

Theories of Relativity

Janice Weizman

According to Uncle Dave, our family genealogist, both sides of my father's family have resided in America for over four generations (*they at least had the brains to leave Russia in time*, as our family lore goes) and he's traced and documented them all in two sprawling family trees. The earliest name on record is that of my great great grandmother Yudasha, whom Uncle Dave estimates was born sometime around 1870. "Before that," he says, "it's a mystery."

Dylan and I are in the midst of packing for our trip to Tel Aviv, where we'll bring in the New Year of 1991, when my Uncle Dave comes over with a special request. "I have a favor to ask of you," he begins after Dylan serves him a cup of tea and a slice of his mother's Christmas cake. We watch as he pulls a thick cardboard file, buckling with newspaper clippings, notes on scraps of paper, and old photos, from his bag.

"Sure," Dylan says, in that amiable, eager-to-please tone he's taken to using with my family.

"You," he says glancing at me, "know the whole story about the Posner name, but you," he turns to Dylan, "probably don't."

I wince as Dylan responds with a little shake of his head. To him I'm just plain Melissa Resnik, and I fear that the "whole story about the Posner name" will add layers of history and complexity that will give me a new and excessive sheen of pathos.

"We're fairly certain that our family name wasn't originally Resnick, but Posner. It's been affirmed by several of my relatives."

"No kidding! Posner," Dylan enthuses politely.

You see at one time in Russia, Jews would often change their family names in order to avoid being drafted to the Czar's army. It wasn't uncommon for a boy to marry very young and then take his wife's family name." He opens the file and retrieves

a clipping from a recent issue of a local Jewish newspaper. “Now have a look at this.” I lean into Dylan and scan the headline: ‘Soviet Jews Take Their First Steps in Be’er Sheva’. The accompanying photo shows a family – the man with a thick, dark moustache, his fair-haired wife, an elderly grandmother seated in an armchair, and a teenager in a striped tee shirt. The caption underneath reads ‘The Posners in their new home.’

Dylan peers at the photo. “You think these people are related to you?”

“Look at that face,” my uncle points to the man of the family. “He’s the image of my father as a young man.”

I stare hard, trying to conjure up what I remember of my grandfather. “Maybe a little,” I have to admit.

“And not only that. The article says that this family is from the Gomel region, the same area that our family came from. I think there’s a very good chance that this guy is somehow related to us. And when your dad told me that you’re going to Israel, I figured that this could be an opportunity to meet them and see if there’s a connection.”

“You want us to check them out,” Dylan says, annoying me with his agreeable tone. I say nothing, but feel like a kid getting a homework assignment to be done over spring break.

I guess my expression is less than neutral, because my uncle says, “Look, I know that this is your vacation, so consider it a special favor for me. For years there was no way to make contact with Jews who lived behind the Iron Curtain, but now that it’s finally possible to meet these people we can actually try to put the pieces together.

“I’m not sure we’ll have time,” I said gently, regretfully.

“I get that. But if you can find a free afternoon,” he replies, handing me a photocopy of the article, “that would be fantastic.”

To be honest, Israel wouldn’t have been my first choice for our winter vacation. I’ve already been there – on a family Bat-Mitzvah trip when I was twelve. But we wanted to go somewhere warm, and Dylan said he wasn’t into the “same old predictable

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Caribbean Christmas vibe.” He wanted something different. And then he started to talk about Israel.

When we first started dating, he had mentioned, almost casually, that since he was a teenager he had always wanted to date a Jewish woman. “Don’t get me wrong,” he put it at the time. “I’m really into you as a person. Your being Jewish is just a bonus.” I soon learned that Dylan is something of a philosemite, intrigued with Jews, Jewish history and culture. So once the tickets were booked, I stepped back and let him plan the trip. On the strength of glowing recommendations from friends of my parents, he hired an Israeli tour guide, Eli Ronen, to both be our driver and show us around, starting in the North and ending with a trip to Eilat for a few days at the beach.

Several days after Uncle Dave’s visit, we’re lying on the shores of the Red Sea, gazing across the turquoise waters at the purple mountains of Aqaba, when Dylan turns to me and says, “By the way, I was looking at a map and it would be totally possible to ask Eli if we can make a stop at the Posners in Be’er Sheva after we visit Sde Boker.”

The plan is supposed to be that Eli will pick us up in two days time and drive us through the desert to Kibbutz Sde Boker for a tour of Ben Gurion’s cabin, before we head back for two final days in Tel Aviv. “Don’t be ridiculous,” I groan. “Those people aren’t my family. My uncle is deluded.”

“You don’t know that. He said that the name was probably changed. And you agreed that the guy looks like your grandfather.”

I sit up, annoyed. “You know what? Who cares? Who cares if they’re some cousins ten times removed? At what point does a family connection become so tenuous that it can be considered null and void?”

“Why are you so being negative about this? What if these people really are related to your great grandparents? You could actually learn something about your family history. And anyway, your uncle was practically begging us to do this.”

I glare at him, aggravated, because he’s right. “And how do you think we’ll even find this guy?”

“Simple. We can ask Eli to look up his number. And then, if Eli says he can’t find it we’ll tell your uncle that we tried and failed.”

It sounds like a good idea – particularly because Eli has mentioned, more than once, the ineptitude of the Israeli phone company. When he calls that night I tell him about my uncle’s request. “Mikhail Posner in Be’er Sheva,” he repeats. “No problem. Just leave it to me.”

I hang up, optimistic that he’ll nonetheless fail, but the next morning when he picks us up, he brings other tidings. “I think I’ve found your relative,” he tells us.

Dylan and I exchange glances, his pleased, mine less so. “Can you help us call him?” he asks.

“Sure. What should I tell him?”

“Tell him...tell him that my uncle saw his picture in an American newspaper, and...that because of his family name he thinks we might be related.”

“And that you want to meet him?”

The insanity of the thing hits me with full force. “Yes...I mean, I guess so.”

When we meet Eli the next morning, he has news. “I’ve arranged everything,” he informs us. “Mikhail will be very happy to meet you. I explained that the only time you have to see him is today, on our way back to Tel Aviv.”

“Perfect,” Dylan exclaims. “Does he speak English?”

“A little. And a little Hebrew too. We were able to understand each other.”

As Dylan and I wander through the book-lined rooms of Ben Gurion’s cabin I reflect that I have absolutely no idea what I’m going to say to say to the Russian family we’re about to meet. I can only wonder how I’ve gotten myself into this ludicrous situation.

It turns out that Be’er Sheva isn’t very far. As we drive off the winter sun is starting to set, and soon the stark, empty sands give way to streets and parks and dumpy little

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shopping centers. “They’re living in the old, ugly area of the city,” Eli tells us. “These apartments were originally built for the immigrants that came in the 50s and 60s. Now they rent them to the Russians and Ethiopians.”

I stare out at the dilapidated concrete buildings with their small windows, thinking that if we’re really going to go through with this I want to do my best for my uncle. If I conceptualize this encounter with complete strangers in a remote, desert city as a mission performed with me as his emissary, then this whole crazy episode makes some sense. This is the mindset I adopt as we park in front of a complex of stuccoed apartment buildings, follow Eli into one of the entryways, and head up the stairs. The Posners are on the fourth and last floor, and by the time we arrive at their door we’re panting.

Eli rings the plastic buzzer and the door is answered by the man from the newspaper photo. Mikhail Posner in the flesh is short and a little stocky, with the familiar moustache and a head of thinning brown hair. He looks from Eli to Dylan to me, welcoming but curious as he surveys us. “Shalom, he says. “Please.” He gestures for us to enter and to give him our jackets, which we do readily, happy to have something to busy ourselves with. As he whisks them away we take tentative steps into the family salon. The first thing that catches my eye is an undersized Christmas tree, decorated with bright pink tinsel and little plastic ornaments. Furniture wise, the small room is dominated by a large mustard colored faux-velvet sofa and an oversize book case, which block part of a sliding door leading out to a porch. Above the couch is a framed painting of a mill on a river bank.

The familiar elderly woman sits in her armchair, studying us as though we’ve dropped into her living room from another world, which perhaps we have. Mikhail returns followed by a woman half a head taller than himself, with wide Slavic cheekbones and limp blond hair, and a sweet-faced teenage girl whose features insinuate a complex genetic mix. “I’m Melissa,” I say, extending my hand. “This is my boyfriend, Dylan, and this is Eli. He’s the guy who called you.” We shake hands, a show of good will and good faith in the midst of all the awkwardness.

“My mother, Sonia,” Mikhail explains. He speaks a few words of Russian and her gaze opens genially. “And this is my wife, Valentina, and my daughter, Alina.” We take a seat on the sofa. Valentina flashes us a brief, shy smile and heads back to the kitchen, Alina following behind her.

Eli asks Mikhail something in Hebrew, which none of us, Mikahil included, understand. “How long have you been in Israel?” Eli tries again in English.

Mikhail sighs. “Six months. Very difficult. No work. In Russia I am a doctor. Here, no work. Right now I am in *ulpan*. But at my age...very difficult.” He glances at Dylan. “What is your work?”

“I’m a computer programmer, and she’s a lawyer,” he replies. “We both work for the same company. That’s where we met.”

“In America is good,” he said. “Here is very difficult. My wife also has no work. Only Alina is ok – in school. In Russia I was a...” he gestures with his fingers as though cutting something.

“A surgeon?” I suggest.

“Yes! That is it. A surgeon. In a big hospital. Here I am in class at Soroka hospital. There is a big examination.”

Dylan nods sympathetically. “Oh man! Good luck.”

I figure that it’s time to get down to the business at hand. “So, my uncle in Sacramento has this hobby of doing research about our family tree and finding long lost relatives. According to him our original family name was Posner, just like yours. He saw your photo in our local newspaper, and he thinks you look a lot like my grandfather.”

“This is very interesting,” Mikhail says. “What are the names?”

“Well, my great great grandmother was called Yudasha. And my great great grandfather was Shmaryahu.”

From his perplexed expression I see that these names are not ringing any bells. “When did your family leave Russia?”

“Around 1906. Before that they lived in a little town outside of Gomel. It was called Propoisk.”

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“Propoisk,” he repeats. “Gomel I know. My mother’s grandparents were from Gomel. But Propoisk...I have not heard this name. You know, many places’ names were changed after the war.”

“What about your relatives before her grandparents? Do you know where they were from?”

“They were from Gomel. That is all I know.” He turns to his mother and says something in Russian, from which I pick out ‘Yudasha’, ‘Shmaryahu’, and ‘Gomel’. At the word ‘Gomel’ her face brightens and she replies, looking at me warmly and smiling. “She says that her mother’s father family was originally from a small town, but she doesn’t remember the name.” Mikhail appears to be thinking about this. He rises and heads, determined, down the narrow hallway.

“Gomel?” The old woman asks us hopefully.

I shake my head. “Propoisk. Do you know Propoisk?”

“Propoisk?” she repeats, and frowns. “Nyet,” she said, and I make a mental note to convey this to my uncle.

“Here are some photographs,” Mikhail says, returning with an opened photo album, followed by Alina, who holds a framed black and white picture. “My grandfather,” he says, pointing to a studio photograph of a bespectacled man in a top hat and suit, taken perhaps seventy or eighty years ago. “And here,” he says, tapping on a picture of a child on a rocking horse, “he is a little boy.”

“Grandmother,” Alina says proudly, thrusting out the framed photo she’s brought of an attractive young woman in a summer dress with a large bow.

“She is my grandmother, not hers,” Mikhail clarifies.

Dylan takes the photo and grins. “She’s really cute.”

“But she wasn’t a Posner, right?” I ask.

“No. Her name was Pessia Schwartzman. Do you have any Schwartzmans in your family?”

Valentina appears and says something to Mikhail, who rises again. “Excuse me. I must help.”

“Listen,” I turn to Eli. “I don’t think we’re going to get any more information. Obviously he can’t tell us much. I don’t think we’re even related.”

Dylan looks visibly disappointed. I’m about to explain that we needed to go when Valentina, Mikhail, and Alina come out of the kitchen bearing trays of food, brown glass plates and cutlery, which they set down on the coffee table. There’s a salad, a potato dish with pastry, a tray of meat which reminds me of the cuts of tongue that my dad loves, and something preserved in a sort of jelly. “Please,” Valentina says, handing each of us a plate. Mikhail invites us to help ourselves.

I decide to do the right thing and take a small piece of tongue and a bit of the potato pastry. They urge me to try the jelly thing, but I politely refuse.

Outside it’s growing dark. Eli and Dylan chat with Mikhail while Valentina and Alina happily partake of the meal. “We should start heading out,” I say to Eli. “I’ll just use the washroom and then we can go.” Mikhail murmurs something to Alina, who puts down her plate and motions for me to follow her.

The bathroom, with its peeling paint, yellowing toilet seat and grungy plastic medicine cabinet is among the most depressing I have ever seen. When I stare at my reflection in the chipped cabinet mirror, the woman I see staring back is American. Daughter of fortune. Resolve in her eyes. Optimism in her bones.

I only hear the singing when I step into the hall and I linger a minute, puzzled by the tune, which I sense that I’ve heard before. I peek into the kitchen and see that it’s Sonia, bent over the sink washing dishes, and right there, in a flash of memory, I see my grandmother, years ago when I was a little girl, singing that very same song. I move towards her, drawn in by the melody and suddenly, inexplicably, I’m singing along. She turns and takes my hand in hers, her wet, warm fingers clasping mine, her eyes shining, and we sing together, like two members of a long lost choir. Afterwards, when we fall quiet, she still clasps my hand and we stand there together as though holding this moment, this homecoming to a place has no address and appears on no map.

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“Are you two singing in there?” Eli asks. He and Dylan have their jackets on, and Mikhail is holding mine.

“We both know the same song,” I say, trying to puzzle through the strangeness of it all. “My grandmother used to sing it.”

“It is a very old song,” Mikhail says. “Even through all the years, Stalin and Khrushchev and Brezhnev and Gorbachev, my mother never forgot it.”

I’m relieved to leave Be’er Sheva and the sad little fourth floor walk up behind. I want to get back to Tel Aviv and the boardwalk and the cafés and the beach. “Looks like your instincts were right,” Dylan says as we drive out of the city. “You guys couldn’t even find one relative in common. Chances are you’re just not related.”

“Who knows?” I murmur as we speed down the highway into the darkness.