

Not Sad

Ruchi Koval / Parshat Vayechi / January 6, 2023

It's the end of an era.

Last week I got home from Monsey, NY where I was celebrating the shiva of my dear grandmother, Mrs. Neche Heimowitz, of blessed memory. I say "celebrating" mindfully — it was not a sad shiva but rather an inspirational one, one where we all got to celebrate the woman who was my grandmother, or "Bobby Heimowitz," as she was lovingly known. (We did used to call her "Bobby Bronx" to distinguish from our other grandmother, "Bobby Queens," but then the one set of grandparents moved from the Bronx to Monsey and the other one moved from Queens to Brooklyn, so we had to revert to last names which were hopefully less temporary.)



My grandmother was born in Khust, Czechoslovakia — now Ukraine — and until the age of 15 grew up in a loving, wealthy, religious Jewish family. Her grandfather owned a series of orchards and had connections to lumber merchants, and built homes for all of his children on a cul-de-sac. She learned to swim in the nearby Tisza River and in many ways had an idyllic childhood.

Until 1944.

She was taken to Auschwitz with her family and later transferred to the Gorlitz labor camp where she was forced to build weapons for the enemy who had killed her own people. With the exception of one brother, and her father who was in America at the time, no one survived.

My grandmother came to America at the age of 17, and at 18 married my grandfather, an American-born Jew of Chassidic descent who specifically wanted to marry a refugee. Why? Because he wanted someone devout and pious, someone who would dress modestly, observe Shabbat and holidays just like in Europe, and continue the strong traditions of our faith despite the pull of American assimilation.

Growing up, I always believed it was my grandfather who took care of my grandmother. He was American, while she was a European refugee. He was educated and well-read, she was

simple. He drove, she was the life-long passenger. He was a huge personality, and she was happy to sit in his orbit and laugh at his jokes. He loved to go and run and do; she was happy to tag along.

But as an adult looking back I see things a bit differently. They were one unit. They shopped together, they ate together. They even talked to me on the phone together. And she took care of him at least as much as he took care of her. She was so content to cook his meals, bake him cookies, and be his wife. They were a model couple in oneness and devotion.

The loss of my grandmother was long and gradual. She started to drift away the day my dear Zaidy passed seven years ago. Saying goodbye to her has come in spurts and jolts over the seven years, ranging from covert tears standing at her bed, holding her smooth and beautiful hand with the iconic blue numbers on her arm, to conversations with my mother, aunt and uncle about her state of health and mental awareness.

Three years ago, aunts, uncles and cousins, numbering nearly 100, gathered to celebrate her 90th birthday. She was only semi-cognizant of the occasion, but we approached her for a blessing for our son's upcoming bar mitzvah five months later. They say if you want a blessing from a holy person, find someone with numbers on their arm. Their blessing is powerful. She blessed him to grow up to be a good boy and a good Jew – a blessing that so far has taken powerful shape.

When you consider that in her wedding album, she had two relatives in her family photo, and that 72 years later at her 90th birthday, she had close to 100 descendants, including several great-grandchildren named for her husband, you can see that this is a woman whose life transformed the meaning of "survivor." Because she was more than a survivor. She was a thriver. She was a mother, she was a wife. She was the best grandmother we could have hoped for, and the best great-grandmother.

I am not sad, but I will always miss her. I pray my life and my deeds are a continual merit for Alte Neche bat Moshe.