

Who My Father Is to Me

by Betsy Dougatz

Lately, I've begun questioning the concept of reality. Do we correctly remember our past, and allow those experiences to dictate our future? Or, do we take our past, filter it to suit our needs, and have that become our reality? And when it comes to the story of my father, I may never know what is real and what is interpretations of reality.

My father's name was Karlman Russ, and he was a Holocaust survivor. His story of tragedy, heartbreak, triumph and hope, the reality is more ambiguous and open-ended than ever. In the summer of 2005, I was able to piece together some of my father's past when I visited the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem, Israel. He seldom mentioned family members lost among the 6 million Jews killed in World War II. After searching the memorial's database of the dead, I found myself face-to-face with the names of my own kin, names that were never more than a whisper in the Boston home where he raised me. Then I was struck with the horrible reality - he survived the concentration camps. Others did not.

The Nazis first rounded up my father and his family in the Łódź Ghetto of Poland. While I do recall a few tender loving tales of his family life before the ghetto, there is no real firsthand information about dad until he was liberated from Bergen Belsen Concentration Camp in 1945. Here's what I did know about him.

My father was born in Piotrkow, Poland in 1908. He was born to Pinkus Russ (b.1882) and Ruchle (Nachmanovitz) Russ, (b.1890). He had two siblings that didn't survive the war and their cause of death was never talked about. Maybe he never knew what happened to them? What he did always say, in an adoring manner, about his sister, was just how much I looked like her. That's all I knew about her - we looked alike. Her name was Sura Ryuka Russ, born six years after my father (b.1914). His brother Jacob Maher Russ was born in April 1922. The only thing I recall hearing about his brother was that my father "heard" his brother might be alive somewhere in Poland and that my father went back to Poland from Russia in an attempt to find him. My father said this was towards the end of the war. At that point my father was caught by the Nazi regime and was sent to a concentration camp, maybe Auschwitz, but he never definitely told me.

I knew that my father was a shoemaker, as was his brother Jacob. He did say that having that occupation helped save and prolong his life. He was vital to the Nazi war effort, making boots for German soldiers in a forced labor camp. I think he escaped to Russia after 1943. Was that a conclusion I made up on my own, or was it what he had told me. I will never know.

The most shocking documentation I discovered in my research at Yad Vashem, was that my father was married before the war. I was completely blindsided. His wife's name was Chejwet (Litman) Russ (b.1905). They had a child born in either 1938 or 1940. Records show different dates. Her name was Zerthal. Records show that his wife and child were taken out of the ghetto in 1942. I'm assuming it was to a death camp. I had always known that my father suffered the horrible loss of his

entire immediate family, but I never imagined that he had a wife and child. I had no evidence of this at all and he never said a word of it to me. I did however have a gut feeling something was not being said, and that silence was deafening.

When a dear friend of mine lost her son at the age of two in 1976, my father became anguished and overcome with sadness and was extremely pensive. Just the way he said, "No one should know from losing a child." made me think, "*Does he know from this first hand?*" I never asked him, not wanting to upset him.

I always sensed that my parents made a conscious attempt to shield me from his traumatic experiences. With loving and protective intentions I have "gaping holes" in my knowledge and questions unanswered. After his liberation he somehow ended up in a DP (displaced persons) camp near Munich. How he managed to be on the second transport to America after the war is a mystery I will never unravel. He was 38 years old when he departed Bremen, Germany on the passage ship Marine Marlin. On December 20, 1946, he arrived in New York. With twists and turns of fate that first week in America he met my mother and four months later they were married. I was born 9 months later.

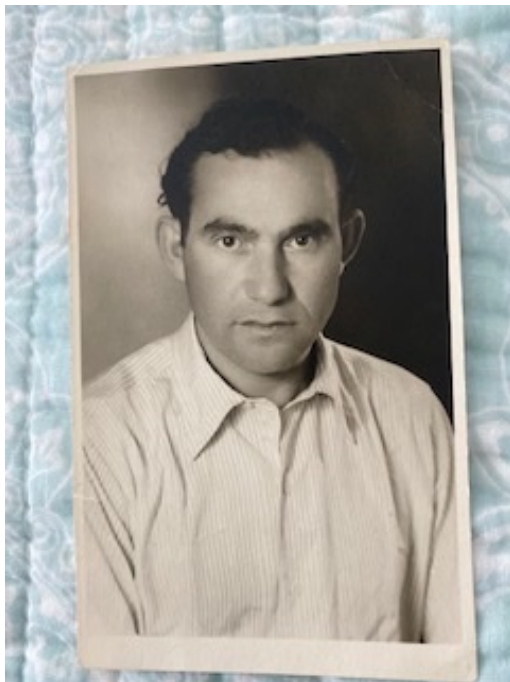
Sadly, I have few archival memories of my father. Fortunately, I'm one of the lucky ones to have a creation of my own "personal myth".

His resilience and sheer will to live dominated his life. His ability to love so deeply, his strong arms around me keeping me safe. His endurance to any adversity and a commitment to

a new and better way of life are lessons I hope I learned. I learned to always be self reliant and always persevere.

He found power to not only survive, but to thrive in the face of so much loss and horrible experiences. Traumatic stress impacts not just the person who carries it, but everyone in the home who lives with it everyday.

My Father never lost his humanity. It's a testament to the human spirit.



Karl Russ



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