

## RUTH MANDEL

### Eulogy To The Holocaust

dear great aunt erna,

Anyone who knows you would believe it easily, even expect it. They have had to strap you, hospital-gray-white canvas with worn fuzz on the skin side, around your wrists and across your legs. To keep you there, prevent you from kicking your feet over the edge, wresting yourself out of the bed, wrenching those i.v.s out of your arm, the oxygen tube out of your throat and walking right out of the hospital, probably unaware that your lungs cannot breathe, your legs cannot carry you. Your mind, having a mind of its own, would just walk on out, regardless.

Memory is a kind of oxygen.

The survivor in you ready to take care of yourself, by your own means. But, if you flail and kick yourself free as you are trying, we would lose you, on foot, to an unwalkable, vague and dreaded landscape. They have bound you, to protect you from your desire to flee. One strap wraps itself just under the tattoo Auschwitz gave you, wise and horrible Auschwitz, keeping itself alive, in a small way, on your arm.

Memory is a kind of ruin.

The tube in your throat makes it impossible for you to speak, your eyes do the work, bore through us and plead. Occasionally, you write a word on a blank white page, pencil shaking in restrained fingers, barely pressing against the page, almost illegible marks which we try gravely to make out. And your strapped hands, they too, gesture and implore. All your signals scream, "OUT."

Memory is a kind of terror.

Your first baby, Bina Rachel, born in Tarnopol Ghetto in 1940. And died there, exactly one year later, on Yom Kippur. "A natural death." Language tortures us. *Natural?* Relative to the other deaths, meaning she died in your helplessness, hungry arms. And was not shot, not smothered,

not thrown to life or to death, from a racing gas-bound train. A dead bundle, swaddled by your ribbon-thin hands.

Memory is a kind of burial.

And later, your husband smuggled you and his sister out of the ghetto. False papers named you, *Marysia Loska*, the last time you saw him. You and she were arrested, because she *looked Jewish*, and neither of you had your papers. In jail, the guards questioned. You lied, and pointed to your blond hair, all those fools needed to be convinced you fit their smug and silly, aryan definitions.

Memory is a kind of proof.

Convincing them of a false address in a non-jewish part of town was dangerous. When they investigated and countered that you had given a street address higher than the numbers actually went, you insisted they had heard incorrectly, persuading them you had said 8 and not 18. Persuading them that your neighbours denied knowing you because you had committed some disgracing, unmentionable deed. You spun stories deftly, never sure if they would save your life.

Memory is a kind of unravelling.

Unknown to you, your sister-in-law, was already murdered. You tried to escape from jail and were sent to Auschwitz, where your indispensable, expert sewing saved your life. And to Birkenau, where you continued to sew, perhaps the uniforms of the guards, vestments for the officers, dresses for their wives—you never said. Three years of saving your life every moment. You, a Jew, hiding in a death camp, as a Pole who was caught with a Jew. Emerging to a gassed out, depleted world, to learn of your husband's death, which even now you cannot bear to speak.

Memory is a kind of wail.

You are our lived memory, our certain memory. Our living memory. You have remembered for us, generously, openly, without demands upon us. A model, teaching us to remember faithfully,

yet still enjoy life's other colours. What questions I could bare to ask, bare to inflict, you answered with affection, with details, impressions, dailiness, events.

Memory is a kind of love.

Remembering was substantive and specific. We sat with my tape recorder running. You introduced me to your sister-in-law Henya, my father's mother—as you knew her—your girlish awe and envy, her urbaneness, intelligence, sophistication. *Elegance*, your word exactly, saying "Oh, how I looked up to her, me a young girl from the country, she was married and living in the city, I could just sit and watch, everything beautiful, the way she walked, dressed, how she talked to me."

Memory is a kind of family.

And you introduced me to your nephew, my father, as a child. Your head tilted fondly and your glinting eyes gazing off to the side, ani-



Sue Goldstein, "Of Course I'm not Jewish," etching, 1996.

mated, as though about to join a giddy family table in the corner of the room. Your attention fixed there, you chuckled and described him, circling the crowded table to nibble food off people's plates—or am I confusing that with how you remember me.

Memory is a kind of fusion.

You helped me draw the family tree from which I grew, create remembrances where I had none. You helped people the sets, props and wardrobe on a distant, sparse, smashed stage. Told me who entered, exited, crossed, returned or was never seen again. The kinds of details that make my eyes flood and my sinuses rush in anguish. Make me realize fiercely what we have lost. What is missing. Why we are lonely.

Memory is a kind of script.

And even then, not getting a photo of you, of your arm. And even then, not covering it all. And even then I tired, not making as much effort as I should have, not staying longer. Knowing that I was leaving, and you were staying in your apartment to contend with the cast whom my questions had invited into your home—some still struggling to live, some in the throws of horrendous deaths, some waiting, some watching—all of them our blood, all of them flowing.

Memory is a kind of danger.

Your daughter Sharon, born after the war to an altered you, and a new husband, said you recently pointed to my wedding invitation, still posted in the kitchen of your home and said, "I was in Sweden." My husband's background has always been a source of cherished memory for you—the place of your liberation, your first smorgasbord, the hotel sheltering d.p.s, overlooking the sea, safe haven at the end of the war. *The end of the war*—Sweden made those words possible for you. Working again as a seamstress, this time for kind women and for pay. A time of recuperation before returning to assess absolute loss. Wicked and unmovable loss.

Memory is a kind of stone.

And now, your body is emaciated, again. Disoriented and distressed, you have forgotten how to eat and do not want to remember. Or cannot. Your hand knocks Sharon's benevolent

spoon away. A stroke brought you to the hospital, where you forgot how to breathe and do not want to remember. Or cannot. The ventilator tricks your body into remaining alive. Some days your eyes open, others they do not. Some days you can write again. Others you cannot. You take my offered hand, squeeze my palm and weave your fingers in and out of mine.

Memory is a kind of loom.

On Fridays, Sharon lights the hospital-approved electric candles for you. For you and for God. God, whom you have talked to each and every shabbat, at sunset, eyes closed gently. You lit the candles, sheltered them with your hands and whispered once the blessing through your fingers. Your arms circled slowly to shepherd their light, spread it among us and across time. Head bowed and eyes covered by your fingers, once more the blessing, this time your throat still and just your lips reciting. You, the women before you, beside you, after you, with you.

Memory is a kind of prayer

a kind of oxygen   a kind of ruin   a kind of  
terror  
Memory is a kind of burial   a kind of proof  
a kind of unravelling   a kind of wail  
Memory is a kind of love   a kind of family  
a kind of fusion   a kind of script  
Memory is a kind of danger   a kind of stone  
a kind of loom. A prayer.

At 76 your memory  
is briskly walking away from you,  
leaving you  
and leaving us,  
behind.

Who will do the remembering now?  
Who is remembering now.

*Erna: March 15, 1918—March 10, 1995*  
*Lovingly, Ruth*

*Ruth Mandel is the daughter of a Holocaust survivor. She is currently working on a poetry and photography manuscript, titled Photographs We Will Never See, about the Holocaust's continuing reach. She has been published in Contemporary Verse 2, The Antigonish Review, The Fiddlehead, and is forthcoming in Prairie Fire.*

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