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BURNT TOAST

A Memoir of My Immigrant Grandmother

Nancy Gerber

Apprentice House

BOOK REVIEW

In this memoir, a woman attempts to piece together the puzzle of her mysterious grandmother.

Gerber's maternal grandmother died of heart failure at the age of 92—but despite a long life, she remained an enigma even to those who were closest to her. The author knew her grandmother was born somewhere in Ukraine in 1895—possibly Ekaterinoslav in the Pale of Settlement—but Gerber never established this conclusively. At the age of 8, she survived a vicious pogrom directed against Jews—the author's grandmother was Jewish—and when only 15, she was compelled to flee her homeland and family, never to return. She made her way by ship to Philadelphia and was apparently rechristened Bessie Katz, but even this fundamental fact eludes confirmation. Bessie married Philip Siman, a tailor, and they lived “in a strange new land where their foreignness and their Jewishness and their poverty made them objects of suspicion and disdain.” Gerber loved her grandmother deeply and sought from her the affection and attention she couldn't pry from her own mother. Nevertheless, Bessie never discussed with her or anyone else the details of her life before she came to the United States, and since she was illiterate, she couldn't record them. An impenetrable silence enveloped her like a dense fog, though her own trauma lived on in her three children, including Gerber's mother, who suffered from a deep depression. The author's account is necessarily impressionistic—with journalistic tenacity and emotional poignancy, she gathered what little evidence there was of Bessie's mysterious life. But Gerber paints a vivid tableau of what life was like in the U.S. for Jewish refugees who faced ferocious antisemitism and were often condemned to lonely, alienated lives of quiet shame. The author's brief portrait—well under 100 pages—is an affecting homage to the woman she so profoundly loved though hardly knew.

A heartbreaking remembrance written in powerful, poetic language.

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