

“Accepting, Take Full Life” or Why I Wanted a Baby

By Lillian Faderman, Ph.D

*To be a Jew in the twentieth century
Is to be offered a gift. If you refuse,
Wishing to be invisible, you choose
Death of the spirit, the stone insanity.
Accepting, take full life....*

Muriel Rukeyser, 1944

These are my earliest memories:

I must be about five years old, since it is soon after the War. I am kneeling over a coloring book, bare-kneed, on a wooden floor in the cramped bedroom that my mother and I share. My Aunt Rae, whom I call My Rae and love more than anyone in the world except for my mother, sits huddled with my mother on the bed. So wrapped up have I been with my coloring that I have not heard the talk between them, but now they are both weeping. No, not weeping...they are keening. I see their lips twisted, their faces distorted like scary masks. “Alle toyt...Gottinue!” they are howling in Yiddish. The crayon falls from my hand. I jump up and throw myself on them. “What, Mommy? I scream. “What, My Rae?” I have never seen such anguish on grown-up faces. Then I too am bawling.

My second memory. Did this happen the same year? A year later?

I am on a strange street, twirling round and round a telephone pole. The El train is roaring above. My mother, whose face seems never now to be without a terrible look of suffering, has taken us to this street in a big yellow car she called a taxi. When I stop my twirling, I see she is talking to a man who wears a Homburg that shades the upper part of his face. I did not know before that you could curl your lips into a smile that says to someone “You are nothing to me.”

“Come, Lilly, come,” my mother says urgently. “Say hello to your father.” The El train roars again. She pulls me by the hand until I am in front of him, staring at the soft pearl-grey cloth of his coat. I raise my eyes shyly. “Hello, Father,” I say obediently, though the word is odd to me, like a foreign object on my tongue.

The train has passed, and now the street is quiet. The man looks not at me, but at her. “Vadda you doink, Mary?” I feel my face grow hot. “I’m not your fadder,” he mutters barely loud enough for me to hear. He has still not looked at me. Then he turns from us. For a long time I can hear the tap, tap, tap of his heels as he walks down the street. My mother sobs, and I hug her tight, burying my face in her midriff. “Don’t cry, Mommy,” I croon softly, as though to a disconsolate child. When I look up again and search the horizon, I am bathed in warm relief to see that his form has grown tiny.

Long before the War that wiped out European Jewry, my mother and My Rae had come to America from a small shtetl in Latvia called Preil. Like so many Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, my mother and aunt, one still in her teens, the other in her early twenties, had been charged with finding a way to bring the rest of the family—father, mother, brother, and two sisters—to America. They were to rescue them from deadly poverty and pogroms. So enormous a mission would ordinarily have fallen to the oldest son; but there was only one boy, and he was, as they described him, “a cripple” from a childhood accident. The whole family’s hope rested in two girls.

They found work in the garment factories of New York, my mother a draper and my aunt a finisher. Every few weeks, they dutifully sent dollars, all they could spare, back to the shtetl—

for a sister's shoes, the Mama's coat, more food on the Shabbas table. "We'll bring them to America when we get married and have a home," my aunt said. Was my mother convinced? When the Yiddish papers carried daily stories of European Jew-hatred, did she try hard to persuade my aunt that they must act now? Or were they both so inured to the awful history of persecution that they did not understand how this new outbreak was different?

My aunt did not marry until the War had been over for five years; my mother did not marry until I was in my teens. Their sisters and brother and all the other Jews of their shtetl were long dead by then. My mother never forgave My Rae. Though My Rae lived to the age of eighty-six, she never forgave herself.

My mother and aunt never knew for certain what had happened to their relatives. Hitler did not write letters saying "I regret to inform you...." But I learned the details when a book I was writing in 1996 took me to Latvia. The mayor of "Preili," as it is now called, pulled from the city archives a document dated March 30, 1945. The photocopied pages he presented to me contained—as I discovered when I had them translated—eye-witness accounts of the summer of 1941. They were the testimonies of non-Jewish citizens of Preil, recorded by the Preil City Commission during their post-War investigation of Nazi atrocities in their town.

On July 28, 1941, the Nazis, assisted by the Arajs Sonderkommando—the Latvian "Security Police" who were no less vicious towards Jews than the Germans—had invaded my mother's shtetl. (I had been exactly one-year-and-ten-days old that day. My mother and aunt had probably just sent another postal order to Preil, as they did for a long time after, since they did

not know there was no one alive to receive their American dollars.) The killing went on for several days.

Varvara Kondrateeva: They went from house to house, forcing Jews out, and herded them into the Jewish School on Posadan Street. I saw that as they were being herded down the street, many of the old people and children could not keep up. The police beat them with wooden paddles and sticks. Then the Jews were herded to a meadow on the outskirts of town that was owned by Mr. I. Prokofiev. I saw the Germans force people to dig their own graves. Shooting went on in groups and individually.

Francisca Kochina: By order of the Germans, the Arajs brought a 30-Jew convoy to the Jewish cemetery and made them dig pits. I saw that by sunset there were two huge pits dug out. Then I saw the next day that people were brought toward the pits. They were crying, screaming, begging for their lives to be spared. The Germans and their collaborators mocked them before they shot them. Those who did not die from the bullets were beaten to death. The men were shot first. Then the women were shot in several groups. Even the babies weren't spared, but the Germans did not waste bullets on them. They threw the babies into the pits alive.

Kuzma Potskovich: At the beginning of August 1941 I was in town for personal reasons, and the police apprehended me and fifteen or twenty other men. They took us out of town to the Jewish Cemetery where there were pits, twelve by four meters in size, with bodies in them, mostly dead but some still alive and moaning. They forced us to fill in the pits with dirt.

But my mother did not need such details to understand, finally, that horrors had happened to her family. The continued silence from Preil, the movie newsreels that eventually showed Jewish corpses stacked high in piles, the Yiddish papers that reported the daily discoveries of new atrocities—these were enough to drive her crazy.

One more memory, this of the chicken-dance. My mother and I did the chicken-dance often in the years after the War:

Though she manages to get up every morning and go to work at the Roth-LeCover factory where she drapes dresses on a mannequin, though she controls herself most days because she must support us, my mother is sick. I can see in her face when a spell has begun. Her mouth makes funny movements, like she is spitting out little bits of paper caught on her tongue; her eyes keep looking at something that is not there. Sometimes she pulls her clothes off and runs around the room, naked. “*Gevalt! Ratehvah mich!*” she screams, “Danger! Save me!”

I follow behind. “It’s all right. Mommy,” I keep repeating, trying hard to make my voice calm. How else can I bring her back to me from the terrible place to which she has gone? But I am not calm. I am beside myself. What if she dies from such anguish? What if she has to go to an insane asylum? I will be taken away from her. They will put me in an orphanage. “*Zay hargenen Yidden!* They’re killing Jews!” she sobs.

We are two headless chickens, running round and round in little circles, round and round, till she exhausts herself and drops to her bed. Then she stares up at the ceiling, motionless. For hours she stares, while I watch over her from my own bed a few feet away. Sometimes my breath catches because I cannot see that she is breathing, and I jump up to bend over her and look closer. “Mommy?” I call. She does not hear me. She is as immobile as death. Her face is a mask of all the sorrows in the world.

I grew up in the shadow of my mother’s tragedy.

On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, I would go with my mother and My Rae to shul, where we sat upstairs in the women’s balcony. With pledge envelopes that were stuck into the prayer books, we fanned ourselves against the oppressive Indian summer heat, much worse up

there than on the ground level where the men and boys sat. Bored and cranky, I wiped beads of sweat from my upper lip and squirmed on the hard bench. I flopped my head heavily onto my mother's shoulder. I played with the knuckles of my aunt's free hand. I did not understand a word of the Hebrew that the grown-ups were droning all around me. From my perch between my mother and aunt, I could lean over and see the yarmulkes and prayer shawls and the men's incessant bowing as they davened. I placed my forehead against the metal rail, cool but like a prison bar it seemed to me. I longed for the ordeal to be over.

When my mother married, years later, for the first time in my life we lived in a whole apartment and not just a furnished room by a Missus. A housewife now, my mother began to light Sabbath candles. Sometimes I would watch her closed eyes and moving lips, the graceful gestures of her hands over the flames. But I was fourteen years old by then and a serious rebel. Her ritual meant nothing to me. It was too late to induct me.

When I was sixteen, I had my first sexual relationship with a woman, and I'd started staying out all night. My aunt, also married and living on the other side of town, was summoned by my mother to come help her because I was out of control. "Is this how a Jewish girl behaves?" My Rae yelled at me in despair.

"Jewish girl," I sneered. I was furious that they imagined they could exercise influence over me. "How am I Jewish?" My tone was as sarcastic as I could make it.

But in truth, I did not know. Neither the conservative synagogue we had gone to nor my mother's Friday night gestures had the power to move me. Though my mother and aunt still sometimes spoke to me in Yiddish, my *mamaloshen* had slipped away from me because I always

answered them in English. How was I Jewish? To me, “Jewish” signified only my mother’s sorrows and her craziness.

It was not until I was a college undergraduate in the late 1950s that I found an answer to the scoffing question I’d thrown at My Rae. Only then did I learn through history books the magnitude of the loss—that what had happened to my mother’s relatives had happened to six million others. Then I understood personally, as I never had before, what the Jewish lesbian poet Muriel Rukeyser meant in her 1944 poem: that to deny my Jewishness was a “death of the spirit” because—whether or not religion had great meaning for me, whether or not I went to shul—I was a Jew whose people had been decimated. I was a remnant. “Accepting, take full life...” Rukeyser had written.

But what could that mean for me—to “take full life” by “accepting”?

It was a few years later, when I was writing a Ph.D. dissertation at UCLA, grooming myself to become a professor, that I was struck by an overwhelming realization. My mother had no child but me. My aunt was already in her forties when she married, and she was childless. Their sisters in Latvia did have children, including a baby who had been named Avrom—after their father who died, mercifully, of typhus before the Nazis invaded their shtetl. (Avrom must have been one of the babies whom Francisca Kochina mentioned in her 1945 testimony before the Preili City Commission: “They threw the babies into the pits alive.”) If I remained childless, when I died there would never again exist in the world someone of my mother and aunt’s family. I would have abetted Hitler’s final solution by permitting the total eradication of one more Jewish line. I must have a child.

But I was a lesbian. My brief forays into heterosexuality only confirmed for me that it was women I loved. It would be reductive to say I became a gay woman because as a child I loved my mother and My Rae passionately or that the man who was my father refused to acknowledge me. I have lesbian friends who hated their mothers. I have lesbian friends who were raised and nurtured by their much-adored fathers. Some of my straight women friends were rejected by their fathers, others were dearly loved; some are alienated from their mothers, others are touchingly close. There is no formula that explains why one becomes heterosexual or homosexual. And why I became a lesbian did not matter. What did matter was that I knew it was only a woman who could make me happy and with whom I wished to spend my life. And what did matter was that I knew I had to have a baby. I needed to find a way to make those two powerful desires compatible.

When the understanding that I must have a child first came to me, I told myself it was something I would do in the future. When I finished my dissertation and accepted a job at California State University in Fresno, I was twenty-six years old. Still plenty of time to have a baby. When I was thirty, I began to hear the faint tick of my biological clock. It was 1970. I had just been promoted to associate professor, and I was living with another woman, who said to me one day, after I'd idly shared my notion with her yet again, "Lillian,...listen. One reason I became a lesbian is that I didn't want children in my life. I got my fill when I was a kid and had to take care of my brother and sister."

Another year went by, then another and another. The tick grew louder. I sought out fertility statistics. I'd long passed the optimum age to have a baby. How quickly the years go. I'd been made chair of my department, then interim dean, then Assistant Vice President for

Academic Affairs. And now I was struck by the ostensible impossibility of my having a child—just as the desperate realization hit me that I wanted a baby not just for the sake of *them*, for my lost relatives and my beloved mother and aunt—I wanted a baby for *me*, too. I wanted to be a mother. I woke often from dreams in which I held its tiny form to my breast: So real did the dreams seem that as I lay in bed with my eyes closed I could smell its fresh-apple breath or feel the skin of its soft cheek against me.

“When are you going to meet a nice boy and get married?” My Rae asked every time we spoke on the phone. “Do you want to be like me? Soon it’ll be too late to have children.”

(More than once I had tried to tell her that I was a “lesbian,” but the word meant nothing to her. “I prefer women,” I then told her. “So have friends,” she answered me, as blissfully ignorant of the concept as she was of the word. I gave up.)

“I’m too busy right now,” I snapped at her marriage query. My anger at her nagging reminders was exacerbated by my own anxiety. How did I ever think I could have a baby? I was already thirty-three. I was not going to meet a nice boy and get married. Not only would I fail *them*, but I too would be forever bereft. My breasts ached.

Phyllis was not a Jew. With her fair skin, blue eyes, and mid-western accent, she epitomized the type of woman my mother and aunt had always called *shiksa, goya*. But when she and I took a break from university business and, over coffee or a pizza, I would tell her about my wanting a baby, why I feared it might never happen, or why I could never let myself forget that I was Jewish, she’d nod slowly at all that I said, a thoughtful expression on her face. She said she understood. She’d lived in bombed-out Vienna two years after the War, when her father had

been a lieutenant colonel in the occupying army, she told me. She'd seen and heard so much, she said. She was an only child, she told me.

Phyllis too was a university administrator, and together we worked to design a women's studies program. One spring evening, the program well underway, she invited me to her home for dinner, and afterwards the two of us strolled the river ditch bank that bordered her ranch property. We stopped to watch two doves build a nest in a tree whose branches shaded the water, and she put her arm in mine. "Let's sit," she said. "We need to talk."

She told me she loved me. I'd felt it. Of course I had. I loved her too, as I'd come to know through our three years of working together. But my life was complicated. I still had a relationship with the woman who had said that she'd done too much childrearing as a kid and that she didn't want children. I grieved always about the baby whose only life was in my fantasies, and what could Phyllis's "talk" do but make matters worse?

"Have the baby," Phyllis said. "You'll live with me. We'll raise it together."

I felt as though all the air had been sucked out of the universe. I opened my mouth to speak. "But...." No. Why should there be a "but"? Suddenly, it seemed simple. The lines from Muriel Rukeyser's poem echoed in my mind. "Accepting, take full life...." "Yes," I breathed.

It was 1974. Straight women who did not want to get pregnant were helped by medical science through the Pill. But what help was there for a gay woman who wanted more than anything in the world to get pregnant? "I'm almost thirty-four," I told a Fresno obstetrician. (I left the "gay" part out, unsure of his prejudices.) "I have a Ph.D. and a career. The other day I

read that my chances of finding a husband were slimmer than my chances of being killed in plane crash.”

The doctor nodded solemnly at my little attempt at levity. He consented to do what was still being called “artificial insemination” and told me how to determine when I was ovulating. In a few weeks, we were ready. The anonymous donor, he read from a card he pulled from his file, was “a mesomorphic type, blond hair, blue eyes, a medical doctor. From the eastern United States. Jewish.”

Phyllis was with me in the labor room to hold my hand, and she received our son in her arms with his first breaths. He was born January 27, 1975. The minute I clasped him to my breast and felt the dear weight of him, I knew I needed him and loved him not for what he represented, but for his sweet sake alone. Yet I’d willed him into being for *them*. We named him Avrom, to honor the grandfather I never met and in memory of the baby cousin I never knew, who had lost his life—when I too was only a baby—in a pit in Preil.

Because it was the middle of the school year, I had to return to work. The nanny I found to be with Avrom was an elderly woman, Bea Schwartz. She was the wife of the rabbi at Beth Jacob, one of Fresno’s two synagogues. I loved it when Phyllis and I would come in the door at 5:30 to find Rabbi Schwartz jiggling our son in his arms, crooning to him an old-country lullaby.

It was the 1970s and “the lesbian family” was not yet a concept. Rabbi Schwartz never articulated a name for us, but he made it clear that he understood we were a family, that Phyllis was Avrom’s other mother. When Avrom began to speak and called her “Mama Phyllis,” the rabbi called her “Mama Phyllis,” too. He did not let us doubt that he honored our relationship. I

entered a synagogue for the first time since my childhood because of Rabbi Schwartz. I will never know for sure whether he planned his sermon that first Friday night to welcome the lesbian family that was sitting in the pew in front of him, but it was moving and eloquent. “Love is beautiful in any form it takes,” he told the congregation.

My mother died in 1979, when Avrom was four years old. My Rae died in 1984. They were shtetl women to the end, despite all their years in America, and I don’t think either ever stopped seeing Phyllis as *the shiksa*. They never really understood who she was in my life. But when My Rae was in the hospital with her last illness, Phyllis and I and Avrom went to be with her, and one afternoon, just as we were leaving (the last time we would see My Rae alive), she called Phyllis back. Phyllis says my aunt peered deep into her eyes, that they exchanged a long, significant look. “Take good care on Lilly and the baby,” My Rae whispered to her.

Avrom is thirty-one years old now. His son, his first child, was born April 2, 2006. Phyllis and I, grandmothers together just as we’ve been mothers together, were present at our grandson’s birth. It feels to me like I have completed my part of a sacred mission—that against great odds in the mid-‘70s, I found a way not only to be true to myself as a lesbian woman but also, crucially, to accept my obligation as a remnant of my Jewish family, to honor those who were lost, and thus to “take full life.”