

The Habit of Silence
Deborah Allen

“There’s a blaze of light in every word it doesn’t matter what you heard the holy or the broken hallelujah.” Leonard Cohen

Shimon Dubnov perished in the Riga ghetto. They say his last words were "Schreib, Idn, schreib..." - "Write, Jews, write..."

Prologue

Memoir writers share a deep dread, which translates into a thousand versions of “how dare you?” The truth is so complex, and my relationship with my father wonderful for so many years, how dare I start with something that immediately puts him in a bad light? Is it just to give the book its punchy beginning? Once, in a writing class, we were given ten openings to ten books to read. Every one of them began with something dramatic and difficult, and they got my attention. And, since the truth is so complex, I cannot be clear about why you need to know what went wrong first, but in my case, these were the only clues I had and they led me on a far journey, and I want you to come with me.

Maybe the journey began when my Dad beat me up. I was sitting on my bed in the room I shared with my sister, wearing a paisley headband, so it must’ve been sixth grade. I guess I gave him The Look, the one that parents interpret as lack of respect. The next thing I knew I was on the carpet, and he was kicking me, over and over again. I screamed, “Oh God,” and he screamed, “Don’t say God, say Daddy.” When he left, I had a man-sized purple footprint on my stomach. That was the day I learned to cry without breathing.

Maybe the journey began at the house in Atherton. It wasn’t the house where we grew up. Events that happened there were stripped of the smells of chlorine and pea soup with wieners, the loud sounds of childhood. It was my parents’ grown-up museum house, and the antique white walls made a whisper feel like a howl. Ace and I were in the kitchen, doing our late teenage brother-sister brains alike ongoing deep conversation. Dad passed through the kitchen, looking like he would just keep on going. But whatever had him twisting and turning was not to be contained. He gave us the Unmitigated Idiots look followed by the scathing monologue delivered in the Wither You Without Mercy voice. I don’t remember what he said. I remember Ace and I holding hands. I saw Ace cry for the first time since childhood. My body snapped into trauma mode, pushing all the feeling into my spine as though I could avoid the inevitable tender tearing in my chest.

Maybe right then, the journey that took us to Lithuania began.

What caused our usually brilliant and erudite father to transform into someone unutterably frightening and impossible to reach?

When I was in my thirties, I had an internship at the Menninger Foundation where my father’s sister worked. We often brought lunch to a little lake with a bridge. We’d lie down on a blanket

surrounded by quiet, bird song, and willow trees. I finally told my aunt about the episodes of violence that seemed to come out of nowhere and return to the same mysterious source.

“Oh dear. I didn’t know about that.”

“Family secret.”

“Well, dear Deb, actually your father did very well.”

Not exactly what I expected to hear.

“Our Dad belted your Dad every week for all the years of our childhood. He did so much better than his father, didn’t he?”

Leaving the Known

I did not start off as someone prone to mystical experience. But during the five years I commuted to work in Europe, I was constantly getting ill at sacred sites, followed by discovering I’d been standing where Jews had died. I vomited over the railing at most every chateau and castle in Provence.

Before that, there was little evidence that some other world was trying to get my attention. I do have terrible nightmares. I rarely talk about them. The group of people who really want to hear the content of your bad dreams is about the same size as the audience for your travel photos – pitifully small. And I dread using the nightmares to feel special. So mostly, I have them, I suffer, and (as I still have them but much less frequently) I am silent.

There is the hanging on the hook’s dreams and the doused in fire ones. The Paul Newman dream reoccurred so often I was sure he would recognize me if we ever met on the street. He and I are locked in passionate embrace, full on intercourse. Men all in black attack us and hack us to death with machetes. There is blood everywhere and I cannot get myself to wake up until after I am dead. I almost always die in these dreams. I realize even inside the dream that I am going to die, and I can’t stop it. Sometimes there is still a “me” watching dead me in the dream. Sometimes there is just a vast falling, terror, and the struggle to wake up.

Then there was the weird visitation. We were still in the old house, so it must’ve been before high school. I remember the twins were with me (Ace and Steve) in the living room, not the family room. We did almost nothing in this room except attend my Dad’s occasional family meetings. It seems my Dad wanted to pass along a prayer. As I collect evidence about my upcoming life as a mystic, the one and only prayer said in the room where I had the weird visitation might be important.

There was no mention, ever, that this was a Jewish prayer or that we were learning to be Jewish kids. I always told people I was Jewish, not that I knew what it meant. (My sister said she was Presbyterian.) My Dad would sit and read it to us, and look content, and we would sit with him and my mother and that would be that. But it was always the same prayer. It had something to do with passing things along to your children. Despite his stunning absence from his childhood

faith, my father made the effort to commit this genuinely unnatural act: he read to his children from the Bible.

“And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you this day shall be upon your heart. And you shall teach them diligently to your children, and you shall speak of them when you sit at home and when you walk along the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise up...”

Only when I became a practicing Jew did I discover that the prayer my Dad wanted to pass along was the Shema, the very heart of Jewish faith and observance.

So, in the living room where the prayer happened, I was sitting with the twins when I felt something try to enter me. I was an imaginative child, and I am sure my brothers to this day write off this moment as some dramatic little sister thing. However, I am in my fifties now and I still remember how the moment felt. It felt dreadful. Full of dread. Something dark wanted to get inside me, from outside to in. Nothing has ever adequately described it until I saw the Dementors in the Harry Potter movies. Only instead of sucking me out, something was trying to get in. It wasn't until I came home from Lithuania that I felt what went in, had gone out,

In 2008, it became clear that I had unfinished business in Europe and needed to go to Lithuania to say Kaddish (prayers for the dead) for the family killed there during the Shoah. Shoah is the Hebrew word for catastrophe or destruction. Many Jewish people use this word rather than Holocaust, with its literal meaning of sacrifice to G-d. While the common usage of Holocaust is not meant to be offensive, words are important in Jewish life, they carry the spark of the Divine. Nothing in Jewish theology signed us up to sacrifice most of our people.

As someone who had never said Kaddish for anyone, I seemed, even to myself, an odd choice. But in my internal life, the marching orders were clear. I had to go. My brother Ace should go with me. We were to bring our attention to those who died, and in the process, find out about our own missing pieces.

My life as a Jew has had a drive and luminosity that has been impossible to explain. I wonder if the ancestors call different members of the clans to do particular kinds of closure. My mother converted to Judaism, but with my father traveling constantly, she never had a partner to help her explore her new religion. My mother remained unexpressed pioneer Baptist. My brother Steve is deeply involved in the ethos of my mother's people, the homesteaders of the West. My sister is an Orthodox Christian, my oldest brother somewhat neutral on the whole topic. Ace and I are the two with a pintele Yid (a little spark of Jewish that cannot be put out). I continually turn to the sound of Hebrew, to a life in Europe, and finally, to return to the place where my father's family began.

What feels mysterious about the Lithuanian family choosing me is wrapped in the absolute ignorance I've had about the most ordinary parts of Jewish life; I only began keeping the Sabbath three years ago. I take lessons to learn about how to pray so I don't feel so disconnected when I go to services. I knew almost nothing, before we left, about the scope of Jewish learning, the phenomenal wisdom of the great Rabbis, the teeming cultural phenomenon that was the Pale of

Settlement. In truth, the ancestors chose someone who has been secretly terrified of identifying as a Jew. When I began to practice my faith, I wanted to wear a piece of jewelry. I scoured the catalogs looking for just the right thing. And I noticed that I could not buy a Jewish star to wear in an obvious place. I could wear a Hamsa (the protecting hand), or a 12-tribes of Israel shield ornament, but it was too confronting to wear the Star of David. I still go through an almost unconscious thought process on airplanes, wondering if I will be the first one dragged off and shot.

I do not remember my grandfather. He lives inside my body, in the mysterious place called Gene Pool, but not anywhere I can access in memory. In photographs, he has the saddest eyes. My father did not tell many stories about him. Mostly he said, "We do not speak ill of the dead." I know my grandfather's family came from a shtetl in Lithuania. He raced horses with a sulky (a kind of sled that races on ice). He spoke several languages as was befitting a place that had been passed from Poland to Russia to Lithuania repeatedly. He spoke Yiddish. He never managed to learn much English. The stories that we heard were about my father writing out speeches for his father, who wanted to express himself in the worst way. There was even a story about him writing a speech for the Prime Minister of Canada. He had long conversations with the local Catholic priest and even contributed a holy water font for the church. What was he writing speeches about? What did he think about so passionately? Was he a liberal, a conservative? He must've been smart. What did he want? What did he long for?

He met my grandmother when he came across the continent, to join a colony of Jewish settlers who wanted to try a farm commune in Republic, Washington. Apparently, he met my grandmother, the daughter of the Jewish agricultural dreamer on the West Coast and brought her back to Canada and the cold remote mining community of Cape Breton Island.

The personal stories about my grandmother are even fewer. She was a kind woman. She kept the family together. She was very reserved. My father used to iron her back for her to get the tension out of her muscles. What did she long for? What did she think about? How can it be that no one who loved her has a story to tell? The silence about my Jewish grandparents is deafening.

The stories about my father begin to have some flesh. It was cold in Glace Bay. He used to say they had to break the ice on the washbasin in the morning. As a kid, I thought this was the usual father's tale to his children about how easy they have it. In hindsight, I am betting the ice was very cold on their hands.

Dad's older brother had rickets, and my Dad pulled him in a wagon to school, all the way until sixth grade. The Catholic kids would hide along the route and throw stones at them. The Jewish kids had to stay in the Jew corner of the playground or the big bruising children of the miners would beat the crap out of them. One of the Jewish men in town saw what was happening. Did he go to the parents or teachers? No. He taught the young Jewish boys to box. My father, the one pulling the wagon, the able-bodied one, channeled his energy into the structure of fighting. He went on to be a Golden Gloves contender.

My father is 90 now and slipping away into the far silences of dementia. In the last few years, while he was still awake inside, he began researching a book on the great religions of the world,

looking for the one universal principal that would unite us all. After a few years of patient reading and note taking, he decided that the one sentence that would change the world (if truly acted upon) was this one: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. He got that reciprocity was the only hope for peace. He understood that doing unto others harmfully also brought that harm back to you. But as he continued to slip his intellectual mooring, the story he was writing began to change.

He began repeating at regular intervals, “Jesus was a Jew. He was born a Jew, he lived as a Jew, and he died a Jew.” His research took a new twist. Dad began reading all about the early beginnings of Christianity. Apparently for the first time, he realized that the Christian dogma that had so wounded him in childhood was not in the teachings of Jesus, who was born a Jew, lived as a Jew and died a Jew. Over and over, he repeated this phrase. The urgency in his voice called me to listen to the deeper need. In my imagination, the ten-year old boy was exorcising his bewilderment and rage at the world around him that did not understand that we are all of one root. If those Catholic boys could know what he knew that they were stoning Jesus’ very own people, maybe the story would have come out different.

“There is the hidden presence of others in us, even those we have known briefly. We contain them for the rest of our lives, at every border that we cross.” Michael Ondaatje, Divisadero

Ace is studying his Lithuanian flashcards. I watch his mouth move as he struggles with the language of our father’s family, the whisper in his blood. My brother has a born linguist head. He speaks Norwegian, Spanish and Hebrew. Now he will speak Lithuanian, one of the hardest languages on the planet. I wonder if he learns about our missing people through the sounds they would have made, the way they inhabited words.

In my work as a body-oriented counselor, we are always talking about what the body knows: “ask your body” and “where do you feel it in your body?” and “if your body could speak, what would it say?” Maybe Ace is asking his body as he makes the strange shapes with his mouth.

While this is very poetic about my brother’s inner life, it is not true. My grandfather probably never spoke Lithuanian and probably never felt like a Lithuanian. In Eastern Europe, he was always, foremost and forever, a Jew. The Lithuanians were the natives not Russian, not Polish, and, not Jewish.

My body floods with fear. We are sitting in the airport departure lounge, amidst a group of very serious looking people. No one smiles or laughs out loud. Ace tells me the Eastern Europeans at his synagogue explain that in this part of Europe, you are considered frivolous if you smile a lot. I remember getting on a plane in Africa and smiling at everyone. The man I was traveling with me, a seasoned wildlife biologist, pulled me aside and told me that my smiling “like that” was an invitation to a come on. Losing my smile is like losing an arm, a direct I-Thou connection to the heart. This may be a problem.

I am sitting in the departure lounge practicing not smiling. I tell Ace what I am doing, and we crack up, suddenly the brother-sister team that shares its own language. We’ve always been able to follow each other’s thoughts like they were our own. I had a few years where I was jealous of Ace’s special bond with his twin, and his wife, and my other siblings, and my parents...but I got over that. Loving someone a lot just increases love.

We are the only two in our family with Hebrew names. Ace is a nickname for Isadore/Issac, the uncle who died in Korea, whose story is never told around the dinner table. This is not a remarkable absence, as my father never told stories around the dinner table, but when you have a name like Ace, there should have been a story to tell the billions of people who ask you “Is your name really ACE?”

My mother told me they had wanted to name my sister and me Jewish names like Rachel and Rebecca, but my father had been afraid we would be marked for prejudice for the rest of our lives. There is a catchy pop psychology phrase that applies here: what we resist persists. So here goes their daughter, off to find the names she wasn’t given.

Ace tells me he feels frightened too, which is a great relief. I am not someone who habitually prefers the strength of silence. I feel relieved when I hear how people are feeling. In our household, the feelings were there but the habit of naming them absent. Ace's fear relaxes my aloneness.

On the plane, Ace speaks Lithuanian with a woman next to him, which eases the tension in my chest. I like the sound of a good word bath, the connection that happens when words are exchanged. I prefer truthful words or exotic words, but I am also very patient with small talk. It feels like tiny little feelers going out between people, like hands looking for a light switch in the dark. I remember being terrified flying into Uganda until my seatmate, a very large African man, not at all reading my smile as a come on, talked with me about fear, and we made heart connection. From then on, I fell in love with my adventure.

I never got ill at the sacred sites of Africa.

I hear Ace talking away. That he is communicating with these sounds flips me into a state of awe, much preferable to fear. MULL-AW-NU. EE MUN-OW VAESH-BOO-TI, the sounds that herald the opening of a gate to new worlds. Finally, on our way to Vilnius, I remember that we, too, are a pinteile Lithuanian.

Our first adventure on the ground is the cab driver that, without smiling even a little, charges us the equivalent of \$100 to go about a mile. We don't give him a tip. But the hotel is lovely, on a quiet corner behind the main city center. Our room looks out over several old cars parked on cracked cement next to an ugly brick building. This is our "Soviet" view, the mark of the occupation that left the country and its people angry, confused, and poor. But the beds are comfortable, there is a tiny TV, and we have once again thrown ourselves across the world and landed somewhere. It's time for dinner. We go out to meet the city.

Vilnius is a character in this play, beautiful in so many ways. Quiet by American standards, the city feels empty of urban tension and impending danger. Her most prominent citizen, King Gediminas, was famous as the king who ruled without a sword. That was a long time ago. The old city streets are cobbled, the buildings ancient, the light on the statues perfect for painting. Clothing from Dolce & Gabbana, Gucci, Prada, Giorgio Armani glitters in storefronts. (We find out later that most Lithuanians can't afford to shop here, but the stores are still good for money laundering.) In endless window displays, Lithuania's prize jewel, amber, glows in the dusk. There are dozens of restaurants and lots of young people drinking in outdoor cafes. On first look, Vilnius would be cast as a heroic character, up by her bootstraps, rags to riches - a city on the way up.

There is a church on every corner, thirty-six all together- Catholic, Orthodox. Lutheran: All Saints, Anne, Ascension, Bartholomew, Blessed Virgin Mary of Consolation, Casimir, Cathedral of St. Stanislaus and St. Vladislav, Orthodox Cathedral of the Cormition of the Thotokos, Catherine, Orthodox Church of Catharine, Divine Mercy, Euphrosyne, Evangelical, Francis, Franciscan of the Assumption, Holy Cross, Holy Spirit, Orthodox Holy Spirit, Ignatius, Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary, Invention of the Holy Cross, Jesus' Heart, John Bosco, Johns, Most Holy Mary Queen of Peace, Michael, Nicolas, Orthodox Nicholas,

Parasceve, Peter and Paul, Philip and Jacob, Providence, Raphael, Revelation of the Theotokos, Romanov's, Stephen, Teresa.

In 1939, Vilnius had one hundred Jewish houses of prayer. We go to see the one Synagogue left.

It is big, with beautiful Moorish arches and black stripes on the stone, wrapping it like a package. Seeing a Star of David anywhere in this town of churches makes my eyes water. The people who created this building, this place of prayer, were Haskalah Jews, the secular enlightenment people, the ones who started schools in the local language along with Hebrew, trying to include the customs of the places they lived. They probably believed they were assimilating successfully into Lithuanian culture. I cannot help but think my grandfather was one of these Jews, with his passion for politics and argument.

If it hadn't been built of stone, it would be gone now.

This is my first experience of a Jewish house of prayer that is not the California Reform Jewish kind where a Synagogue is a modern building set in a big parking lot with lots of glass and little decoration. I touch the gates and notice I am peaceful. Who can explain this body knowledge that drives people (me) to journey? Both Ace and I feel we were called here. A sign in front says the synagogue is only open for those that pray here. This is not a tourist site. The gates are secured with a huge padlock. My body begins to register the ongoing story of the trip: peace and padlocks.

Back in our hotel room, we light the Havdalah candle and close Shabbat with prayer. It is so rich for me to be with Ace to do these prayers that I have mostly been saying alone. My husband is not Jewish, and although he has been a wonderful partner in keeping a Shabbat that includes my step-kids and grandkids, he does not use these prayers to reach God. I have no regrets about my solo re-entry into Jewish practice, but it is so nice to hear the Hebrew said correctly by someone I love.

I am passionate about the whole 24 hours of Shabbat, the consecration of rest. Herschel calls this day a "cathedral in time," which seems deeply appropriate in this moment, in the land of churches. Shabbat, at the very heart of Jewish practice, creates a time of prayer not dependent on a physical structure, one of the ways Jews have survived through all the wandering.

During these hours, we are asked to sit back and notice that the world goes on even when we stop moving. Shabbat invites us to examine our belief that we are the ones doing everything, to question our certainty that we are in charge. I find this built-in weekly humility extremely helpful. Havdalah marks the end of Shabbat. The prayers are full of the bitter sweetness that comes when something wonderful balances on the cusp, right before gravity, the inevitability of change, asserts itself. We want to hold on to the time of rest, to make this day of dedicated noticing last longer. Havdalah is full of longing.

As we blow out the candle, Ace says, "We are probably the first of our family to say Havdalah in Lithuania in 61 years." So, we sit on our beds and say out loud the names of those who were killed, so they would know we have come for them:

Chaya, Nachman, Zarem, Shifra, Yaakov, Shmual, Bila, Tila, Tuva, Mirale, Dvora, Schneier, the two children 5 and 6 whose names we do not know.

When we wake up, in twin beds next to each other (something that never happened in childhood), Ace teaches me a prayer I've been saying in English for the last year. I long to say it in Hebrew but am too shy to ask anyone to teach me. As we lay in the semi-dark, in the cocoon of family and friendship, my patient linguist brother helps me go over and over the sounds of the words until they can live on my tongue.

“Thank you G_d for giving me a heart of compassion. Great is your faith in me.” It is the translation of the last line of this prayer that makes me want to say it. Somehow, a G-d that knows how daily the struggle for compassion can be, is a G-d I want to know better.

*Mo-deh a-ni l'fa-ne-cha
me-lech chai v'ka-yam
she-he-che-zar-ta bi nish-ma-ti
b'chem-la ra-bah e-mu-na-te-cha.*

Hebrew, the language that makes me weep, has been part of the call to this journey. This language - that has no written vowels, which asks you to blow the divine of your own breath into the consonants to make the words live - slays me.

Last night, our guide, Daniel Gurvitch, came to meet us, and let us know we are going to the shtetl of our grandfather today. Daniel and his father, Yulik, started Jerulita, a travel agency that mostly serves Jewish people coming to do their “roots” tours. Daniel is a funny, smart, (understandably) cynical young man, who carries both Lithuanian and Israeli citizenship. “I can get out at any time,” he tells us, grinning. His grandfather fought with the Russians, which undoubtedly saved his life, but cannot have been easy for his family after the war when the Lithuanians lost so much to the Soviets. Jewish and Soviet, not a good combination. I know there is a story there, but I do not ask.

We expected to have a few days to get ready, but we are on his schedule. Today is the day. We are up and out, under-prepared but on our way.

There is a cardboard box of research that has passed from my oldest brother Mike to Ace and then to me. It contains the only tangible pieces of our history. We know very little. My grandfather's parents were Abraham and Sarah Aarhon. They came from a little village in Lithuania where there were a lot of lakes. The family had a fish business. Abraham studied and Sarah and the children sold fish. They took the fish to a bigger town to sell them. They had 18 children. Half of the family left for far places before the war. My grandfather raced horses with sleds called sulkies on the ice. We have one photograph of the family left in Lithuania, taken in the 1930s. There are twins in the photo who look uncannily like one of our cousins.

Mike began the research. He'd found my grandfather's entry record at Ellis Island, listing his home as a town called Rimshany. He was still Israel Aarhon in 1914, about to become I.N. Allen. With the help of the web, Mike found two Lithuanian towns that might be Granddad Allen's and noted their longitude and latitude. Travel into the past in Eastern Europe depends on these coordinates because the map and the names of towns in this part of the world changed with every new occupation – Russian, Polish, German. With more research, he found the town closest to “a lot of lakes.”

I followed Mike on the computer. It stunned me how much information the Jews of the world have gathered to remember their kin. I didn't know. In some obscure corner of the Internet, I found a list that included tradespeople from various shtetls, and there was Shumual Aarhon from Rimse.

Using the Jewish Gen website, I discovered a yizkor book (a memory book), collected by survivors after the war, including a town called Rimse. There are lists and lists of names of those who lived in various small villages. Through these lists, we could track several people with names on our list (including Abraham and Sarah) who had lived in a Rimse with the same latitude and longitude that Mike had found. Ace discovered some photos on the Internet of the village called Rimse. With Daniel's confirmation, we know we have found our village, now called Rimse.

Ace followed up at Yad Vashem (the Holocaust memorial in Israel). After the war, thousands of family members sent information to Yad Vashem about those they had lost, and where, and how. Ace collected this for many of our family who were murdered. I hadn't known he'd done this, and seeing their names moves me to tears. Aunts and uncles and cousins, all safe and far away, had sent information about their lost ones to be held in the reverence of the Jewish state. Even though my family never heard stories about them, someone at least registered that they were gone.

Daniel had done research before we came, also from Yad Vashem. He has a somber book that lists all the shtetls of Lithuania and where the Jewish people are buried. That's about all we have – a handful of stories, a dot on the map, and list of gravesites.

During his travels, my father made a point of finding many of his cousins, the children of the ones who got out, others whose roots were here in Rimse. There were Aarhons in Canada, New Zealand, Mexico, Brazil, Russia, and Israel. Maybe he did want to know, and yet still so few stories passed down to his own family. Maybe I'd simply been too young to hear whatever he had to say and now his memory is gone. The other half of the eighteen Aarhons of Rimse and their families died in the Shoah. These are the ones we come to claim.

And so, armed with so little, we leave the hotel.

April here is grey late winter, early spring. There are no leaves on the trees, but invisible birdsong pours from empty space. The drive east passes farmland with deep black soil and tight clusters of trees. These dilapidated farm buildings have been here since before the war, so I expect we are passing buildings my grandfather saw. My eyes and his eyes meet for the first

time, not in real time but in this weird hybrid space where we are following him backwards, but we are his future.

The population of the entire country is 3.5 million. Daniel and Ace are conversing about history and the unanswerable “why?” that travel with us for every step of this journey. There are always two conversations going on – who were my relatives? (The Jews of Lithuania) and why did they die this way?

“You have to understand,” says Daniel, “what was happening here when the war started. Lithuania was located right between Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. Stalin got Lithuania, which Hitler gave him, knowing full well he intended to invade the Soviet Union later. Stalin wanted to make Lithuania a Russian state and began deporting ethnic Lithuanians. Step one, the non-Jewish Lithuanians hate the Soviets.”

Daniel goes on to tell us that, by 1939, the Nazis had totally smashed Poland, so the Lithuanian Jewish community absorbed thousands of Polish Jews. So, the Jews knew bad things came with the Germans. They tended to pin their hopes on the Soviets, who took control of the country in summer of 1940. While they were also anti-Semitic, banning all Hebrew, they allowed Yiddish to continue. The Soviets believed that restrictions on minorities were elitist, so more Jews were allowed into university and management positions that year. The Lithuanian nationals suddenly had their former scapegoats over them at work, inflaming a centuries old antagonism.

Their Lithuanian neighbors, losing their national identity to the Russians, supported the Nazis over the Soviets. During World War One, the Germans had been fairly civil to the local population. And the Nazis found the perfect combination of scapegoat by blaming everything on the Bolshevik Jews.

What has disappeared from history is the reality that a higher percentage of Jews were deported to Siberia than any other Lithuanian group. Since Jews ran many businesses, they bore the brunt of Sovietization – 83% of all businesses nationalized belonged to Jewish people. The whole construct that pitted neighbor against neighbor – that the Jews were thriving under the Soviets - was faulty.

Daniel drives us into more and more forest, on a good, paved road, through miles of tall slender trees. I remember reading in so many pieces of memoir about the War: “they ran to the forest.” Of course, they went to the forest. Everywhere is forest. Part of what has driven me here, to this moment, are the words “they ran.” Who were they? Why did they have to run? What is my Dad running from? How do these questions get passed along, generation to generation, in the unspoken territory I seem to have claimed?

I turn my attention back to what Daniel is saying. “And here’s what no one wants to hear. The Jews of Lithuania were killed mostly by other Lithuanians. At first, it was in the name of being anti-Soviet, since the Jews had hoped to align with the Soviet Union. But the first mass executions, in Kovno in 1941, they were done by local people.”

“Do we know who killed our family, in Rimse?”

“Well, what we have from Yad Vashem says they were murdered in June 1941. The Nazis were officially in charge on June 23. They can’t have reached Rimse by then. So, I think we can assume it was mostly Lithuanians involved.”

We sit quietly for a while.

Before the Nazis arrived in Lithuania, there were over 40 pogroms in 40 Jewish communities. The Lithuanian army announced that the Jews were the enemy of both the Germans and the true Lithuanians. In June of 1941, Lithuanian gangs began the massacres. In just a few days, these “partisans” had murdered 3500 people. The Germany army arrived soon after, and by the end of 1941, most of the 250,000 Jews of Lithuania were dead. These are the kinds of numbers that flood my system and increase the numbness. I imagine Kansas City, where Ace lives, with its population like Vilnius at the beginning of the war. Half the population is murdering the other half in a few months’ time, and no one stopping it. Trying to somehow bring this event closer to me, I keep hitting a barrier that will not let me understand the enormity. My neighbors have walked across the street with a big gun, marched me and my family and all my friends into a field and shot us.

See? It is impossible.

My first year in Africa, I lived in Uganda, soon after the second round of genocide had ended. Most of my colleagues (in the National Theater) had lost family to brutal torture and murder. I know I made the proper noises of respect, but as I watch the empty fields of Lithuania flash by the car window, I send an apology backward in time: I have no idea how to respond to what you have told me, and I am sorry.

“You will notice,” says Daniel, “that much attention is paid to the righteous Gentiles who helped the Jews. And not to take anything away from them, but only 17,000 of 250,000 Jews survived. Most of them were partisans, or in the Red Army, or hidden in the woods fighting. Local people rescued only 1000 out of all those lost. The Lithuanian Catholic Church, one-upping even the silence of Pope Pius II in Rome, forbade help to the Jews.”

We drive deeper into the forest.

After an hour and a half, we see our first sign to Dukstas. I have Ace take a photo for brother Mike, as Duskas was the first big town he pinpointed in the early research, pointing us towards the mysterious village that houses our paternal history. We have entered a strange kind of time travel, where the months of pouring over names on the Internet become a three dimensional, living presence outside the car window.

Daniel stops to show us a memorial in a small village. Little wooden cottages surround a spare winter park. The church literally towers over the landscape. There is a sculpture made from a tree, very spare and unobtrusive, a menorah, commemorating the Jews who lived and died here. We take photos. It is our first moment of “Jewish people lived here.”

The houses are small and wooden, still empty. A square surrounded by empty houses. Why didn't anyone move into these houses? A small wind begins to blow inside me, a breeze stirring the numbness. These little houses contained people who kept Shabbat. Who made love and babies. Who were confused, and happy, angry and delighted. It takes me a terribly long time to feel my feelings, as though I could live without them. Many years of hard psychological work lets me know that my feelings are frozen in there, waiting patiently for permission to thaw. I handle this newborn feeling way I often handle the possibility of a difficult emotion. I lean over to Ace and sing softly "Anatevka, Anatevka," from Fiddler on the Roof. He grins, but I can see he, too, is feeling feelings. I am guessing that we are both noticing the tiny fingers of grief.

Dukstas is a town on the railway. We conjecture that the Aahrons got their fish to Vilnius by train. We keep going. We are so close to Rimse. Turning off on a country road, we see what must be the lake. Ace spies the church steeple he's seen in Internet photos. And, boom, here we are, inside the map, inside our narrative, inside the slender thread held by our relatives who left in time. Rimse. 150 of the 300 residents, in 1939, were Jewish. Half again of those were named Aahron. 150 were murdered.

It's funny how small the lake is. My grandfather was young here. To a child, this would be a big lake. In America, it would be a big pond. Daniel parks on a side street near a meadow that stretches to the water. A woman in her early sixties is working with two men and a horse-drawn wagon.

"Get a picture of the horse! Dad said his father had horses!"

Daniel and Ace (whose Lithuanian is truly astonishing) approach the woman (who is willing to speak with us – the two men back away). And here is where the weird Twilight Zone music starts, the strange workings of the truly mysterious. We give her no information about ourselves, only say we are searching for information on a family called Aahron.

She says earnestly that "Yes, the Aahrons house was right there (pointing at the meadow by the lake) and their fish store was right there on the lake. And where that green fence is? That was the shul. There were two shuls. And the Aahrons had a little snack bar too. And house where the municipality/post office is now, that was a Jewish house. And the two story one where the clinic is now, that was a Jewish house..."

In this whole small town, we have only talked to one person. And we have pulled up within 100 feet of where my grandfather was raised, talking to a woman who knew that my family was in the fish business, knew their names, knew which houses they had lived in. She could not have been more than two during the war. What stories did she grow up on? Why does she know these stories, these names?

I ask if there are any older people who might know more. Her father lived here during the war, but he died 2 years ago. She has an aunt in Vilnius who might have some photos. Would the aunt be willing to talk to us? The woman gives Daniel her phone number. (Later when we call, her children tell us she is in Poland. Daniel has said not to get our hopes up, no one really will want to talk to us.) As we turn back from looking where she has pointed, we realize that she, and the two men and the horse, have all disappeared. The conversation is over.

We walk to the small lake, the land where our grandfather had stood, laughed, eaten, and grown up until he was 18, with his huge family and a fish business with a snack bar. I think of my brothers and sister, and all the ways I am who I am because I grew up with them and share their memories.

We stand in almost utter stillness by the small lake. Just single notes from a bird. Wind. Grief. We take pictures of us holding a photo of “the family.” We say out loud: “Your relatives remember you. You matter. We have come to see how it was for you.”

As we walk by two of the “Jewish homes” it is clear (at least to me) that someone in our family was doing well. The houses are two stories. Who knows, maybe the townspeople rebuilt after the war, on a piece of land where a Jewish house was burned down. The town is so tiny, dirt poor, would’ve done better if the Jews had stayed, keeping the fish farm. I quell my inner story, the one that says how advantageous it might have seemed to get rid of the people who lived in *these* homes. The more we learn, the more I realize how naïve my inner voices have been. It is always much worse than I had imagined.

We see no one else the entire time we are there except an old man on his bicycle. He is totally plastered and promptly falls off at our feet. We are kind but move away as soon as we can. He is close to the vomit stage. I cannot help but feel that the wheel of karma has passed through Rimse.

There is no one else around to ask questions. Later Ace and I realize we were a little shocky. It was also 2 pm on a Sunday and we haven’t eaten, and everything is closed, and we probably won’t eat until dinner. We get back in the car. We’ve been there maybe an hour and a half. Across the world to take a photo and avoid a drunk guy. So strange, disorienting when the past and present meet.

The woman we talked to didn’t know if or where the Jewish cemetery might have been. This is the beginning of yet another sad unsettling thread of this trip. Jewish people take burying their dead seriously. Traditionally, we don’t burn the bodies but put them in the ground with a respectful message carved on the headstone. When family comes to visit the site, they leave a rock by way of saying “someone who loved you was here.” In Lithuania, there are no graveyards with headstones to visit.

We leave Rimse and head off to find out where the family is buried.

Now we are traveling along the dark thread. The unknowable space. The silence that cannot be met unless you were there.

Several years ago, Ace and I went to visit the graves of my mother’s family in Kansas, including this same generation of great aunts and uncles. It was cold that day too on the Kansas plains in winter. But their gravestones had their names on them. And they “rested in peace, beloved of...” My father’s family did not rest in peace.

In Lithuania, there are 241 mass gravesites.

We drive into the woods from Rimse. Daniel reminds us that “they” never killed people in the towns, always in the woods so they could go home and sleep in their beds. The ferocity of the Lithuanians turning on their own Jewish neighbors was unparalleled in the Shoah. “One bullet, 100 Jews,” says Daniel cryptically. Where our relatives are buried, 8000 Jewish people were murdered.

We drive deeper into the woods. Daniel must check in with his father several times by cell phone so we don’t miss the marker. I can’t help but think that at so many other historic sites, events like this would have huge memorials. In these woods, we almost miss the small metal sign “Jewish mass graves,” in English and Yiddish. Daniel tells us that all over Eastern Europe, people have been removing these tiny signs, hoping to make what is buried disappear.

We park and begin to walk. The trees are long and thin, like thousands of fingers all pointing upwards. The forest floor is covered with beautiful purple wildflowers. Ace turns to Daniel. “Do you know what these are called in English? Forget-me-nots.”

As we cross into a small clearing, there is an 8’ high brick rectangle, rusted green fencing, several old memorial candles, and weathered Israeli flags. Only a small brick monument in the woods? As we draw closer, we see on either side of the brick tower, the green fencing stretches out in perpendicular rectangles, enclosing two long corridors each 30 yards long and 8 feet wide.

“Those are the mass graves,” Daniel says quietly. I start crying. I don’t have any way to meet this, not with thought. Purposefully, I drop into Emptiness. It is good to grieve, not necessary to internalize into my organs. The woods are so still. Ace opens his prayer book.

“We don’t have enough people to call a minyan,” he says. His voice breaks. “But these are unusual times, and I call this a minyan.”

We say the prayers for the dead in English and in Hebrew.

“Glorified and sanctified be God’s great name throughout the world which He has created according to His will. May He establish His kingdom in your lifetime and during your days, and within the life of the entire House of Israel, speedily and soon; and say, Amen.

May His great name be blessed forever and to all eternity.

Blessed and praised, glorified and exalted, extolled and honored, adored and lauded be the name of the Holy One, blessed be He, beyond all the blessings and hymns, praises and consolations that are ever spoken in the world; and say, Amen.

May there be abundant peace from heaven, and life, for us and for all Israel; and say, Amen.

He who creates peace in His celestial heights, may He create peace for us and for all Israel; and

say, Amen.”

I let the words surround me, not trying to make meaning or do my usual analytical dance. If G-d is everything, then death must be included. These deaths must be sanctified. If I open and open and open my heart, can I allow a thankful noise for these lives that made mine possible? To bless the creative force of the universe that continues even after we die? That holds all of this in a world beyond all worlds? Can I trust G-d to be that?

We say Kaddish in Hebrew. Something deeper comes through me, something that my body knows and my brain does not. As though the hands of my ancestors are adding me to the Great Chain of Being.

Yis'ga'dal v'yis'kadash sh'may ra'bbo, b'olmo dee'vro chir'usay v'yamlich malchu'say,
b'chayaychon uv'yomay'chon uv'chayay d'chol bais Yisroel, ba'agolo u'viz'man koriv; v'imru
Omein.

Y'hay shmay rabbo m'vorach l'olam ul'olmay olmayo.

Yisborach v'yishtabach v'yispoar v'yisromam v'yismasay, v'yishador v'yis'aleh v'yis'alal,
shmay d'kudsho, brich hu, l'aylo min kl birchoso v'sheeroso, tush'bechoso v'nechemoso,
da,ameeran b'olmo; vimru Omein.

Y'hay sholomo rabbo min sh'mayo, v'chayim alaynu v'al kol Yisroel; v'imru Omein.

Oseh sholom bimromov, hu ya'aseh sholom olaynu, v'al kol yisroel; vimru Omein.

We name each name we have. Chaya, Nachman, Zarem, Shifra, Yaakov, Shmual, Bila, Tila,
Tuva, Mirale, Dvora, Schneier, the two children 5 and 6 whose names we do not know.

The sound of each called one falls into the stillness.

I stand at the edge of one of the long rectangles of graves. Instead of imagining how it must have been for them, I just start praying for the indwelling presence to arrive. So many of them under the ground. I pray that whatever is still needed so they know they mattered, whatever that need might still be, it is met. I tell them we are their family and we have come to thank them.

The ground is soft. The killers chose the peat bog. On my knees, I put both hands on the earth. As I put my hands where they are buried, my body takes a great sigh and without warning, the voice in my heart tells me that this part of the Call is complete. The drive to find them, to get here, to tell them. I know I can't make luminous space arrive, but how I welcome it when it graces this moment.

I look over at Ace and he too is in a deep reverie. I make sure to pray on both sides of the great expanse of ditches because I don't know which side the bodies of our family might be on. Some part of me wants to lie down on the graves, but I choose to resist this part. I don't understand the impulse and don't trust it to be life giving. But I leave my hands on the ground for a long time.

This experience, in a strange paradoxical twist, is making me less cynical. An old part of me would never have allowed ME to be important enough to have such an experience. And when others have them or write about them (unless they are very humble or very poetic) I am jealous

and push away. To have listened to my own call gives me such profound relief I am dizzy from it. For this, too, I thank my Lithuanian ancestors.

Everything looks different in the car on the way home. Trees that were interesting and beautiful a few hours ago now look haunted. The houses that looked quaint and picturesque feel alive and full of danger. Everywhere I peer into the forest, I see my people not running but lying dead. The loamy earth itself has changed. Just under the surface flows a river of anguish. I have no idea how to metabolize these feelings, so I sit in empty space and wait for feelings to come or not come.

In the language of my own Jewish inner world, the holy kind of empty is called Ayin, the great nothingness that must be passed through before wisdom can grow. Ayin speaks to the profound kind of silence where the old self empties to make room for the new.

I have always confused silence with secrets. When something is not said, something real and usually unpleasant, the silence fills with something as tangible to me as wood. The unseen roils around me and that which is hidden travels through me like a wave of toxins. Trying to make sense of this has been my life's task

One silence I am running away from, and one I am running towards.

Daniel drops us off at the hotel. What a difficult job he has. Ace and I head out to find something to eat on the main street of Vilnius. Even the city has changed in the time we've been gone. It's like being on acid only not. Instead of things being luminous good, they are luminous weird. Because of Rimse, the very cobblestones of Vilnius have begun to vibrate. In this city, my people had thought they were home.

Dusk is usually my favorite time of day, when time hangs between light and dark. My husband and I call this "painters' light," and I feel a squeeze of love in my heart so strong I think it will push me to my knees. Maybe I can find an Internet café tomorrow. He is on his own adventure with friends in Vienna, and we will meet next week in Prague. This part of the trip was for Ace and me, the sister and brother, to really fall into our own story. It is good to feel a feeling, and that the feeling is love not hate.

The tiny, cobbled alleys open into a large empty square occupied only by a small statue of a man in a hat talking to a young girl in a babushka. We peer under the hat to see the sad eyes, the worn face, the kindness radiating. The inscription is in Hebrew, so we know we are gazing at a member of the tribe. "Look, Acie, he's a Jewish doctor just like you!" "He has a proud mother," grins Ace.

Traveling with my brother has a particular kind of ease. After this day, this life-altering day, this unexpected, difficult and unspeakable day, we walk without talking much. I don't rest in quiet well but with Ace, I trust that a literal lifetime of friendship is alive in the silence.

In a back corner between two buildings, almost missed, we see a bust of the Vilna Gaon, the most well-known Rabbi from this country. The base is covered with graffiti. We continue our

tour of absences. We don't know it yet, but we have now seen much of what is here to memorialize 250,000 souls.

The main street, while mostly empty on this cold April night, is prepared for tourists. We go to the most obvious restaurant, the one with the brave potted geraniums, the flowers that grow no matter what. Ace tries to order in Lithuanian, but the waitress, intent on showing us her international pedigree, insists on speaking English. We order something very potato-full and head home to bed.

Once back in our small hotel sanctuary, we are both completely incapable of even one more moment of deep and meaningful, so we turn on the television. Much to our delight, there is an old Samson movie subtitled in French. Everyone is running around half-naked, and the furniture is definitely made from Styrofoam. We spend the next two hours howling with laughter as we make up our own dialogue.

I do not dream.