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NON-FICTION | SPRING 2014

## Yom Kippur

By Lisa Gruenberg



My father, on the far right, with his family, left to right, Uri, Elka, Mia and Leo, 1930

In old age, my father, Harry Gruenberg, began to have flashbacks about his life in Vienna before he escaped in 1939, at the age of eighteen. He also had recurring nightmares about being buried alive. I realize now the dream was triggered by his discovery of the details of his parents' murders, details released by Austria in the late 1990's.

*Yom Kippur* is set in 1971. It is one of a group of essays and stories titled *Searching for Mia*. Mia was my father's younger sister, who disappeared into Germany in 1941 at the age of fifteen. The essays deal with trying to come to grips with my father's emerging stories, and my search for his sister, his lost family and his friends and neighbors after his death. My stories also explore my own experience with depression, and its relationship to creativity and writing.



My father with my mother, Eden Jane, me, David, Neville, Syracuse, NY 1956



My father with me around 1972, at Green Lakes State Park, near where his ashes are buried.

Leaving home was a shock but I did not realize it until much later. In fact, I realized much later that the experience left me without feelings except anger for many years to come.  
—From my father’s “Notes on Harry Gruenberg” written around 1994

When I was sixteen I had my first bout of depression. I thought this sense that the color drained out of the world was something that came with growing older. I went to bed most nights hoping I wouldn't wake up the next day. My mother said I was "blue" and told me it would pass. I remember my father being kind and my older brothers making an extra effort to take me out with their friends. The possibility of seeing a therapist never came up.

That September, I asked my father to take me to Yom Kippur services. I'd never been to temple; my father seemed pleased that I wanted to go. I had no idea if he had been since he left Vienna, or even if he went to synagogue as a child. My mother was raised Anglican, but even though we bought a Christmas tree every year, the two of them were devout atheists.



Me, around 1971

On the drive over we passed the sprawling campus of Syracuse University. "Where do you think you'll apply to college?" my father asked me when we passed the building that housed his office and lab. His brows were overgrown and errant hairs curled against his glasses.

"I dunno." I was irritated with his question. Life after high school stretched out like a flat line to the horizon.

"Do you think you still want to be a doctor?" my father asked.

I sighed and looked out the window. My father and I were still close. He was tutoring me in calculus and physics so I could graduate high school a year early. We strolled around the neighborhood when he came home from work, sometimes holding hands, sometimes talking about science. But, more and more, I felt like his advice was old fashioned and not very relevant.

"Well, whatever you do, it should do something you find exciting."

How many times had I heard that? "I think I want to take a few years off. Maybe I'll travel."

"Where?"

"Dunno."

“What about applying to Syracuse?” he asked.

“Too many JAPs,” I answered.

“What?”

“Too many JAPs,” I said it quieter the second time, wondering if my father thought I was talking about Japanese students. Was it possible he had never heard that expression?

“What are you talking about?” He turned to me when we stopped at a light.

“Princesses, Dad—Jewish American...” I couldn’t finish.

The light changed. My father drove in silence for a few more blocks.

“I can’t believe you could say that,” he said.

The synagogue rose like Egyptian pyramids on the hill above the Christian Brothers Academy. My father pulled into the packed parking lot. He slammed the car door and pulled an embroidered yarmulke out of his pocket and placed it on his crown. I was relieved when he took my hand. He nodded hello to a few people I didn’t recognize. The man at the door asked for tickets. With another slight-of-hand, my father produced them from the other pocket of his polyester jacket.

We sat near the back of the sanctuary. The room was dim, as if daylight reached us through some circuitous route. The cantor’s voice rose out of nowhere with the unearthly strains of the Kol Nidre. The rabbi prayed and the congregation read along. My father’s lips fluttered and he moved his finger right to left along the page. He made a small bow forward at certain parts.

The rabbi began the sermon. His subject was the evils of mixed marriage and the dilution of faith. I wondered how many of the people in the temple knew that my mother wasn’t Jewish.

At the end of the service, my father stood up and pushed his way out of the pew and disappeared. I was caught up in the crowd’s winding current and drifted through the portal and out under the haze of the Milky Way. It was still warm—Indian summer. My father was already in the driver’s seat when I reached him. We waited with the windows rolled down as the others jammed their way out of the exit.

“Well, that was weird.” I said.

“Yes.” He pulled the yarmulke off his head and stuffed it into his pocket and then he lifted his hands onto the steering wheel and leaned into it.

“Tell me about your sister,” I said. I didn’t know the question was on my mind.

My father winced like he did whenever I hugged him without warning. He answered the way he always answered. “She was smart, she had a good sense of humor. She was pretty. You remind me of her.”

“What happened to your family?” I knew my grandparents were murdered and his sister disappeared, but how did I even know that? I just did.

My father whispered to the wheel. “I was told my father went to Theresienstadt but I don’t know if that’s true. My parents were both gassed at Auschwitz.”

“And Maya?” My father used my cousin’s name when he talked about his sister in those days. Usually he just said “my sister” or sometimes “Lisa,” my name. It wouldn’t be until a year before he died that I learned her name, Mia, was pronounced Mee-ya.

My father looked bewildered for a moment, as if he wasn’t clear who I was talking about. Then he said, “My father wrote me in 1941 that she was taken to a camp in Magdeburg, a few hours from Berlin—she was transferred to Theresienstadt later. But my

Uncle Rudy inquired at the police station in Vienna when he came back from Russia after the war. The police seemed to think my sister and my parents were deported together to Minsk and then Auschwitz. But the records showed my brother on the same train, so I wonder if they made a mistake.”

My Uncle Uri left for Palestine on a children’s transport in 1938 and survived.

“If that’s what happened,” my father continued, “My sister would have been around your age when she was gassed.”

“I’m sorry, Dad,” I said. The words rattled in the empty space between us.

He turned the key in the ignition. “I don’t know how she could have ended up in Vienna again.” He shifted into gear and pulled out without looking at me. “She developed early. She was already a young lady when I left. I worry about what happened to her.”

Silence began to close a door between us.

“But what if the police were wrong about her?” I asked. “What if she’s still living someplace in East Germany?”

My father braked and put the car back into neutral. He looked at me then. My question held open the door between us for a moment longer.

“I hope she’s not. I hope she’s dead.” The door slammed shut. He put the car back in gear, then pulled into the caravan making its way to the exit, and home again.

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*Lisa Gruenberg is a physician and writer living in Boston. She began writing in 2004, when her elderly father began to have nightmares and flashbacks about the past. She earned her MFA in creative writing from Lesley University in 2007. Her short story, "Keiskamma," won a Massachusetts Cultural Council Fellowship in 2012.*