

## Eitz Chayim

Miriam Robinson Gould

My mother grows the family tree. She hunts its lost branches, sending off for seeds buried in the archives of Hungary (now Slovakia), Lithuania, Latvia, Russia (now Poland), and the Ukraine. The fruit of her labors returns in languages we no longer speak and she presses them flat beneath glossy, plastic sleeves: a manifest, a wedding license, a birth record. These hints of history form a trail; she follows it to Australia and New Zealand (discovering distant kin living in San Francisco, close to her Alameda home). She grafts these new discoveries onto the tree, triumphant. Then she is off again, questing.

The story of my family has always begun in America. I was born here, as were my parents and their parents and even one of my great-grandparents (although when she married my great-grandfather, she—who had never left Chicago—briefly became a subject of the Queen of England until she was able to apply for the return of her lost citizenship). Our roots intertwined deeply through the soil of Chicago, binding us together although we spread like wildflowers across the suburbs. My uncle's all-conference tennis picture decorated the wall of my high school in years before my own cross-country and track pictures appeared. My aunt's name was proudly immortalized in the listing of top ten students kept for each year of my high school's existence.

No one single member of my family bore the burden of memory. We gathered at the high holidays and ate tradition. We sweetened kugel and seasoned chicken soup with exchanges of stories—my mother disowning her sister in revenge for my aunt turning her dresser drawers upside down; my grandmother and her sister throwing money at each other to avoid accepting help paying for dinner. On the other side, we heard tales of my rapsallion great-uncle driving a beer wagon for the mob during Prohibition and my father and his brother rivaling each other at sports. We spun the dreidel and my great-grandmother told us about how she looked so young when she had her first baby that neighbors would cluck, “Ah, the babies are having babies.”

Flickering family films, black-and-white albums that suddenly switch to color, high school yearbooks—our years in Chicago were well-documented. We saw both sets of grandparents court each other during the war and watched our parents' childhoods. My feminist mother could not hide her cheerleader past (“They didn't have many options for athletics when I was in high school,” she protested).

In Judaism, we talk about *eitz chayim*, the tree of life. Trees are valued, linked to memory and perseverance. We clinked pennies into the tzedakah box on Shabbat and, when it was full, sent it off to JNF to be transformed into trees in Israel. But while we sang “Next year in Jerusalem” at Seder, we never really dreamt about leaving Skokie where we could drive down Dempster St. and count the kosher restaurants, turn onto Oakton to arrive at the kosher supermarket or continue until we reached the kosher bakery and butcher store. Schools closed

on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The soil here was fertile for transplanting. We felt no sense of loss.

Still, there were clues of the missing. Our speech was accented with foreign words: *schlep*, *bubbe*, *tchotchke*, *mishugganeh*. Our bedtime stories centered around Chelm or wise rebbes, a very different once upon a time.

World War II did not exactly truncate my family's roots. We had left the Old Country years before and faced its dangers as Americans. If the war had not happened, my family's story would still begin in America. There had always been reasons to flee, always new lands that promised a calm before the storm. Our American traditions were inside jokes—evil broccoli, forgotten tuna fish. They were traditions born out of fearlessness ... traditions of peace, of celebration. Nevertheless, they echoed the absent, the ending where the roots had once been deeper.

Homeland is a dreaming desire, nourished by an imagining so rich as to be memory. Our stories of home chanted of centuries ago. Once upon a time a desert longing begat an ancient kingdom. Tragedy descended and begat the longing of exiles for return. Home was buried deep beneath time.

In Europe, there is nowhere to remember. That homeland was scorched from the earth: No one imagines a shtetl. Memory stretched deep into the ground; dreaming planted new seeds on the surface and watered them with hope. Only empty space lay in between.

Beginnings and endings are intimate bedfellows; in the fever of their coupling it is difficult to separate their skin.

My mother says she was always interested in genealogy, but that is not what I remember. In my memory, there were flickers of attention to the past amidst the vast field of the now. Only when we uprooted ourselves again and replanted in California, did she begin to look backwards. The soil was not as rich as her dreaming memory of Chicago and down the rabbit hole she fell.




---

Miriam Robinson Gould, M.A.  
 Program in Folklore, Public Culture and Cultural Studies  
 Department of Anthropology  
 University of Texas at Austin  
 scheherezade@mail.utexas.edu