

The Forward
Rooted In the Past
A Personal Quest
Jon Papernick | Fri. Jan 19, 2007

The great William Faulkner once wrote: “The past is not dead. In fact, it’s not even past.” My trip home to Toronto last summer with my wife and newborn son made me realize how true those words actually are. I saw my baby boy running the same gauntlet that had been my childhood, passed in scheduled timeslots from one grandparent to another with conflicting narratives whispered in his ears.

My family was split by divorce when I was 5 years old and through the years, either through bravado, ignorance or sheer pain, I swore up and down that I had not been affected by the explosion that rocked my nuclear family. Life went on; I had friends and girlfriends, graduated college, saw the world, attended graduate school, got married, published a book and had a child. Not only did I survive, I thrived.

Returning to one’s birthplace with a newborn child in tow is like coming home after a long exile in which nothing has changed. In an instant, the new father becomes a child again, decades peeling away like the skin of an onion down to the raw nerve, reliving that excruciating, timeless waltz of parent and offspring, in which all wisdom on both sides is constantly questioned.

Now the baby holds within him all the hopes once channeled into me, a second chance to redeem parental mistakes that were inevitable the first time around, but inexcusable the second. So why is it that I feel like I am watching a rerun of a tired old show I have already seen? The enmity is so thick, it is as if my parents had been divorced yesterday.

My wife and I thought coming home would be a vacation of sorts, but we have found little peace among family, eager to stake their claim on the next generation.

But, for an afternoon we did find a measure of peace among the whispering grass and quiet tombstones of the Goel Tzedec Cemetery, tucked away behind a high wall reminiscent of European Jewish cemeteries of a past era. The surrounding neighborhood today is almost entirely non-Jewish, just south of the heart of Greektown, tucked away on a street of working-class row houses where strings of Christmas lights buzz months after the snow has melted away.

The gate is locked, but I’ve been told that I can find the key on a nail inside the screen door of a house just up the street. I tiptoe up the steps like a burglar, pull open the creaking door and find the key attached to a plastic Day-Glo orange expandable bracelet.

The Master lock snaps with ease, and the cemetery’s heavy, rusted door opens to reveal golden sun shining through drooping ivy, humming yellow jackets, stately gravestones, an ancient berry tree and, in the distance, the shining glass and steel towers of downtown Toronto.

I've been told that my maternal great-great grandfather, Barnett Polakoff, is buried here. My only obvious connection to him is a pocket watch and an engraved brass-handled cane that sits in my office at home. I know that he was a shopkeeper, but I know little else. He is so many generations distant from me that he might as well be a character from a novel I have never read. My father seems to agree, and chastises me for visiting "fake relatives" when I could be visiting his family at a cemetery across town. But he's missing the point. I am not trying to introduce my son into a family that does not include my father; this is not about exclusion, but expansion, drawing down the concentric circles of this world to an earlier version of it.

The people buried here are the lucky ones, leaving Russia in time to escape pogroms, living out their lives as merchants, scholars and parents in the relative peace of Canada, missing out on that other great European massacre. As I search among the graves for my distant blood relative, I find several stones marked with the name Papernick — six in all, none of whom, as far as I know, are related to me. I don't think one can ever get used to seeing one's own name on a gravestone, but there is a strange comfort knowing that others will know that you existed long after you are gone. It strikes me as odd that I should be expected to pay respects to others named Papernick but not to these people, who share my name. We are all cut from the same rock and end up just the same, beneath one.

I am called back a second and third time to a small weatherworn stone marked in black paint on one side with my last name. The Hebrew has been rubbed out by time, but the English engraved letters remain. Every stone has its own story, and this one speaks to me: a young private, Hymie Papernick, killed in France in 1918, just three months before the Armistice. He is 10 years younger than I am now, and I think of all the frivolities I engaged in at that age: the drinking, carousing, how I was just starting out on the road to becoming the person I am. I am certain that he never had a child, and suddenly I want to hold my son and never let go.

I think of my father and of the war between Israel and Hezbollah, and how he says he mourns the death of every Israeli soldier as if he is mourning a member of his own family, even though he has never set foot on Israeli soil. And I realize now that he could never believe his own criticism about fake relatives. In fact, I'm comforted by the thought that he feels we are all relatives, all connected and part of the same history and destiny.

My wife finds Barnett Polakoff's grave and calls me over; his wife, Anna, is buried several plots away. I feel worn out by the heat of the day, and we stand by the grave in silence. I don't know what to think about this man I have never met. In fact, I have only met his grandson, my own grandfather, a handful of times. This visit feels suddenly anticlimactic, as if I had expected to learn something from this meeting. I place the obligatory stone upon the grave to mark our visit. I pick up another stone and place it in my 3-month-old son's tiny hand. And for the first time since we unstrapped him from his car seat he begins to cry, to wail as he drops the stone atop his great-great-grandfather's grave, as if he has known all along how to be a mourner.