

Of Blessed Memory

MICHAEL DAVID LUKAS

The summer before my senior year of college, Grandma Guta packed up her life and flew across the country to California. Her health had been failing for some time – a broken hip, heart problems, chronic obstructive pulmonary disorder – and eventually my mom decided it would be best if Grandma Guta moved into the recently vacated house next door. I remember being struck by the idea that she bought a one-way ticket. This was her last move, her last flight. After forty-eight years in New Orleans, seven before that in Paris and twenty-nine before that in the wilds of Eastern Europe, her final stop in life would be Berkeley, California.

Although she was a tiny woman herself, Grandma Guta had an enormous amount of stuff. Over the years, she had accrued a house full of white-and-gold Rococo furniture, many sets of crystal, china, and boxes upon boxes of bedding, linens, clothes and kitchen appliances, all of which she insisted on bringing with her to California. My mom tried to convince her to leave some of these things in New Orleans. Maybe it didn't make sense to ship that old toaster oven across the country. But Grandma Guta was adamant and, in the end, she got her way. In our family, surviving the Holocaust entitles one to a certain amount of stubborn irrationality.

A few weeks after Grandma Guta arrived in California, a moving truck pulled up to her new house and left a dozen or so huge cardboard boxes in the middle of the driveway. My mom and I spent the better part of the day ripping packing tape with kitchen knives and pawing through the seemingly endless dessert bowls, little ceramic animals and crystal brandy glasses, trying to figure out what went where. If Grandma Guta had been able to look through the boxes with us, surely she could have explained each object's meaning and history – the lamp my mom almost knocked over once when she was a little girl, the nutcracker from Jerusalem, the apron that inexplicably brought to mind the smell of Lake Ponchatrain – and I imagine some of these objects held significance for my mom as well. But to me they were just things, boxes upon boxes of stuff in need of sorting.

The kitchen appliances, a set of everyday dishes, and the gilt-framed photographs of me, my brother and my sister at various stages of development – these things all went to Grandma's new house. The bedroom set was carried upstairs to my sister's room and the toaster oven turned out to be broken. Everything else was destined for the garage. After going through

it all once, we repacked the boxes and labelled them according to their contents – ‘Grandma bedding’; ‘Grandma clothes’; ‘Grandma pots and pans’ – such that possession was removed and ‘Grandma’ became nothing more than an adjective. By the end of the day, the boxes were all labelled and stored neatly at the back of the garage. I thought our work was done. But we were only getting started. Organizing Grandma Guta’s stuff was the easy part. Her stories and her memories would take another decade to sort through.

That evening after dinner, my mom brought out an old photograph she had found among the boxes. It was black and white, from the old country, a portrait of sixteen children and two teenage girls posed in front of an exotic-looking backdrop. Grandma Guta was in the back row, second from the left, unmistakable with her short fringes and broad forehead.

‘My youth group’, she said when my mom showed her the photograph. ‘Your youth group?’



7. Guta Brum (nee Wexler) and her HaShomer HaTzair youth group in Staszow (120 km north-east of Krakow). Copyright/permission granted by Michael David Lukas.

For most of high school and college I was involved with a Labor Zionist youth group called Habonim Dror. I had been to Israel twice and worked

for a number of years at an affiliated summer camp. In all that time, Grandma Guta had never mentioned her youth group.

‘Was it Dror?’ I asked, excited by the possibility that she might have been involved with a group similar to mine. ‘Hashomer Hatzair?’

She looked deep into the photograph, as if the answer to my question was hidden somewhere beneath its glossy surface.

‘It was so long ago.’

Over the next couple of weeks I tried a number of times to nail down exactly which youth group she had been involved with. But as much as I pressed, I never got a clear answer. Instead, she would shift the conversation, asking questions about the summer camp where I had worked, or writing what Hebrew she remembered on a piece of scrap paper. Eventually I gave up, worried that my questions might jostle other, more painful memories. For I knew that everything before the war was filtered through the war itself, and everything after fell in its shadow. There was always that dark mass of memory hovering over her and Grandpa Abe, like a great murky planet bending the light around it.

When it came up, Grandma Guta was always the one to talk about the Holocaust. Over Grandpa Abe’s mumbled attempts to nudge the conversation towards happier topics, she would describe the horror of watching her town’s synagogue go up in flames. It wasn’t a story really, so much as the distillation of a particular moment, standing on top of a hill outside town with her family, watching the Nazis incinerate their synagogue and all the holy books inside. It was in this moment that she understood what was happening. The past cleaved off from the present. The life she had left at the bottom of the hill was gone forever.

At this point, I always imagined Grandma Guta running off into the woods with her friends from the youth group. But the truth is, I don’t know what happened next, whether or not she went home to collect her things, whether her family objected to the idea of her leaving. The story ends there. That horrible image of the burning synagogue was tempered only by our knowledge that she made it through the war somehow and emerged on the other side.

Those years between were left mostly to our imaginations. Grandma Guta often said she spent the war ‘on the run through Europe’, without specifying what exactly that meant. Over time, my mom was able to determine that she was in Lvov at the beginning of the war, and that she spent a few years working at a sanatorium in the Ukraine. How she got to Lvov, whether she was there during the Allied bombardment of the city, where the sanatorium was located, how she secured employment – all these questions were left unanswered. The only details we had were gleaned from the story that Grandma Guta would tell sometimes if pressed for more information.

She was on a train, presumably somewhere in occupied Europe. Halfway through the journey, the train stopped and a high-ranking SS officer got on. He went down the car, checking to make sure everyone's identification papers were in order. She wouldn't have had any papers, most likely. If she did, they would have been forgeries. What she did have were blue eyes and blonde hair. When the officer came to her, she put on her best German accent, turned up her charm and told a story about leaving her papers at home. Again the story ends at the climax, leaving us with the emotional truth, this moment of fear, but no concrete details.

At least a half dozen times, my mom resolved to ask all the questions she had built up over the years, to sit down with Grandma Guta and pin down exactly where she was during the war, to figure out exactly what she was doing. But it was never the right time. When she was finished talking, the conversation was over. The topic was closed. Any questions were like needles in a wound. And so, all we had were her stories.

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About a month after Grandma Guta arrived in Berkeley, my girlfriend, Aviva, came to visit. We had been together for four or five years at that point, depending on how you counted. Except for the first year, living on a kibbutz in Israel, we spent most of our relationship apart, flying back and forth between Providence and Washington DC, taking the bus to New York City, and meeting up for shared vacations. We decided early on that it made the most sense to have an open relationship. And since we thought ourselves to be mature adults, unencumbered by jealousy and willing to face the truth head-on, the ground rules for our open relationship included a radical honesty policy we called 'Do Ask, Do Tell.' In other words, we were free to see other people, but had to inform each other of any liaisons, past, present or future. This radical honesty was, in a way, the opposite of the spirit that guided my conversations with Grandma Guta.

After four or five years of this, we were facing a truth more difficult than any random hook-up. Aviva had been accepted into the Peace Corps, which placed her in Uzbekistan. I still had another year of college ahead of me, but was already starting to research fellowships that would allow me to continue studying Arabic. Unless one of us shifted course, we were looking at another three years of flights and phone calls, love letters, long-distance pining and visits squashed full of significance. Despite our radical honesty policy, neither of us wanted to admit this painful truth.

Considering the context, we had a good time, enjoying that particular, guiltless brand of leisure known only to college students on summer vacation. We stayed out late, went to brunch, took hikes along the beach

and made elaborate dinners in the kitchens of parents who had gone out of town. Every so often, we stopped over to visit Grandma Guta, watched a little *Jeopardy* and drank a cup of tea.

‘She’s a smart girl’, Grandma Guta told me. ‘The kind of person you can talk to.’

Halfway through Aviva’s visit, my mom and step-dad went out of town for the weekend and we were put in charge of looking after Grandma Guta. She had a home health aide who spent most mornings with her, took her to physical therapy and made sure her oxygen was working. Our role was to hang out in the evenings and be around in case something happened.

That first night, we went over to her house for an early dinner, followed by a *Jeopardy* double-header. Unlike most fans of the show, Grandma Guta didn’t try to play along. She didn’t shout out answers and didn’t seem to root for any particular contestants. She would just sit there and watch, satisfied that someone knew the fourth most populous country in the world or the continent Columbus discovered on his third voyage. She was particularly happy when Aviva or I would chime in with the correct answer. Her own knowledge of capitals and composers was unimportant, so long as we knew, so long as every clue had its answer, phrased in the form of a question.

On Saturday night we took her to a neighbourhood Italian restaurant, hung with clothes lines and old movie posters to evoke the ambiance of a Venetian square. Outside the thick air of her living room, away from the chatter of Alex Trebek and Larry King (the hosts of *Jeopardy* and CNN’s *Larry King Live*), Grandma Guta was more animated than I had seen her in years. She asked questions about our day and reminisced about Paris, describing their corner store and imitating the little French kids who would call out to my mom from the street. When the main course arrived, the conversation turned to Aviva’s Peace Corps placement.

I had assumed Grandma Guta would have positive associations with Uzbekistan, where Grandpa Abe had lived for a number of years after escaping from a Russian work camp in Siberia. As it turns out, I was wrong.

‘Uzbekistan’, she said, with a disgust she usually reserved for Germany and Poland. ‘It is not a good place.’

Aviva tried to reframe the comment as a lamentation on the poverty in which the Uzbek people were forced to live.

‘It’s a hard place’, she said. ‘But that’s why I’m going, to help out.’

‘It’s dirty place’, Grandma Guta replied, and made as if to spit on the floor. ‘Animals in the street. Camels, elephants. And the people, they’re worse than animals. It is not the place for a nice girl. You’re a smart girl. Go somewhere else.’

Not sure how to respond, I tried to change the subject.

‘Do you like the fish, Grandma?’

She shook her head and grimaced, as if recalling some distant memory. We moved on to a different topic and the question was closed. Or so I thought.

In retrospect, it wasn't particularly shocking that Grandma Guta would have a hard time understanding Aviva's desire to spend two-and-a-half years in an underdeveloped Muslim country halfway around the world from her grandson. Maybe, I reasoned, Grandpa Abe had told her stories about camels and elephants in the street. Maybe he had been treated poorly there and she felt compelled to shoulder his memories as her own. Whatever the source of her vehemence, we didn't talk about Uzbekistan again. Eventually, Aviva went home. Summer vacation ended and I went back to school. I forgot about the conversation until a few months later when my mom called to tell me that Grandma Guta had passed away.

She was buried in New Orleans, in a plot next to Grandpa Abe. A few months later, there was an estate sale. Most of her furniture was sold and the house was rented. Later that spring, Aviva went off to Uzbekistan and I started packing for a year in Tunisia. A few months later, we broke up. My mom and stepdad went on vacation to France. My brother started college and my sister thought about joining her high school soccer team. Life carries on. The concerns of the living trump those of the dead. Or so we would like to believe.

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The story might have ended there, riddled with holes and unanswered questions, had my mom not decided, a few years ago, to start researching her parents' experiences during the war. She knew the basic outlines – Grandpa Abe's arc from Poland to Siberia to Uzbekistan; Grandma Guta's years on the run through Europe – but she wanted to go deeper, to answer the questions she wished that she had asked when they were alive. The idea was to look through their letters, contact a few librarians, poke around Facebook and get in touch with anyone who might be able to fill in the holes.

On those rare occasions when Grandpa Abe talked about the war, he kept to the facts. After his home town of Vielun was captured by the Russian Army, he and his mother were sent to a work camp in Siberia. Towards the end of the war his mother died and he escaped into Uzbekistan. He stayed there until the German surrender, at which point he started making his way back towards Europe. As circuitous as his route may sound, hundreds of thousands of Polish Jews survived the Holocaust in precisely the same manner. A few months into her research, my mom came across a documentary called 'Saved by Deportation', which

confirmed the details of Grandpa Abe's story while answering a number of lingering questions.

Grandma Guta's trajectory was much more difficult to pin down. Her stories obscured as much as they revealed, allowing a glimpse into the terror of particular moments without providing any context or verifiable facts. Without the architecture of narrative, we were forced to dwell in the emotional truth of those moments that she recalled again and again: the fear and helplessness of watching her childhood synagogue burnt to the ground, the cold brick of dread in her gut as she talked with the SS officer on the train. To me, this uncertainty seemed appropriate. Having been shielded from the sharp edge of my grandparents' trauma, I was drawn into her stories, these memories spiralling ever closer to a pitch-black hole I would never be able to fully understand.

My mom viewed Grandma Guta's stories in a different manner. She had heard them nearly her entire life, starting at the age of 5. The Holocaust hung over her childhood like a thick fog, seeping into the upholstery and shorting out the appliances. It was a constant presence. For her, the question was not how to connect to her parents' trauma. The question was how to step back, how to make sense of these stories, how to separate trauma from fact. To her, the holes were meant to be filled, the questions meant to be answered. In order to break the gravitational pull of Grandma Guta's stories, my mom had to create stories of her own.

She hired a professor to translate her parents' letters from Yiddish and, using these translated letters, was able to track down a number of her parents' friends from before the war. Eventually, she got in touch with the daughter of a woman from Grandma Guta's youth group. As it turned out, this woman had also escaped to Lvov and spent a few years working at a sanatorium in the Crimea. Whether they escaped together, whether it was the same sanatorium, the daughter didn't know. But it was certainly something to go on.

Focusing her attentions on Lvov and the Crimean sanatorium, my mom continued her research for years with little success. With the determination of an investigative journalist pursuing a huge scoop, she combed through archives, tracked down self-published memoirs, cold-called octogenarian survivors whose numbers she found on the Internet, and sent dozens of emails to librarians at various Holocaust memorials. No stone was left unturned. At one point, she dug up a family history my sister had written when she was in the fourth grade. More than once she asked me to recall what exactly Grandma Guta said about Uzbekistan that night at the restaurant. Not wanting to send her down another rabbit hole of unanswered questions, I tried to downplay the vehemence of Grandma Guta's reaction, suggesting that perhaps she was repeating things she had heard from Grandpa Abe.

In the course of her research, my mom uncovered reams of information about Stasow – Grandma Guta’s hometown – and learned nearly everything there is to know about the Lvov Ghetto. She joined a Stasow Facebook group, connected with former residents and swapped sources with other second-generation survivors. The Facebook group yielded a number of tantalizing leads. The elderly friend of one source confirmed a story Grandma Guta often told about her brother, who was shot by Nazi guards as he handed money through a fence to his partisan brother-in-law. Still the questions loomed louder than the answers. Emotional truths outweighed the facts. Feeling stuck, my mom put her research aside for a few months and started to reckon with the possibility that she would never find answers to her questions.

Then one day, clicking around on Facebook, she came upon the missing link. Someone had posted an old directory of the Toronto Stasower Society. And there, buried amidst dozens of addresses and phone numbers, was a listing for Bill Wittenberg, Grandma Guta’s childhood boyfriend. Bill had passed away a number of years earlier, but my mom was pretty sure that his wife, Ann, was still alive. She called the number and left a message on the machine. The next day Ann Wittenberg called back.

‘I hear you’ve been looking for me’, she said.

After years of searching, my mom had finally found someone who might be able to tell her how Grandma Guta survived the war, when she left Lvov, where exactly the sanatorium was located, who she was with and where she went next. Here was one of the only people in the world who could answer her questions definitively. And still, they were difficult questions to ask. Even though they were talking about Grandma Guta’s experience, Ann was a survivor too. And my mom didn’t want to push too hard, didn’t want to bring up painful memories. But in the end, she found a way.

In the course of their conversation, Ann confirmed that Grandma Guta had escaped from Stasow to Lvov and then from Lvov to a sanatorium in the Crimea. Then she continued on the Samarkand, Ann said, as if telling my mom more information she already knew.

‘Where?’

‘Samarkand’, Ann said. ‘In Mittel Asia.’

According to Ann, Grandma Guta spent the final years of the war in Uzbekistan, working in a factory less than 200 miles from Grandpa Abe. Surprising as this was, it made geographic sense and certainly explained her reaction to Aviva’s Peace Corps placement. But Ann’s answers only brought up more questions. Was Grandma Guta with anyone in Samarkand? How was she treated? Where did she live? What kind of factory was she working in? Was it possible that she and Grandma Abe met on their way back to Europe? When pressed, Ann admitted that it was possible Grandma Guta

was actually in Bukhara. Or maybe it was Bukhara and Samarkand. When my mom asked how she knew that Grandma Guta worked in a factory there, Ann demurred.

‘That was what most people did.’

And so, we are left with stories, some letters and that photograph of Grandma Guta’s youth group. She’s in the corner of the picture, with her short fringes and wide forehead. Her boyfriend, Bill, is in the middle, a dapper young boy with a new haircut and the beginnings of a smile. I don’t know much about their relationship – whether they ran off together into the woods, what kinds of promises they made to each other, whether those promises were kept – but it’s a handhold, the one aspect of her story I can grab onto. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to fully understand the Holocaust. I hope I’ll never know the pain of losing my entire family, the horror of watching my synagogue burnt to the ground or the anger of knowing that my brother was shot down in cold blood. But I do know what it means to be 21 and in love. I know the gnawing pain of young love crumbling under forces greater than itself. And through that tiny window, I think I can begin to understand. Or at least I can try.

When my mom told me about finding Ann’s number, about Uzbekistan and the question of whether or not Grandma Guta worked in a factory there, I wasn’t thinking about Lvov or the Crimea. I wasn’t thinking about Samarkand or Bukhara or any further questions that might arise. I was thinking about that moment on the hill, about the tinge of heartbreak Grandma Guta must have felt, on top of everything else, when she realized that she would most likely never see her childhood boyfriend again.

I would love to know more about her experience during the war. But the truth is, I’m satisfied with the story as it stands. I’m content to lurch through that messy pit of the conditional, to imagine what might have been, what it might have been like. As I learned from Grandma Guta, there are some truths better left uncovered, some stories better unfinished.