AIMS For a better birth...

Transgenerational trauma: a story of one Jewish family

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My maternal grandmother, Herta, and my paternal grandmother, Mina

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We are all born into a family story. And I certainly was.

How might my grandparents and particularly my grandmothers' experiences (as women and mothers, like me,) have been carried through the family, through our bodies, through our psyches, through our DNA?

The weight of my grandparents' stories have hung heavy in my life since before I can even remember. Their stories were always there as pain and fear, as shadows and ghosts.

In life, as in my work, I look back and can now see that all the threads so far have been - out of necessity - about acknowledging the pain of the ancestors. Each twist of my life has been driven towards understanding the limiting self-beliefs that keep us in our traumas, about deeply questioning the status quo, and about working in all manner of ways to free myself and others from the chains of the stories that lock us in our suffering.

Both of my grandmothers were of Jewish European heritage. My maternal grandmother, Herta Juliana Heymans, was born in 1926 in Germany, to a German mother and a Dutch father. In 1936, when Hitler rose to power, her family emigrated to Holland, where they hoped it would be safer to live as Jews. However, by 1943, it became apparent that it was far from safe to be a Jew in Holland. Herta, her younger sister Doris, and her parents, Wilhelmina and Karl, split up so as to be less visible all together

and sought safety in hiding through the underground movement. They were hidden in the houses of several selfless gentile families, who put their and their family's lives on the line to save mine, until the war ended.

Herta's younger sister, Doris (along with many other of Herta's wider family members), was found, aged twelve, and killed in a Nazi concentration camp. Herta and her parents were reunited when the war ended in 1945. Herta could never reconcile with herself that she had been the sibling who had survived.

In time, Herta was introduced by the hands of fate to Rudolf Rosenberg, who was a Berlin born Jew, and had sought safety with family in the UK before the war, ending up fighting as a soldier for the British army. They married in 1950, and eventually settled in Cardiff in the UK in 1954, along with their three children - twins called Michael and Monica, and Yvonne (who is my mother).

My paternal grandmother, Mina Caroline Sternlicht (which means 'starlight'), was born in Poland in 1922, to Polish Jews called Henryk and Karolina. They, too, could not foresee the extent of the dangers coming their way until it was too late and the Nazis had taken control of their country. By 1939, the safest option Mina's family could find for her in their attempts to ensure she survived the Nazis' orders to round up and kill the Jews (and other marginalised peoples), was to pay the underground movement for false identity papers for her and her sister Franja; they moved to a different city, far away in Poland, where no-one would recognise them. Both of the sisters were blue eyed, fair haired and had small noses, so weren't typically 'Jewish' in appearance. Mina and Franja lived during these war years under the guise of Christian citizens, working as nannies caring for the children of wealthy Polish families in cahoots with Nazi ideology.

Miraculously, Mina's entire nuclear family survived the war and were reunited in their flat in Krakow after the Nazi regime fell in 1945. The story Mina would tell again and again of this reunion, of finding her mother, her father and her sisters all alive and well, under the pink light of the hallway in the entrance to their flat, where they had vowed to gather if they survived the war, still brings me to tears today.

Soon after the war, in Krakow, in 1947, Mina met and married another Polish Jewish survivor, Abraham Glass. Abraham had spent the war years with his father in a Russian labour camp in Siberia, whilst unbeknownst to him, the women of his family, who had naively been left behind in Poland, presuming they would be safe, were murdered in Nazi concentration camps. Abraham and Mina found they couldn't bear to remain in a country they felt utterly betrayed by and could no longer trust. So, in 1949, they managed to find work and residence in London, UK, with thanks to Abraham's distant cousin. Here, in London, they raised their son David (my father) and their daughter, Susie.

Even after surviving these horrors, women like my grandmothers, found themselves as 1950s wives in post war UK, within an oppressive, patriarchal, industrial capitalist system that didn't value women, particularly within the working world, and increasingly not also within the role of the mother. And which still condoned husbands to be entirely in charge of their wives' lives.

At this time, women were also giving birth to their children in an increasingly medicalised culture that

either drugged them as they gave birth and pulled their children from their bodies with forceps, or didn't drug them, and did the very same thing. What's more, women like my grandmothers were bringing their children into the world miles and miles away from their own mothers and grandmothers, having been driven to start life again in new countries following the war. My parents, and so many people in their generation, began life with unresourced, repeatedly traumatised mothers, who had little to no support from the women and matriarchs in their families. There was nobody there to support them in becoming mothers, or to take the strain from constant childcare, housework and from supporting their husbands to sustain a livelihood for their families. This was not an easy time to be a woman, let alone a new mother, a wife and a recent immigrant, having just survived a genocide.

So, shunting forwards to me, to us; to their grandchildren. These tales of malignance and trauma were, as you might imagine, woven into the very fabric of our lives. Our grandparents' histories were only told implicitly to begin with; for even my parents had no idea of the details of their parent's war stories until much later on, when their parents became old and could self-silence no more. That my grandparents' previous lives had been full of fear and tragedy wasn't spoken in words - but seen in the weight of their actions. In the ways that they steadfastly kept to the Jewish traditions as a matter of urgency, teaching their children that keeping to these traditions was paramount, that being Jewish was the centrepoint of their lives, that 'marrying out' would be a tragedy and would never work, as being Jewish was the most important part of all that we were. A hint of their tragic pasts could be seen in the too many locks and chains on the doors of their houses, of the small squat yahrzeit candles they lit often for their dead loved ones that we had never known, of their bookshelves covered in Holocaust literature and in the way that they trusted very few people beyond the Jewish communities they cushioned themselves amongst, and sometimes not even them.

My grandparents' stories only began to be shared explicitly as their years ended, when finally, they could repress their memories no more and they would tell their stories on repeat to anyone who would listen. Which is where my generation stepped in; as the receptors of these tragic tales. Acting as cauldrons of our ancestors' pasts and the potentiality of a different kind of future, we found that these unprocessed traumas were living as toxic loads in us all; showing up repeatedly over the years in all of our systems, in all of the generations, as addictions, eating disorders, insomnia, anxiety, depression, disfunction.

As a generation mercifully living in times of 'democracy' and of peace and material wealth, we finally had the space, the freedom and the cultural thumbs up to begin processing and healing the traumas of the past that were showing up in us. Only with the advantage of sufficient time having passed since the traumas themselves, of not being first generation immigrant children (whose task ultimately was to raise the economic status of their parents' and to reassure their parents that what had happened to them would never be forgotten), and the liberation of living in a country without war, in a class and an era which valued personal development, have we been able to give light to these stories. And so we work towards changing the trauma response behaviours that become ingrained when these stories remain locked in the family system.

So what did I encounter in my two grandmothers, Herta and Mina, as women, as mothers and as

grandmothers? As a child, I saw two immaculately dressed women, one dark and one fair, one tall and one short, both of whom, although very serious on the surface, could melt into laughter in the particular sweetness that is a grandchild to a grandparent.

As a young woman, when they began to share their war stories with me, I began to see their wounds and their hearts, which in parts, had hardened with too much to bear. I saw proud, tired women who had raised their children hundreds of miles away from the surviving members of their blood families, who had worked incredibly hard in order to start again in new lands, so that the next generations could graduate from 'survive', to 'thrive'. I saw women who felt they had no choice until the end but to live in deference to their husbands' decisions, which meant not getting to pursue careers of their own, for example. My grandmothers were tough, bright, dark, bitter and sometimes, like a crack in the cloud, light and so, so soft.

Now, as a mother to two daughters myself, I think often of Herta and Mina and their sisters. And as mine quarrel, I feel a pain so deep in my heart, in the knowing that life can change into tragedy in a hair's breadth. I also see that I, too, moved far away from my blood family just before I birthed my own children, trying to gain distance from a culture whose ethics frightened me, to raise a family in a brave new world, with strong values distinct from the one in which I had come from, hoping to call in a kinder future.

When I put my fingers in the soil to join in with the magic of new life, of working the earth to grow nourishing food, I think of Herta, who was never happier than when gardening.

When I watch my daughters becoming accomplished young artists, colouring pencils between fingers and thumbs, I feel Mina through them, drawing beautiful clothes for my paper dolls on the Sabbath afternoon.

When I look in the mirror, from rural Wales, I see the faces of my grandmothers, and their mothers too, with dark eyes and hair, a small nose, and an Eastern European flair.

When I walk with a woman and her family in her journey through pregnancy and into motherhood, I see a different world available for women today, despite a medicalised culture that can seek to undermine and intervene too often. I see women beginning to be conscious and activated by their wild, powerful strengths, by the magic of their wombs and starting to trust their own inner authorities once again, as well as the outer authorities that speak so loud. I see women rebuilding connection and community and speaking out against injustice, sexism, self-silencing and a culture that neither supports stay at home or working mothers enough.

Finally, I see young girls, such as my daughters, approaching menstruation in celebration of this rite of passage. I see them eyes-opened, informed and empowered, knowing they are going to respect and trust the women they are soon to meet, the women they will soon become, in the inner seasons of their menstrual cycles - each with their own unique medicines and powers.[1]

Herein lies the healing.



Between my grandmother's clavicles

She was all bone.
Between her clavicles was a cave.
And when she lay down, her Star of David curled up in there.

We stayed often at their far away house
In that distant city that smelt of hops,
With the houseplant in the sunlit porch
That looked like peas threaded on strings
(Good enough to eat).

Downstairs was where marmalade
And lemon curd got transferred
Into polished filigreed vessels,
With matching silver spoons.

Downstairs was where leftovers
Were wrapped in plastic shower caps
And where kitchen stools
Wore soft, hand-spun hats.

Downstairs was where there was
A mahogany sideboard,
(with a tiny key),
Keeping sweets in their wrappers
Safe, until after tea.

Downstairs was where dinner got passed

Through a hatch in the wall,
And was always about to be
“Slugs and snails”.

Downstairs was where
There was always knitting to do,
For the many and the few,
And for meals to be cooked and
For chicken soup to stew
And for portions to ladle out
And for phone calls to be made
And for cleaning to do.

Downstairs, in the living room,
Was where the walls were decked
In plates and spoons,
Carved and shaped by many hands,
From those trying to make a penny in foreign lands

Downstairs was where these empty utensils,
Hung up and unused, were
There to prove how far they had come;
From the point of a gun, then on the run,
From dying, death and destruction….

….To the new wife, in the new land,
Speaking a guttural tongue,
To the mother of daughters,
To the mother of a son;
To the couple on safari,
Working hard, so they can have fun.

She was hard as bone,
And soft as a grandmother’s love.
And although she carried tragic tales
In her armored heart
(a very serious woman)
She made me laugh every single time
She jumped me out of the bath.

(Long ago, far from here,
She was hidden in the cellar downstairs,

Under the floorboards upstairs
and in the attic up there).

Upstairs was where there were
Clues of children now grown,
Memories hidden in the faded fabrics
of the single duvet covers.

Upstairs was where her locked jewellery box lived,
The key hidden up high above
The tense but smiling wedding photo;
(She had survived, Now she will thrive).
And every now and then she would
Let me finger through her jewels,
Gem by shining gem, each telling its pretty tale.

Upstairs was there were strange objects
In her ornate dressing table;
Curlers, hairnets, hairspray, which
All smelt like perfume and glue.
And it was here, everywhere,
Where everything smelt so different
And so good
And so wrong
And so strong.

Upstairs was where the sweep of the hallway curtains
Resounded with a crunch and scrape
As they were swept open in the morning,
Signalling to us, that we could come in and lie with them,
Softly under the warm duvet
If we were very quiet,
while they read their newspapers.

She was all bone.
And between her clavicles was a cave.
And when she lay down,
Her Star of David curled up in there.



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1 The Inner Seasons of the Menstrual Cycle.www.redschool.net/blog/the-inner-seasons-of-the-menstrual-cycle