



Title: A Grave Predicament
Storyteller: Boris Timanovsky
Episode: Fathers
Originally Aired: June 16, 2015

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Last summer, after sixteen years of absence, I went to the city in Russia where I grew up. I went there on company business. And I was bringing with me a suitcase filled with secondhand clothes that my mom asked me to distribute among her relatives there. I was really the first in my family to go back there after all those years. And she also gave me a hand-drawn map showing the location of my grandfather's grave at a local cemetery and she asked me to go there. And when I was leaving, she asked me again, "Are you going to go there?"

"Yes."

"Promise?"

"Promise." It was really important for her that I go there. My grandfather died when I was little and she wanted me to remember him. She would tell me stories about him. I guess it was all a part of dealing with the loss. He was still very much alive in her mind. And she wanted him to continue to live in my mind too. But I was just too little when it all happened, so I didn't remember much. So, I thought maybe this visit to his grave at the cemetery, for her, would make things up; Would make up for what she thought was her loss, her failure in keeping his memory alive. So, I promised that the first thing I do when I get there would be go to the cemetery.

Well, the first thing I did when I got there was locate my high school girlfriend. And I got caught up in work. And I had a lot of catching up to do with my childhood friends. So, it wasn't until a day before I was leaving that I actually found time to go to the cemetery. And it was late in the afternoon. And right by the entrance was a woman who was selling flowers. And by then, she only had seven carnations left in her pocket. And I bought them all. But when I reached for my wallet, I realized I didn't have the map with me. I had no idea what happened to that map and I had no idea where my grandfather's grave was located. I could call my mom and ask her. There was a payphone right there and I still had ten or fifteen minutes left on my calling card and it was already morning in New York. But the problem was I had already told her that I went to the cemetery. And, really, you know, what was I gonna say? That I decided to go again but lost the map? She knows who she's dealing with; She'd see right through it.

So, I thought I'd find some help. And I went to look for the main office. And I found the main office and—it was actually in the middle of the cemetery—and it occupied an actual family mausoleum. So, I figured some affluent family must have immigrated, must have commissioned it for themselves but then maybe immigrated to the United States so the management took advantage of the opportunity and moved right in. And fortunately for me it was open and inside was a small office filled with file cabinets. It kind of looked like a financial aid office at some community college. And behind the counter was an old woman, she was reading. And she said yes, she'd help me locate my grandfather's records. And she started looking in those file cabinets. And she was doing everything so slowly. I knew it was going to take forever. And then the back-room door opened and the little boy walked in, an eight year



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old, I think. And he said, “Grandma, I don’t want to play anymore. Let’s go home.” And I could see through the door that there was a computer in the back room with Pac-Man or something like that on the screen.

And she says, “Do Grandma a favor. Go do a grave identification search, the name is Abraham Pikarsky.”

And the boy says, “Yes. Should I look in the mass graves too?”

And she turns to me and she says, “Did you say he died in the war?”

“No, he died in the early seventies.” So. The boy went back inside and a couple of minutes later, he comes back with a printout.

And I was gonna reach for it but the boy’s grandmother says, “No, no, no, let me see it first. It’s five dollars per grave.”

And I’d say, “Well, is there more than one?”

She says, “Yes, there is always more than one.”

So, it turned out, there were seventeen Abraham Pikarskys on the list. And I paid for two: The two who died in the early seventies and whose age, I believe, closely matched my grandfather’s. And I went to look for them. I was hoping that at least one of them would have a portrait on the tombstone. At least it is the custom with Russian immigrants here in New York to put portraits on tombstones. So, I thought, this way I’ll know which grave is mine. And I was walking through the cemetery, and lots of tombstones have portraits on them, and I was looking at the faces. And I was thinking that the faces I saw there didn’t look quite as happy as the faces that I see on our Russian tombstones here in Brooklyn. So, I thought that maybe to have immigrated wasn’t such a bad thing after all. Maybe... Maybe all those immigrants did find that happiness that they went after. So, I found the first grave and it said Abraham Pikarsky on it. But there was no portrait. It was an inscription from the loving wife and children. I had no idea whether this was the right one or not, so I went to look for the other one. I found it, too, and that one was virtually indistinguishable from the first one. Even the granite was of the same color. It said Abraham Pikarsky—no portrait. The inscription was slightly different, it said from the grieving family. So, I’d really no idea what to do. Was my family the loving one or the grieving one?

I was standing there. And I was waiting. I was thinking maybe some sort of a special feeling would come to me. I thought maybe I’d feel some sort of a kinship with the person who was laying there. But I just kept wondering whether this wasn’t a total stranger who was buried there. I tried to remember all I knew about my grandfather. He was a locksmith. He was a father of three. One of them died in the war. He was a soccer fan. He died from a heart attack. Who was this Abraham Pikarsky? A dentist? An oil accident victim? I really didn’t know. I put three carnations on the grave. And I went back to the first one. I stood there too—for a while—and again, I was hoping that I’d feel something special but it was getting late and I remembered that I had yet to pack for the trip back to New York. So, I put three more carnations, well I put three carnations on this grave. And I stood there with the last flower in my hands and I didn’t really know what to do with that one. Which Abraham Pikarsky should it go to? Should I just get rid of it? Should I take a flower from another grave maybe and make sure that each Abraham Pikarsky gets the equal number of flowers. I had to... I couldn’t leave. I had to come up with some sort of a formula.



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And then suddenly I knew what to do. I put that flower on that same grave where I was standing. I thought if this is really my grandfather who's laying there, then all is well and good. And he got the most. But if not, then let this be a consolation to the stranger. Because it wasn't his, but somebody else's grandson, who came all the way from America to pay his respects. And I laughed. I went to the hotel. And I never found that map again. I flew back to New York the next day. Mom and Dad picked me up at the airport. They have this thing about picking me up at airports—really—I would have been home at least an hour sooner, if it wasn't for them. First, they couldn't find the parking. Then they went to look for me at the wrong terminal, then they lost each other... Finally, finally I found them. And on the way on the way home from the airport, in the car my mom started crying. And I asked, "Mom why are you crying? It's only been a week."

And she says, "I'm just so happy that you took the time to visit your grandfather's grave, it really means so much to me. I appreciate it. You know when you called and told me you went there, I thought you were just saying it to make me to make me feel good." But this morning, when I was still in the air, her second cousin, who still lives in Russia, called her and told her that she had just come from the cemetery and that she saw my flowers there. So, my mom really knew that I went there. And she stopped crying and she was sitting there and she was wiping her eyes.

And I was thinking, "Should I ask her how many... how many flowers her second cousins saw: three or four?" But then decided that maybe I should just not say anything at all. Thank you.