

## Something

### 1981 Los Angeles

“Momma, could you tell me what he looked like?” I asked as I looked at her.

“Well, I don’t know, it’s been so many years...”

“Do you remember him?”

“Of course, I remember him...” she said sadly and longingly.

“So, tell me what he looked like.”

“He had soft, reddish hair, you know, like your cousin Bert, and a forehead like your brother. And a trimmed beard, very neat. He spoke many languages, you know.”

“It sounds to me like you remember him pretty well,” I said trying to be enthusiastic.

“*Narrische kind?* But it’s not that I want to remember him like that, when he was at the end. He was a very good man, Paulie. The synagogue honored him you know.”

“Momma, could you show me a picture of him?”

“What do you mean, show you a picture? I have nothing.”

“You couldn’t bring one when you left? You must have had some back then?”

“Sure, we could take, but what do you think we could walk all the way through *Russlandt* with it? We lost everything we had. The Germans took everything when we had to swim the river. We were just trying to survive. We didn’t have enough to eat. Oh, what I would have given to have something, just anything to remember my parents.”

“Well, you know, I thought out loud, he had all those brothers and sisters who went to Mexico before the war, maybe they have a photo of him? I mean, back in those days, people sent their photo to their relatives, even from Poland to Mexico.”

“Oh, don’t you know I tried! I begged them, I cried. They knew what happened and they kept saying, ‘No, No, we don’t have anything.’ I went there, you know, to Mexico City in the 50’s, and I saw them and begged. They said, no, but I think they must have it, they just kept it for themselves. Uncle Mendel, he was different. He was the kind one. Treated your aunt and me like his own.”

“Why don’t you call them and ask again, or better yet, when I finish high school – let’s go to them,” again insisting upon an enthusiastic tone with my increasingly upset mom.

“Oh, no, I wouldn’t try again. Paulie, you must not go there, don’t bother.”

“Maybe they’ll give it to you?”

“*Azoy Shlecht!* What with the bakery and everything they had there, they weren’t hurting you know. They all came out fine through the war, living in Mexico while we suffered. And they had a lot of pictures! Me and your auntie, alone, orphaned, they could’ve helped us. They gave us *goornisht*, except for Uncle Mendel. He gave us those silver candlesticks back then in the 50’s, God bless him. I don’t want anything to do with them now that Mendel is gone.”

“Ok momma, never mind.”

## 2004 Los Angeles

“Lisa”, I shouted as I came rushing down the stairs. “I literally can’t believe that I found them! Can you imagine! Behold the power of the internet!”

“What, what are you gushing about?”, my wife said, half-awake in front of the TV.

“Well, I found their bakery on the internet, all in Spanish you know, and I sent them an email out of nowhere. They wrote me back and it turns out they are all having a family reunion in like 3 months in Mexico City. Cousins are coming from all over the world – Israel, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and of course Mexico. They invited us and I think we should go!”

“Do they even know who we are?” my wife asked.

“Well...yeah, I think they seem to know about my mom and me. I think Duvid who owns the bakery visited here once when I was a kid, brought us some Matzos I remember because his bakery makes them there. But I really want to go meet them. Mexico City is supposed to be amazing anyway!”

“Too bad your mom isn’t here anymore to go with us,” my wife innocently replied.

“When did she die, again?”

“Well, back in ’89, before I met you, but I don’t think she would have gone anyway, you know. It’s complicated,” I replied, half talking to my wife, and half damping down my own enthusiasm.

“Do you think Auntie Genie will go with us?” she asked me.

“Well, if momma wouldn’t come, no way. I can ask her, but I know how they both felt about them. But we’re in a new generation, you know? It’s a new time, we can find a way forward.”

## 2004 Mexico City

“Paul, before we start our event today, I wanted to sit down with you. As you know, your grandfather Hershel was one of a big family of 8 siblings. There was Gedaliah – the eldest - then Hershel, Mendel, Leib, Bertha, Sure-Hinde, Moishe, and Mordche. All of them came to Mexico in the 20’s except for your grandfather and Mendel. They set up a business here. When Mendel came after the war, he went into the seltzer business on his own. Only your grandfather didn’t come - he died in the shoah. We are going to show pictures of all of them today and the kids will make a big family tree out of them, it will be fun. Paul, do you know who this one is?”

“No, Eliezra, I have no idea, never seen him before.”

“He is Hershel, your grandfather.”

“My God - how do you have him? I had no idea of what my grandfather looked like.”

“Well, I went through the things of one of my aunts. She had a lot of photos you know. I think Hershel must have sent his photo over to her in the 20’s. It sat hidden away all these years, even after she died. She had all 8 of the brothers and sisters and we’re showing them today. We are very happy to share it with you now and give it to you to take home.”

As I stared at the photo, I felt myself lost to the noise of the room, the scramble of 50 or more cousins chattering. I felt an immediate comforting familiarity with his close resemblance to my brother Harold and cousin Larry. But he was clearly of another age, sepia-toned and collar-pressed, peering at me in the future with a sharp, fixed gaze. But the comfort quickly passed and merged into a deeper melancholy. I could no longer bring him home and share him with my mom, his own daughter, who longed so intensely to have ‘something,’ to see him one more

time. I could bring him home to his little one, my aunt Genie, who was only 7 when the Nazis came - and that was a great blessing. But to consider that momma was ultimately correct in her suspicions of so long ago led to a hurt that is still not gone. the strands of hurt mixed with feelings of gratitude to Eliezra for her chesed, forming some kind of blanket woven of opposing threads. This blanket is my inheritance.



Hershel Filler  
Born 1890, Brzozow, Poland  
Died 1943, Kokand, Uzbekistan