

Memories of my Grandmother

Leah Cohen

Leah Cohen raconte l'influence heureuse qu'a eue sa grand-mère sur sa vie.



Leah Cohen's Grandmother

I have this terrible longing, this emptiness, that nothing seems to fill since my grandmother died over three years ago. Although my grandmother was over 100 and I was 32 when she died, nothing could have prepared me for her death. In a way, I began to think that she was invincible and would live on for the whole of my life.

My grandmother, Anne Glicksman, née Rosner, was born in a little village in Poland at the end of the 19th century. Until she was in her mid-50s she wandered with her husband and three daughters in Eastern Europe, trying to make a living. My grandfather, who would have preferred to have spent his life as a Talmudic scholar, drifted from job to job.

In 1930, the family emigrated on the last ship allowed entry to Canada at the beginning of the Depression. For the next 35 years, my grandmother and grandfather worked side-by-side running a boarding house, selling charcoal, and for more than 20 years, selling chickens at Kensington

Market in Toronto.

Over the years, my grandmother, who was my staunchest supporter in all my enthusiasms, assured me that I was a golden child and that I could do anything I wanted with my life. It was my grandmother who explained to me that I must look at the world as an absurd place and never take myself too seriously. When I became despondent over my lack of genius in high school math, my fierce disagreements with my father about the proper career goals for a woman (he wanted me to work in an office and give up my plans to go to university), and the inevitability of a Nuclear Holocaust, my grandmother wrapped me in her arms, held me close and promised me that this too would pass. Of course, she was right. I outgrew those fears and disappointments, only to inherit a new set, but my grandmother always had the energy and the interest to hear me out, to encourage me, to love me completely.

Support is a wonderful thing and indeed we all crave it, but my grandmother had much more than that to offer. My grandmother had wisdom to pass on to me; the wisdom of a long life, the wisdom of experience. Whatever my questions or concerns, she tried to answer, tried to explain, for she wanted to help me learn to cope with problems and she advised me to become a strong, independent person.

My grandmother was quite eccentric, especially as she grew older. I remember how much she hated to cook and do housework, but how much she liked to entertain my friends. She would always offer us a glass of her raisin wine and sagely advise us that a drink in the afternoon was good for the digestion — cleared the brain and stimulated the heart. For a long time, I thought my grandmother could barely speak a word of English, although I was aware that she spoke many languages. It was only when I discovered her speaking to my best friend in almost flawless English that I confronted her with this strange deception. She laughed and informed me that she only spoke Yiddish to force me to retain my fluency.

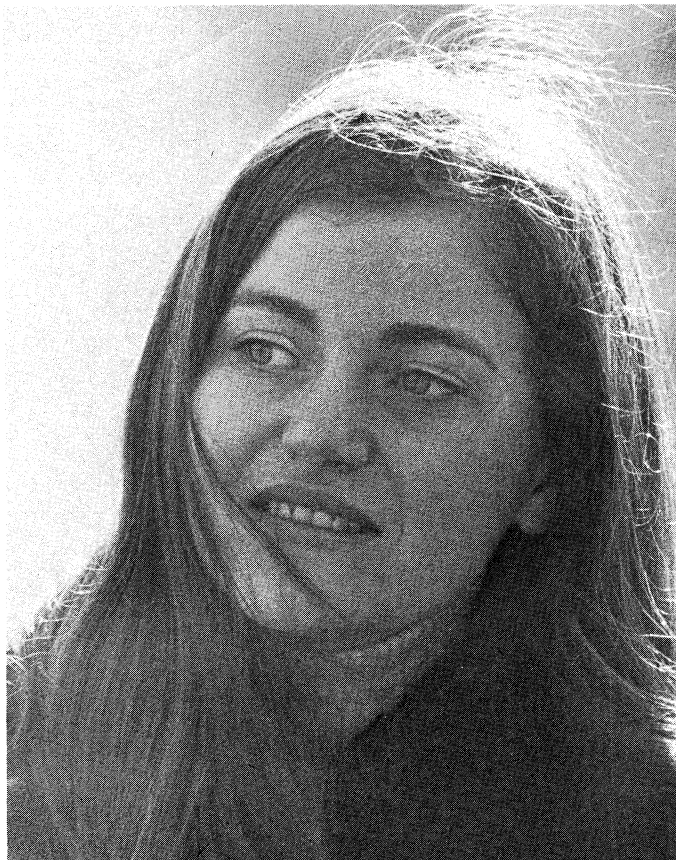
Over the years, my grandmother gained a certain mystique among her neighbours. She saw successive waves of immigrants come to her neighbourhood, all of whom

she befriended. Her neighbours respected her ability to live on her own and her proud, dignified deportment. Everytime I came to visit, I noticed that the house was filled with flowers and vegetables from her neighbours' gardens.

We used to sit on an old trunk in her living room and watch the people in the street. I was always amazed at how much she knew and cared about their troubles, even as her own health began to fail and her life became a struggle to remain independent.

I inherited my grandmother's old trunk and I often sit on it, aching for her presence. When I am troubled or confused, I find myself having an internal dialogue with my grandmother, asking for her advice and receiving her approval. But the good moments in my life lack something without her to share them with me. I miss so very much that wonderful empathy; that unspoken understanding.

I realize how very fortunate I was to have had such a magnificent grandmother and to have had her for such a long time. My grandmother gave me a foundation upon which to make my life and she passed on a tradition of proud, strong, independent women. But more than that — she instilled in me a curiosity about life and a desire to live long and well as she did. ☉



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