LOOKING BACK THROUGH

SARA GOGOL

My Grandmother Tillie was a dropout. She had only had two years of school when a case of typhus left her head as bald as an egg.

She covered her baldness with a babushka. And she stayed at home, away from school. Although her light brown hair grew back in time, her mother told her that school was not necessary for a Jewish girl. Book learning was for boys and men. Her father was known as a scholar, but a girl needed to know only the womanly arts.

My grandmother Tillie had hazel eyes, the same color as my mother's and my own. Perhaps her eyes filled with tears when her mother told her that her school days were over. She told my mother that she had loved going to school. But my Grandmother Tillie obeyed her own mother and let herself be trained as a special kind of seamstress, a sewer of trousseaus for brides. And she never returned to school. By the time I knew my grandmother, her hair was gray. I remember also the deformed thumbnail on her hand. It was thickened and discolored from being pierced by a needle too many times. That thumbnail, and the smell of chicken soup which clung to her, were the essence of my grandmother to me.

I picture my grandmother as a young woman, arriving in the new land with bedding sewn by her and her mother. The family had enough money to send her second class instead of steerage, so probably she didn't suffer as much as some did on the ocean voyage. But I picture her standing at the ship's railing, her long hair bound up and covered by a babushka, watching as the alien New York City skyline came into view.

Did the winds blow cold around her and make her shiver inside her layers of old world clothing? Or did the stifling summer heat make her long just once more to breathe the cool, clear air of the Carpathian Mountains?

My grandmother's face was small featured, as is my mother's and my own. As she stood in long lines at Castle Garden, New York, where the immigrants who came second class were taken, perhaps she wanted to cover her face with her small but strong hands. Probably she wanted to cry but held back the tears for her husband's sake.

Coming to America was not my grandmother's dream. She crossed an ocean only because her husband, my grandfather Abraham, immigrated here first and wanted her to join him. For my grandfather, America was a place where he would not have to serve in the army of the Emperor Franz Josef. And more than that, I think it truly was a new world which he wanted to explore.

But my Grandmother Tillie's roots in the old country were strong. She was from the town of Sadagura, near the city of Czernowicz, in what was then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and which now belongs to Russia. Almost all of her family was there, and since they were well-off they remained there until they were slaughtered by Hitler's armies.

My grandmother always missed her family and the old world she had left. The three children she gave birth to in America never quite stopped the ache in her heart. But she managed to make a home in the new country. She kept house, cooked chicken soup with noodles she made herself, and did the family sewing at the treadle sewing machine my grandfather bought her. I can still remember her lighting the candles in their silver holders on Friday nights.

There were schools for adults as well as children in the new land—classes in English and American-style cooking and other subjects. But my grandmother never went to any of these. I think life had already taught her that learning was not a dream she could have for herself.

Learning was for the *kinder*, my grandmother must have thought. For the children, whose first letters are written in honey, learning is sweet.

Grandmother TILLIE

My grandmother never learned to speak more than broken English. But for her American-born children, two sons and a daughter, my grandmother wanted learning. They all went to the American schools. On the weekend a rabbi came to teach them to read and write Hebrew and Yiddish. What my grandmother could no longer dream for herself, she kept alive for her children.

My mother Rose went off to school along with Harry and Julie, her two brothers. She learned the strange new language so well that it flowed from her tongue more easily than Yiddish. She practiced the piano which my grandfather bought at my grandmother's request. Times were good in the new country. My grandfather made good money doing skilled work as a cutter in the fur industry. And the children learned quickly about the new world.

Then the depression came. My grandfather lost his job. The rent couldn't be paid, and for a time the family ate only potatoes. My mother had to stop her piano lessons, even though her teacher said she might have gone on to become a concert pianist.

There were things which even my grandmother couldn't do for her children. But there was one momentous event which it was in her power to shape.

My mother Rose was a fine student in school, the type of student who decided one day that she would read all the books in her little neighborhood library, and did. But when my mother graduated from high school, my grandfather decided that her learning was over.

"A girl," my grandfather said in Yiddish. "What does she need with college?"

I picture my grandmother raising her hands to stop my grandfather's words, her hands with the deformed thumbnail, which were so skilled at needlework. I picture her remembering her baldness then and the schooling she never returned to.

"Let her go to college," my grandmother told my grandfather,"so she can be a teacher."

So my mother Rose, who was only 16, went off to study at the City College of New York. The new land would mean learning for Tillie's daughter as well as her sons.

At the City College of New York, which was filled with the sons of immigrants and some of the daughters as well, tuition was free. But my mother needed money to take the subway there and back every day. It was still the heart of the depression and times were hard. Yet, every day my grandmother gave my mother 25 cents from her small, poorly-filled purse; a nickel for carfare each way, and 15 cents for a sandwich and milk.

My mother loved college, the gift her mother had given her. She wrote for the college newspaper, and excelled in all her classes. She didn't study chemistry as she had wanted to, because there were no jobs in that field for a Jewish girl. But she did get her degree in business education and eventually found a job teaching in a New York City high school.

My grandmother's dreams were realized, for her daughter as well as her sons. Her American-born daughter, her beloved Rosala, was a schoolteacher now. My grandfather was proud too, but surely not prouder than my grandmother.

This American learning was not without pain. My mother grew apart from the ways of the old country. At a Passover Seder, as her father read from the Hagadah and chanted the Hebrew prayers, my mother sat and read from an American book. Sometimes her American learning was a knife, cutting her away from the traditions of my grandparents.

Still, I'm sure my Grandmother Tillie had no regrets. Her daughter Rose had been given learning, a treasure which had been denied to my grandmother. My mother's learning was passed on as a gift to me. There were always books in our home, and trips taken to nearby libraries. There were dinner table conversations where my mother and father talked with their friends, and words flew around the table. And there was even my mother's music, which she was able to return to. At home in the evenings she sat at the piano and played—Beethoven, Chopin— and I would sit near her and listen.

My brother and I grew up in Chicago, but we visited New York City twice a year. I liked visiting my grandfather in his fur shop and playing with scraps of fur. I liked the chicken soup with kneidlach which my grandmother made for us. But my grandmother herself was an alien figure to me—a slow moving old woman with a thumbnail deformed by sewing. She was a woman of the old country and I was a child of the new. The cultural differences and our different languages, English and Yiddish, made a barrier between us as broad as an ocean.

I didn't know about my grandmother's baldness then or about the schooling which had been denied to her. My own head, with its thick, wavy brown hair, was never bald. I took my schooling, not as the gift which it was, but as a given. We always had enough to eat, and my brother and I always went to school. My brother was an excellent student. Sometimes I studied hard, sometimes not. But we both went on to college, my brother to study chemistry as my mother had wanted to do, and I, who didn't know what to want, because college was a kind of birthright.

My grandmother Tillie died before I started college, before I began writing stories and became a teacher. But I think of her bald head sometimes—when I teach a class or read a book or let myself dream the beginning of a story. I think of her hands which sewed so many fine stitches.

My own learning is stitched from the same fabric as my grandmother's. I know that now. Just as she was a seamstress, so I am learning to be a stitcher of words. When she was a child, her dreams were scissored short while mine were not. But I could not go on teaching and writing all alone. I need my grandmother's dreams to help me.

I think sometimes I even need my grandmother's bald head. I need to remember how she was stopped. And then I need to keep on learning. ▲

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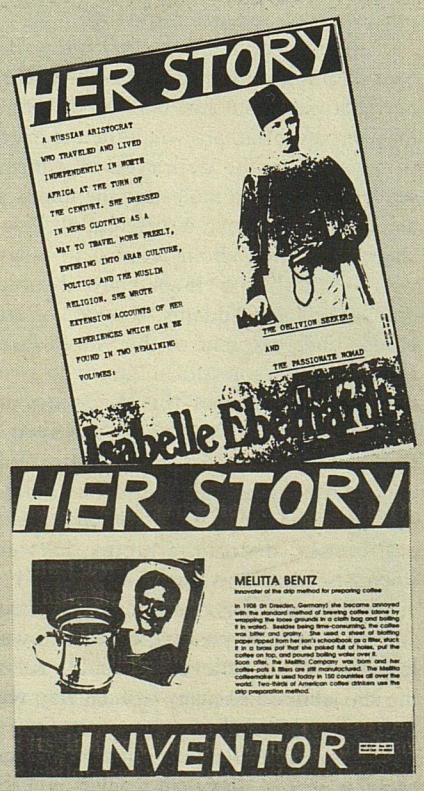
EVERYDAY REBELLIONS



Historically, women's contributions have been overlooked again and again by society. Leslie Raymond is trying to change that. Recently she started a project to bring the story of women out into the public. According to Raymond, "the idea is to inject the information circuit with details and images of women's accomplishments."

The project, called HER STORY, involves the distribution of flyers which contain information about women's lives. There are only three requirements. The flyer must be about a woman. The woman may be someone who is publicly known, or a family member. The person may even be mythological, as long as some historical information is known about her.

Second, a strong commitment should be made to put the flyers up in as many public places as possible. "The effectiveness of HER STORY," explains Raymond, "depends on being seen." And, flyers should be sent out to others around the country. People should be encouraged to make their own. Copies of flyers should be sent to HER STORY, PO Box 1073, Royal Oak, MI 48068.

Raymond realizes the simplicity of this project, but hopes "it will inspire people to expand on the idea and find other ways of interjecting this kind of information." ▲

Beth Dulin