

When I was 10 years old, while other girls were playing with dolls, I was obsessed with the *shtetl*, or village, my grandmother came from. I begged my parents to take me to Brooklyn, so I could sit next to her, feel the softness of her skin, and ask her about her village in Russia.

My grandmother was not forthcoming. Nor did she know exactly where her *shtetl* was located because it was an isolated village, and the only time she ventured any real distance from it was to come to the United States when she was 17.

“Grandma, where do you come from?” I would ask.

“Far.”

“What was it like?”

“Feh.”

The less she said, the more my imagination went wild, conjuring up images of a dark, mysterious place in Russia with sinewy alleys. I was awed that my grandmother, the woman who was my mother’s mother and called me “*mamaleh*,” lived in such a place and knew its secrets.

“Please, Gram, tell me.”

“It’s better to forget about it.”

She never spontaneously talked about Minkowitz, and I never gave up questioning her or trying to find out about her life before she came to America, before I knew her. Who was she before she was my grandmother?

“Tell me what you ate there, Gram.”

“Food.”

“Where did you buy it?”

“There was a market once a week, on Tuesdays. We had beans, potatoes, beets, corn....” her voice trailed off. She went into the kitchen to stir the chicken soup, and I watched the yellow chicken legs float to the surface and then disappear.

“Are you hungry, *mamaleh*?” she asked.

When I nodded, she opened the refrigerator and took out a jar full of *schmaltz*—rendered chicken fat—that was speckled with burnt onions. She spread half an inch of *schmaltz* on a piece of rye bread, and handed it to me.

“Did you eat *schmaltz* in Minkowitz?”

She nodded yes. I took a huge bite of bread, relishing the *schmaltz*, because it linked me to my grandmother’s village.

I was never very interested in religion, but I loved everything about my grandmother’s culture: the Yiddish newspaper that was folded up on an overstuffed, upholstered armchair in the living room; the front parlor, where I slept, and which looked out over the street; the pantry closet which smelled vaguely from matza. Most of all, I loved that she came from Minkowitz. It sounded so exotic. It was somewhere across the ocean, in a vast country called Russia. She wasn’t born in America, like I was. She came from a mysterious place and she was a foreigner with secrets. I felt about her the way the ancients must have felt about travelers who arrived in their midst; they wanted to hear stories, to learn about how people lived in faraway lands. The slightest details that my grandmother divulged about Minkowitz became indelibly imprinted on my brain.

“Gram, did you go to school?”

“No, *mamasheyne*.”

“Why not, Gram?”

“We weren’t allowed to.”

“Why couldn’t you go to school?”

I was like a little prosecuting attorney, and my grandmother softened on the witness stand. She got a faraway look in her eyes.

“I stood at the bottom of the hill, looking up at the school where the Russian girls studied. They wore blue uniforms. I wanted to be educated like them.”

“But you couldn’t....?”

She shook her head no. I wrote down everything she told me, and thought about it until the next time I saw her. Then I started asking questions again.

“If you didn’t go to school, what did you do all day in Minkowitz?”

“When I was 10 years old, like you are now, I was working.”

“What kind of work?”

“I dried tobacco leaves in the field with the women.”

I had never seen a tobacco leaf. Why did they need to be dried? I wrote down what my grandmother told me, and mulled it over until our next conversation. My mother said I was making my grandmother crazy. I didn’t understand what I was doing wrong. I loved my grandmother. I was just asking her about her childhood.

“Tell me about your house, Gram. What did it look like?”

“The floor was made from goat dreck.”

Goat shit for a floor. Were there clumps of dung? Who spread them out? Did they stink? What happened if you walked on the floor with bare feet? I clung to each tidbit, marinating it in my mind and imagination, repeating it to myself as though my life depended upon my remembering it.

On one visit, I was playing with cans of food in my grandmother's hall closet, stacking them, and unstacking them, using them like big tin Legos. She walked by and patted me affectionately on the shoulder.

“Where in Russia was Minkowitz, Gram? Do you know the name of the biggest city in the area?”

“Oy. Always Minkowitz. The biggest city was Kamenetz Podolsk.”

Again, I wrote down every word she said. I thought I was getting ancestral gems, but later, when I looked at the content, it was paltry indeed. No stories. No slice of life anecdotes. Just six facts about my grandmother's life in Minkowitz. That was it. The weekly market was on Tuesday. When she was 10 years old, she dried tobacco leaves with the women. She lived at the bottom of a hill. The Russian girls went to school on top of the hill. The floor of the house was made of goat dung. Kamenetz Podolsk was the big town. I repeated the scant facts over and over, clinging to them, imagining what they looked like, felt like, smelled like. It was so vivid that I felt as though I had lived in Minkowitz too.

I knew that in Minkowitz they spoke Yiddish. I started trying to imitate the sounds of the language since I couldn't speak it. Instead, I invented a sort of fake Yiddish. I would call my grandmother, and, when she answered the phone, I would cheerfully ask, “Grandma, *vus habastups-du?*”

“Judie,” she would say sadly, “I don't understand your *Eedish.*” That's how she pronounced it: “*Eedish.*”

The next time I called, I greeted her with the bogus, “Grandma, *hoison boisin galempt.*”

“Judie, I’m sorry. I just can’t understand your *Eedish*.”

When I was 19, bedridden with mononucleosis and hepatitis, I didn’t have the energy to roll over or kick the covers off when it got too hot. My grandmother got on a train in Brooklyn, which was unusual for her, and came to see me in Queens. She sat next to my bed, on a folding chair, and informed me that she finally figured out why she didn’t understand my Yiddish. “Because you go to college and you speak a very educated *Eedish*.” If I had had the energy, I would have leapt out of bed and hugged her.

My obsession with the village never diminished. When I went to live in Switzerland, and formed an experimental theatre troupe, I wrote a play about Minkowitz. In experimental performance art, repetition is not necessarily a bad thing, so I used the six facts I knew about Minkowitz over and over; they became a kind of choral refrain and achieved a certain musicality. The audiences were very attentive, and people often told me that they found the play to be unusual and esoteric. I can still hear the echo of one actress intoning, “The floor of the house was made of goat shit,” and the chorus repeating, “Goat shit.”

My Swiss boyfriend at the time started calling me “Minkowitz” as a term of endearment. “Minkowitz, do you want to go to a movie tonight?” he asked. “Minkowitz, let’s go into the country tomorrow.”

It seemed pretty normal to me. Why not call me “Minkowitz?” I was obsessed with it by day and dreamed about it at night. It was so vivid and real in my mind that I became convinced I had a past life there.

Growing up, I begged my mother to talk to me about Minkowitz, but she pursed her lips and frowned, as though she had just sucked a lemon. She was born in Brooklyn,

she had never been to the village, but certainly she remembered things my grandmother had told her when she was growing up.

“Stop driving me nuts with Minkowitz,” she’d say. “They were dirt poor. They didn’t have a pot to piss in. Everyone was poor. It was horrible. The Czar’s men came in and slaughtered them. That’s why they wanted to get away and they don’t want to talk about it.”

“But, Ma, it’s our heritage. I need to know about it.”

“How many times do I have to tell you it was awful?”

“Please, I want to know about where I come from and what life was like there.”

“It was based on the Jewish calendar. That was what mattered in Minkowitz and all the other dirt-poor *shtetls*, and that was what they brought with them to America.”

“So you mean that Grandma was always tuned in to the Jewish calendar?”

“When she lived with us, which is what we did, because we felt responsibility for our parents and didn’t send them off to institutions —“

Uh oh. I didn’t respond. I didn’t feel guilt, sort of. I just waited for her to continue.

“When she lived with us, which of course you don’t remember, she would look at the calendar, see which holidays were coming up, and begin to plan for them. Her life was organized, just as it was in the *shtetl*, around the Jewish calendar which included an endless supply of feast days and fast days, in addition to the weekly preparations for Sabbath and the Havdalah ceremony which ended it, after which everyone wished each other a ‘*guten woch*—a good week.’”

According to my mother, one of the heaviest holidays was Tisha B'av, which commemorates the destruction of the two temples in Jerusalem; although more than 600 years apart, it is said that their demise occurred on the same day of the Jewish calendar. It is also a time to remember other tragedies that befell the Israelites. My mother reported that when she grew up, they ate "*milichdicker*" food on Tisha B'av---dairy only, and no meat. The sadness lasted for nine days, during which time they couldn't swim in the ocean, get married, or celebrate any joyous occasions. My mother emphasized she and her sister were half-hearted about religious observance, but they did it "because that's the way things were. You respected your parents."

I tried to find out more about my great-grandparents, and, surprisingly, my mother told me that she loved them. When she grew up, she held up a Havdalah candle (a braided candle that is used at the end of Sabbath and certain holidays) and measured it against her grandfather, who was very tall. She wanted her future man to be the same height. Her grandfather was a *melamed*, a learned one, in Minkowitz and when he came to America.

"Wow, ma, I love being descended from a learned man."

"A *melamed* in the *shtetl* was a big nothing. He trained boys for their *bar mitzvahs*, and a *bar mitzvah* was no big deal. They took place on Mondays and Thursdays, and the girls didn't go. They served a piece of herring and some schnapps. That was it."

I tried to picture a little *bar mitzvah* boy and an even littler piece of herring. Truth? Who knows? Anything from the *shtetl* was diminished by my very American mother.

"Please tell me more about this, Ma. Anything you remember of *shtetl* traditions."

“That’s it. I’m finished.”

“Please. I’m not finished. I have no one else to ask.”

“I can’t imagine what good it will do you to know this.”

“It does me a lot of good. Ma, did they ever tell you what it was like to sail to America in steerage?”

“No.”

“They never said anything?”

“I wasn’t interested. I never asked. Just count yourself lucky you were born here and not in Minkowitz.”

“Ma, I get it. I know how you feel. But I want to understand more about Grandma, and what her life was like before she came here.”

“It’s of no interest. None.”

“Did you ever ask her when you were a child?”

“No. She was a terrible mother to me.”

“What did she do?”

“It’s what she didn’t do. When there was parents’ night at school, she never came. She was old school, she spoke Yiddish, she had no interest at all in what I was doing. I came home one day and told her I was the valedictorian. She didn’t know if that was a good or bad thing. She said, ‘Here, have a glass of milk.’ When I was 19, I had a lump on my neck the size of a grapefruit. I had to go to the hospital by myself to have surgery. I could have died, and where was my mother? She was completely, totally, ineffectual. ‘Here, have a glass of milk.’ That was her response to everything. When I was 3 years old, I decided to raise myself. Look, I don’t want to talk about this.”

“It’s important to me.”

“But it’s not important to me. Stop hounding me.”

“How did you raise my mother? Was she always difficult like this?” I once asked my grandmother.

“No one could ever tell your mother what to do,” she replied, shaking her head sadly. “When she was three years old, she decided to raise herself.”

I wanted so badly to have a gentle, caring mother, like the moms I saw on television. But when they were giving out soft mothers, I was at the back of the line. What I had, instead, was a gentle grandmother. My mother was angry and deeply disappointed in her. But I was grateful.

There was nothing exceptional about my grandmother. She wasn’t smart, or accomplished. She had a kind of folk wisdom, like the way she talked about fashion. “When your clothes go out of style, you put them in a barrel. When the barrel is full, you turn it over upside down. The clothes that are at the bottom will be back in fashion again.”

She was right. Bell-bottoms out, bell-bottoms in. Paisley out, paisley in. Ruffles no. Ruffles yes.

She had a different way of looking at things from my mother, father, sisters, friends, and teachers. Somehow, I believed it was because she was forged in Minkowitz, that mystery place in Russia.

My sisters had no interest in where my grandmother came from. My mother had no interest in where my grandmother came from. I am not even sure my grandmother had

any interest in where she came from. But somehow, the finger of fate pointed to me. I was the little flame that burned and burned with curiosity and kept Minkowitz alive.

When my grandmother said, “I love you more than life itself, *mamaleh*,” and showed me how to make water bagels by dropping little circles of dough in a pot of boiling water, the way they did it in Minkowitz, I knew it was my destiny to one day go to Minkowitz and see for myself.

I didn’t know where in Russia it was. I didn’t know how I would travel there. I didn’t know who was left or what language they spoke or what they looked and dressed like. But I knew in my bones that Minkowitz still existed and I vowed to myself that someday I would get there.