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The Healing Words of My Holocaust-Surviving Grandmother

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By Estelle Erasmus

"I luff you, because you're sweet like a piece of chocolate," my Grandma Genia crooned in her thick, Yiddish accent, handing me a hunk of a Hershey bar. No exotic fare like Godiva for Grandma—she eschewed exports, even though she herself was one.

Grandma had suffered bitterness in her life. When the Nazis first invaded Poland, my grandfather wanted to stay and fight. She convinced him to take their family—including baby, Miriam, my mother and flee. Escaping into the forest, they made their way to Russia. Two of my grandmother's brothers were already in America, but most of their cousins and siblings couldn't get out, and were either killed by Nazis or perished in the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. After the war, they lived in Israel and emigrated to the United States when my mother was fifteen years old. She married my father, after meeting at a college dance.

Grandma was dramatic. She wore her blonde hair in a bouffant and, despite her meager income as a dressmaker, and my grandfather's as a tailor, donned a mink stole when dining out in Brooklyn, where they landed after the war. Though they were referred to by the derogatory term "Greeners", (new to the country) I thought of them as "Redders". Red for the searing anger my grandfather displayed when he refused to accept reparation (he called it "blood money") for losing his family in the Holocaust. Red for the beautiful lace dress Grandma made, that I wore to prevent a "Kenahora" (evil eye) from jealous people. Red for their fervent Zionism.

Perhaps because she had thwarted death, Grandma treated life like an adventure. I rode horsey on her back for hours. After I threw Jell-O on the wall in the midst of a toddler tantrum, Grandma celebrated as if I were a budding Picasso. At a Bat Mitzvah, she joined me on the floor, scooping up chocolates showered from a piñata, even though the Holocaust had long since transformed her into an avowed atheist.

"Family is de only ting dat matters," she would say.

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She confiscated bags of clothes her neighbors had marked to donate to charity without shame. In her mind, my family was the charity. I remember Grandma bent over her humming sewing machine, thumb protector on, needles in mouth. Hours later, after lifting a hemline, replacing plastic buttons with jeweled ones, shortening or removing sleeves, she had created fashion alchemy, transforming discards into couture.

Though I wore her creations until my mid-twenties, when she and Grandpa moved to Florida, her words had also created something far less tangible—my romantic destiny. “You haf to marry a Jew,” she told me when I started dating, and throughout my teen years regaled me with nightmare scenarios about distant relatives (I didn’t know and had never met) who were beaten by their non-Jewish, alcohol swilling husbands. It was a fate neither of us wished me to have. In addition to my “Greener” grandparents, my father’s parents were Orthodox Jewish, and my parents were Conservative Jews, so I faced strong cultural pressure to marry someone Jewish.

I tried hard to stay within the status quo—exhausting the limited supply of able-bodied men from the local temple, and on JDate, but my romances either fizzled or ended in heartbreak.

I dared not step out of my religion, even after Grandma passed away. My legacy was having my future marital life forcefully imprinted on me like the not-so-temporary tattoos marking the skin of the Jews who survived the Nazi’s concentration camps.

I met Werner in my forties and he was an unholy trifecta. He wasn’t Jewish, was the son of an Evangelist former preacher, and was visiting from New Zealand on a work visa. But he captivated me with his stoic, practical nature, so different than my own dramatic personality, and the way he took care of me, by acting as my gentle alarm clock, watching that I didn’t trip on curbs, booking sumptuous dinners on date nights, and remembering that I liked chai lattes during Starbuck runs. Though I didn’t cook, he did and we fell in love over slabs of steaks, cooked to my preference, medium well, paired with a bottle of Cabernet.

Despite my parents’ fears, nine months after we met we moved in together. Over the next year, Werner demonstrated his love for me, his professional ambition, and most important— how much he embraced my Judaism by participating in my cultural rituals. I loved seeing his patrician features framed by a yarmulke at the myriad bar mitzvahs and Shabbat dinners he attended with me, and adored watching him discover and devour my mom’s Hanukkah latkes.

With a nod to tradition, he asked for my dad’s blessing—and received it—before proposing.

We married but struggled with infertility. When I finally got pregnant I was nauseous all the time and wracked with fears of miscarriage.

“Kotvenu b’sefar he-ayyim,” inscribe us in the Book of Life,” I prayed in temple on Rosh Hashanah.

Since I had married a non-Jew, would my Jewish prayers be answered, or would I be punished and lose my child? What would Grandma have thought of my betrayal? Would she have said the mourner’s kaddish for me over my choices?

Then, through my tears, I saw the prayer book (Siddur) I held, had a dedication in it from my mother to the memory of my grandmother. I forgot that my mother had given that commemoration. It was a sign. I let out the breath I didn’t even remember holding, closed my eyes and imagined Grandma’s voice telling me “*family is de only ting dat matters,*” and knew in my heart it would be ok. Grandma Genia’s love had left a permanent hug on my soul—and that of my unborn child.

Author’s note: When my beautiful, healthy daughter was born, while my parents beamed from the bema, we gave her the Hebrew name, Gavira (‘powerful ruler’) to honor the woman who had fled a war-torn country to save her family, which ultimately gave me the freedom to choose mine. Nine years later, my strong marriage and my smart, joyful daughter—who we are raising Jewish— are a living testament to Grandma’s prescient words.

Estelle Erasmus is a widely-published [writing coach](#), journalist, and former magazine editor-in-chief. She teaches personal essay writing and pitching for *Writer’s Digest* and can be found on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#). Her [website](#) offers publishing advice and editor interviews.

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