

THE LETTER by Raphael Shevelev

On the Saturday before Rosh Hashanah in 1946, before my eighth birthday, I accompanied my parents to visit my only remaining grandparent, Blume–Devorah Westermann–Shevelew. The others had all died in Latvia and Lithuania before I was born.

We lived in a flat on the lower slope of Table Mountain, with a view of the city and harbor. My paternal grandmother—*Bubbe*—lived in the vibrant suburb of Sea Point, two or three blocks from the oceanfront, from which one can see Robben Island. It took two bus rides to get to her home, the first down the hill into the center of Cape Town, the second westward to the Sea Point Main Road, a busy commercial avenue. The bus stopped at the corner of St. John’s Road, and we’d alight to walk a block to a very modest four-flat building. We didn’t yet have our first car.

Grandmother lived on the left, downstairs, in a tiny two-bedroom unit. She had to put coins in the meter to generate the gas for cooking. I liked standing on a chair to help her with that.

The smaller of the two bedrooms was occupied by uncle David, my father’s youngest sibling. The two men hadn’t talked to each other for years and wouldn’t ever again. During our visits, Uncle David would sequester himself in his room, and I’d knock to gain entry. I liked him, and in retrospect, given the unexpected direction of my own life, perhaps it was because he sketched so well. He was then the only member of the family with an interest in art and classical music. Years later, when I was a student at the University of Cape Town, I asked each of the brothers what their feud was about. Neither could quite remember, but that wasn’t the point.

Anyway, on that Saturday, grandmother gave me her usual treat: a sixpence so I could walk back to the corner of Main Road, and buy a packet of potato chips in which a small twist of paper held the salt. When I returned, the adults (*sans* Uncle David) were conversing in Yiddish. I joined in.

It must have been late in the morning, close to noon, when we heard the postman arrive. Grandmother rose to retrieve the mail, and when she came back, her faced reflected foreboding. In her hand, among other items, was an envelope marked with the emblem of the Red Cross. She sat slowly, and clearly without willing, opened it. Inside was another envelope, addressed to her. She recognized the script.

During the Second World War, the Red Cross made prodigious efforts to ensure deliveries of foodstuffs and mail to prisoners of war and, when possible, prisoners of the German concentration camps. Occasionally, perhaps once a year, those confined would be permitted to write a very brief censored letter to relatives on “the other side”. By the end of the war, a huge quantity of mail had been accumulated, and now, in the second year of the peace, it was being distributed. The letter was from her first child, my oldest uncle, Moses. It had been written several years earlier, before he was murdered in Majdanek.



Guard Tower Stairs–Majdanek (photograph by Raphael Shevelev)

Moses Shevelev was born, I believe, in 1908. As a young man, he had left the family home in Libau (Lepaja), Latvia, and found his way to Paris, where he attended the Faculty of Law at the University of Paris (Sorbonne), and practiced as an attorney until the German conquest of France. The French authorities, pre-empting their German overlords, rushed to detain and deport Jews. Uncle Moses was put onto a train.

The destination was Majdanek, on the edge of the eastern Polish city of Lublin. Unlike other camps, Majdanek was not screened from public view. It was right there, the fence also demarcating the border of Polish farmers' smallholdings, as it still does. Shots and screams from the camp must surely have penetrated the air, as must have the stench from the crematorium.



The Desolation of Majdanek (photograph by Raphael Shevelev)

Grandmother, my parents and I sat in silence. She had certainly known — or guessed — that her son was dead. We sat there for a long time. The adults said nothing, and I knew enough not to ask.

Just before the war broke out in September 1939, my father and his brother Max, who was also settled in Cape Town, had made a determined effort to extract Moses from France. Thanks to their considerable diligence, and certainly

bribes to officials, the offer of a visa to Madagascar came through. The telegraphed response from Uncle Moses lives with me still: “I don’t want to be stranded on a remote island.”

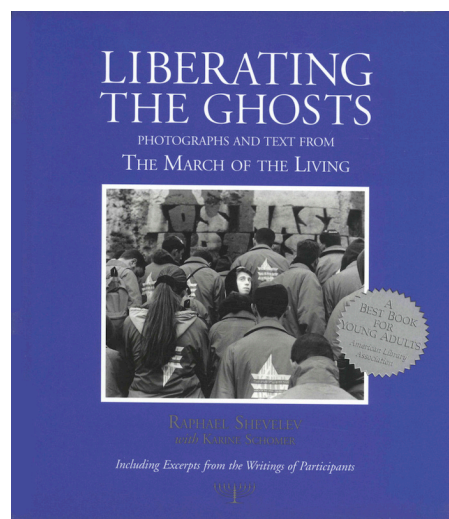
Among the small items that have accompanied me to homes on the other side of the world is a photograph made in the early 1920s. It shows four of my grandmother’s five children. David was either an infant or not yet born. Those depicted are, in ascending left-to-right order of age: Helena, who, as a very young woman emigrated to Palestine, Max with his left hand on a toy wooden horse, my father Jacob (Jack) standing next to him, and Moses seated to the right.



Shevelew Siblings – Latvia, 1920s (photographer unknown)

In 1994 that photograph accompanied me to another place: Majdanek. I found a niche in the wall across from the ovens, and photographed the photograph there.

Karine and I were doing the research for what would later become my book, [Liberating the Ghosts: Photographs and Text from the March of the Living](#) (LensWork, 1996). The book is dedicated to two men: my uncle, and a French Huguenot by the name of Daniel Trocmé. Both were murdered in Majdanek.



Liberating the Ghosts, by Raphael Shevelev (LensWork Publishing, 1996)

On Easter Monday, 1994, we took a short bus ride to the camp, and found ourselves alone in that vast, cold, depressing place. Taking shelter in one of the huts, we lit two votive candles on the concrete floor.

One was for Uncle Moses. The other was in memory of Daniel Trocmé, from the French village of [Le Chambon-sur-Lignon](#), where Karine had lived as a child. Daniel ran a children's home in which he'd hidden Jewish refugees and supplied them with false papers. When German soldiers raided the home and took the Jewish kids, Daniel insisted on accompanying "his" children.

Perhaps the two men had met and gotten to know each other.

We later discovered that, by an astonishing coincidence, we'd been in the camp precisely on the fiftieth anniversary of Daniel's death.

The letter is long gone, though I wish I'd been able to preserve it. It may have been written in Yiddish, though Moses and his siblings were also all schooled in Hebrew, German, Latvian, and, of course, he was Francophone as well. Perhaps the letter had been written in German, to pass the censors.

I don't know whether Moses ever married and fathered children. Many years ago, I would fantasize about finding long lost French cousins. But the story, though it continues to haunt me, ends with the letter.

It was the beginning of my consciousness.

A word about the author:

Raphael Shevelev (1938–2021) was born in Cape Town, the son of Jack and Doris Shevelew. He attended SACS, UCT and Wits, then taught Political Science and Public Administration for three years at the University of South Africa in Pretoria (now UNISA) before emigrating to the United States in 1964 and settling in California. In 1989, after careers in academia and business, he decided to devote himself full-time to photography and writing. His art and some of his essays can be seen on his website www.raphaelshevelev.com. Though he only returned twice to South Africa, his formative experiences there nourished his imagination and ideals throughout his life. "The Letter" was originally posted on his blog, [Raphael Shevelev's Voice](#). Along with several dozen other such essays Raphael wrote over the years, it will appear in a posthumous book under preparation and elsewhere. (Karine Schomer, wife of Raphael Shevelev, El Cerrito CA, USA)

Date written: September 2014

Date Posted on the CHOL Share Your Story Site: February 2024