



Family Secrets

Did your Jewish family once have a retarded relative hidden away? An old photograph holds new revelations about the author's long-dead sister.

by Mona Kornberg

I was 48 years old when I first saw my sister. I was browsing through a family album looking at a picture I had seen many times before. But this time something was different. The picture was the only one I had of my sister, who died when she was three years old, years before I was born. It was also one of the few I had of my father, who died when I was one year old. There was a horse-drawn carriage; my sister and I sat in the front seat beside the driver; my father and mother sat in the back seat with another woman I did not recognize.

To this day I do not know what made me look at the picture differently. Perhaps I was simply ready to see what was there. There seemed to me to be something odd about my sister's face. It took a while for the thoughts to penetrate. I kept staring at the face of the three-year-old child in the photo until I realized that the features reminded me of a child with Down syndrome. At first I told myself I must be mistaken, for the thought was so incredible. But the more I looked at the picture, the more possible it seemed.

My mother had died 12 years earlier and the only person I could think of asking was her sister, my Aunt Ann. I traveled to Brooklyn, NY, where my aunt lived and asked her if my sister had been "retarded." "Shhh," she said, "it's a 'shanda' [shame], we don't talk about it." I knew then my suspicion was correct. I was filled with questions my aunt did not want to answer. My mother had told me my sister died of pneumonia; never did she mention anything about Down syndrome. But my mother never spoke about anything to do with the family. She never told me about my father and when I asked, she answered with the fewest words possible. I got the message. As a young child I learned not to ask. But now I wanted to learn the truth.

"Why didn't Mom tell me?" I asked Aunt Ann. "We didn't talk about it; it was difficult for her at the time," she said. "What happened to my sister?" Through persistent questioning, I found out my mother had cared for my sister until she was three years old and then, against her wishes but at my father's insistence, she had placed her in an institution "somewhere in New York State." My aunt could not remember where the institution was or what it was called. My sister had died there.

I returned home to Toronto more determined than ever to find out what had happened to my sister. But where was I to start? I called a friend who knew something about newspaper reporting. She suggested I try to find the death certificate. I called around and found the

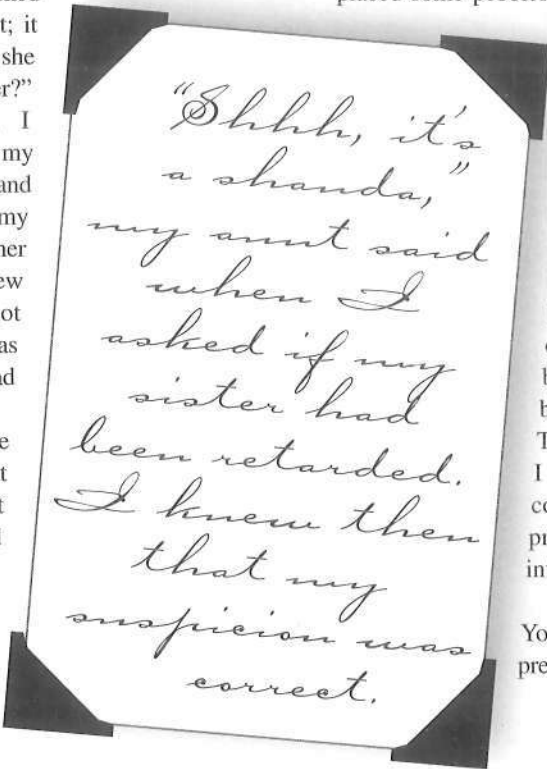
phone number for New York State records in Albany. Not knowing her birth date, I requested a search over a three-year period. I filled out the forms with the little information I had, mailed in the fee, and waited for information. Several weeks later the death certificate arrived in the mail. Reading it made everything very real. The cause of death was listed as pneumonia, as my mother had said, but she had died in a hospital in a town I had never heard of. My husband and I took out a map of New York state and tried to locate the town. His research at the library provided a list of institutions in New York State. I found the institution where my sister had been placed. I called the director and asked if there were records of my sister's stay there. From the institution's registry, the director confirmed my sister had lived there for a very short time. Several months after she was placed, she contracted pneumonia and was transferred to the hospital where she died. The director was sympathetic. In the days before penicillin, the life span for children like my sister was short. Unfortunately, the records of this period had been destroyed and there was no way of learning what her stay in the institution had been like.

I needed to know more and was able to track down the cemetery in Queens, NY, where my sister was buried. It was the same one where my father was buried. My daughter and I made the journey to New York. My father was buried in a section of the cemetery reserved for *landsmen* from the *shtetl* in Eastern Europe where he was born. It took us a while to find my sister's grave, which was almost hidden in a separate children's section in front. I had grown up in New York and never knew my sister was buried here. My mother never took me to visit her grave. I stared at the simple gravestone, "Sandra Silver, born 1934, died 1937." My daughter and I placed some pebbles on the gravestone and recited the

Jewish prayer for the dead.

Over the following few weeks, I experienced a mixture of emotions: anger at my mother for not telling me; sadness for her and what she must have gone through. I tried to imagine what it would be like to place my three-year-old child in an institution and have her die two months later. I could not imagine ever doing that, but then I did not know what it had been like for my mother and father. There was so much I did not know! I did not know how my mother could have let me go through three pregnancies without sharing this information.

Soon after I returned from New York, my daughter announced she was pregnant. I did some research and dis-



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Aiding Our Relatives in the Mental Hospital

by Susan Schnur

Through the '30s, '40s and '50s, before the push to mainstream mentally ill children and adults into their communities, my father, Bernard Schnur, a physician, was employed part-time by a state residential psychiatric hospital. I can remember as a child traveling way out into the country with him where he would disappear into some grim, massive, scary-looking buildings for an hour or two while I would stay outside, happily collecting pine cones.

On the drive home, my father, uncharacteristically subdued, would invariably tell me about all the Jewish residents in the facility, how this one or that one from our home town had a daughter or a brother who'd been institutionalized there for 25 years or more.

My father was moved and troubled, I think, by three things. First, what seemed to him to be a high incidence of severe mental illness in the Jewish community. (I can remember him looking across the pews at *shul* during the High Holidays and remarking that, for every 4 or 5 rows—every 30 families or so—there was a profoundly retard-

ed or mentally ill, institutionalized family member.)

Second, that the existence of these kin was a closely guarded secret. Though my father might regularly see family members visiting at the psychiatric hospital, outside—in *der richtige welt* (in the real world)—there was no mention of these relatives. Their existence was universally understood to be a secret.

Third, as my father reminded me even this morning when I called him to confirm my memories, "The Jews, by and large, seemed to take very good care of their institutionalized kin. They visited often—long, involved visits—and they were kindly, empathic, and very attached. Up and down the hallways of the mental hospital, I would see Jewish family members. Their presence was felt. The non-Jews, on the other hand, made a different impression on me overall. They were more casual about retardation and mental illness; they weren't as secretive. I remember their dutiful visits before Easter, but mostly, they didn't seem to pay much attention to these family members. The Jewish families seemed to have both more intense visits and a need to keep them secret."

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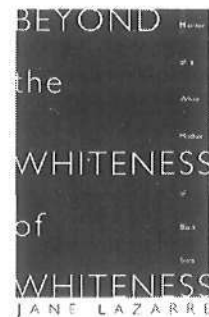
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covered that there are different causes for Down syndrome; one is genetic and the other is not. I went for a blood test and anxiously awaited the results. Mine was not the genetic variety. Reassured, I shared this information with my daughter. I did not want there to be secrets between us.

I used to think my family was unique. My mother and her family emigrated to New York from Russia when she was five years old. My mother's father died before I was born and her mother, my bubba, died when I was nine. My mother never talked about her family or her childhood.

resurgence of interest in genealogy. Our generation is trying to discover its history, to trace our families. What was it like in the *shtetls* our parents left? What happened to the rest of our family members?

Somewhere in the United States I have first cousins I have never met. Two years ago I managed to find one of them, a daughter of my father's brother. She knew my father and my family but had left home by the time I was born. She never knew I existed. We now visit each other and have become friends as well as cousins. She shares



Whenever I asked, I received terse answers. I used to speculate that she had an unhappy childhood, too painful to talk about. But her sister, my Aunt Ann, would sometimes share a fond recollection of her family that provided a glimpse of a loving father. What would explain this “blinking out” of a family history? I never knew what my father or grandparents were like. I never found out what happened to the grandparents I never met. I never found out what happened to my mother's two brothers who did not emigrate to America with the rest of the family. Whatever it was, even my Aunt Ann would not talk about it.

Over the years, in discussions with Jewish friends whose families also emigrated from Eastern Europe, I have discovered that my family was not unique. These friends encountered walls of silence when they asked about family history. Perhaps that is why there is such a

with me her memories of the relatives I never knew, of some of the family secrets *she* has uncovered.

Most of my parent's generation and many of their offspring have died. There are secrets I will never learn about. I talk to my own children about my childhood and about the relatives I knew and those I did not know. I answer their questions and talk about subjects that are sometimes difficult. I try very hard not to keep any secrets from them. ■

Dr. Mona Kornberg is a consultant in training and organization development. She is married, has three children and two grandchildren and lives and works in Toronto.