelope in the mail from my mother. She had found a study that "proved" that Holocaust survivors who did not talk about their past led more "successful" and happier lives than those who did. The newspaper clipping came attached to a note, handwritten from my mother, with only one line. Remembering the sentence, I can only laugh: "And I don't want to talk about this either."

An Unusual Re-mark

Several years ago, I met my parents at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. While the rest of the members of our group carefully examined every display, my mother moved through the exhibits very quickly. After all, she had seen it all before, all too closely and, even through her buried memories, all too clearly. I worried when certain exhibits could not be avoided—when, for instance, she had to walk through a box-car used for transporting Jews to Auschwitz, an "original" brought from Poland and placed as a "corridor" between two parts of a room. But she was fine; she simply passed through. Another hallway was lined with photographs, close-ups of arms marked with tattoos. My mother paused and looked closely. "They don't have one like mine," she said. I was startled by this unprecedented (almost intimate) interjection, wanting but scared

to ask. “See, part of mine is crossed out and then tattooed over. When we arrived, they were changing their numbering system, considering, and then rejecting, a separate code for Birkenau. Look how the B’s been gone over and changed back to an A.” I looked. My mother—who, in her silence and hard-won self-control, has always signified the Holocaust to me, even more so than my grandmother, aunts, uncles, and other friends able to narrate the stories behind their own marks—unique among these represented survivors, an unequalled vision in my eyes.

Near and Far Sightings

In 1994, my siblings and I were planning a trip to Poland. We had wanted our grandmother to join us, but she was too frail. We never considered that our mother would be interested in going back. Amazingly, she was. Indeed, she took over the trip, planning it down to the last moment and detail. Yet she planned it like the way I plan a course, complete with assigned readings: she put together a packet of materials, including maps, historical summaries, archival information, and short, typed pieces briefly explaining the family connection to each site: “MAJDANEK CONCENTRATION CAMP established in November, 1941. . . . On March 1, 1944, a convoy of 600 people were shipped from Radom to Majdanek. . . . The group consisted of about 200 women and 400 men, among them were my Mother and I.” No questions need be asked; the information is all in the pack. Survival depended upon a necessary distance between the present and the past, the U.S. and Poland, the text and the . . . what? She still can’t say, and I no longer feel such a burning need to ask. Walking down the streets of Lublin, where Majdanek is located, we face two Poles heading in the other direction. As they claim the sidewalk, we’re edged into the street (a common occurrence, I later discovered, perhaps just a cultural difference in the occupation of space). Recalling nightmare visions of Polish collaboration, my mother is scared: “They see me and want to kill me; they know I got away and now they see another chance.” How much distance is enough; how much space does it take?

Afterimage

I went back to Poland in 1997. I was given the chance to participate in an exchange program at a university in Lublin, and though I, too, was a little scared, I wanted to go. I needed to come to terms with what,

in another history, would have been my home. My mother agreed that she and my father would travel with me before my teaching duties began. We could take more time, she said, than on the previous trip when she was too overwhelmed to really look around. We decided to go back to Majdanek and see the museum and memorial now there. Again, my mother walked through quickly; my father (with his camera) and I took more time. Standing outside a structure once used as a gas chamber, I looked in through a slot in the doorway: a peephole used by guards to ascertain that the victims were dead. I had a direct line of sight, through this hole and then through a small window on the other side. There was my mother walking away, her back to us and her mind someplace else. “Quick, take a picture through this eyehole,” I insisted to my dad. He agreed grudgingly. “It will make a lousy picture,” he said. “You won’t be able to see anything.”

Will I? The first time I saw my parents after my return from Poland, I showed my mother a draft of this essay. Her response was classic Ida: first, to correct some spelling, punctuation, and factual errors, and only after to voice an emotional reaction. This, too, came in stages: first, to express her happiness in my loving portrayal of Esther, and only later to admit that, though the essay elicited some feelings of guilt, she was moved by the feelings it revealed for her as well. In this conversation, I felt, for the first time, able to ask my mother to let me examine her tattoo: once B-48, rewritten as A-20⁰48. I couldn’t, however, examine the photo from Majdanek; on this point my father had been right. Definitively classified as a “bad” print, it was refused by the photo lab, and by the time I came home, my parents had thrown the negatives away. It is nothing now but an image imprinted in my own faulty memory—an invisible mark that stays with me all the same.

For Wendy and Esther.

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