

University of Western Australia

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Brina Israel's Body

memento mori

I don't want to forget Theodore Krakouer and Brina Israel, my grandmother's grandparents, but it appears that everybody else in the world already has. There is little to be passed down to me. All has been lost, or was hidden, many years ago. And I have no access to an Old World: I am Australian, four generations Australian on this side, and even more established on my father's side.

I am well aware of the dangers of my desire. I want to adapt an ancient form for my own purposes, to appropriate secrets. I want to write a memorial book in the form that Jewish people have prepared for centuries, and make an epic for the first time about my family. To constitute memories, some of them straight out of the air, and make a picture of my own. The distance between us, the different worlds we have occupied: this will colour my dedication. Trying to avoid the pitfalls: the danger of turning people into heroic figures, an unnecessary flattery.

Descended from a convict and a free settler to the Swan River Colony, two Jews. The evidence is scarce, aside from scrappy records of a few births: no marriages, not many deaths. And I'm not a Jew like them, other than in the flimsiest of yearnings, wanting some communion with a past perfect family. Imagining a line made along the maternal, beginning with the pure union of Brina and Theodore. To resuscitate a family line, a connection, that was never there. The sheer lack of evidence might beat it out of me, eventually.

The contemporary memorial book, the *yizker bikher* (tombstones of paper), often concludes with a list of the names of the dead, a reminder about forgetting. I'm compiling names and trying to make a list. I want to write my memorial book about just one family, my family. Is that allowed?

storing memories

It wasn't a catastrophe. The two girls, sisters, held onto their memories of family at home, and they replicated the best parts in a new and disordered place.

Because records are kept in this way, I have only the name of the father of Abraham and Brina and Hannah and Esther Israel, in that order, without their mother's name.

Samson Israel. Furniture Broker.

Residence: 7 Constitution Row, Gray's Inn Road.

Or elsewhere named as Gray's Inn Lane. I have found it on the map of London, seen it noted as a current address of the Open University.

In these records, I am given, in its flourishing script, the Hebrew names of all of these children. Born between 1831 and 1836. Mother nowhere named.

What sort of a man was this one that Brina met and had babies with. She was twenty, he was thirty something, already married, the father of one. A convict to the Swan River Colony in 1851. Both wife and son safely back in the Mother Country. (He was from the Fatherland: born in Poland, educated in Germany.) He had books delivered to him while he was imprisoned at Portland Prison. He was a reader, and a record was kept of his borrowings. These books: *Saturday Magazine*, *Cottage Visitor*, *Caves of the Earth*, *The Snow Storm*, *History of the Plague*. Did this mean he had an imagination, an interest in the natural world, the damage that men could do to each other, the ferocity of disease.

Brina and her sister Esther both married Jews in Fremantle; convicts, enterprising men who made money, who set up crazy schemes. Elias Lapidus, Esther's first husband, traded and shipped horses to Singapore for the British Army. Lapidus got caught up in a shonky deal in Singapore and never returned. This is a revelation: the idea of horses on boats amuses me. I have ridden horses in the sea, watched them on the back of vehicles. Their bodies are beautiful, but not always practical. The idea of Lapidus returning to the high seas after his recent convict journey is intriguing. And Theodore Krakouer was a willing and hard working man, a teamster, a dealer. There are wild sightings of him disguised as a six foot eight inch Russian on the Goldfields, a heroic figure out of place after his convict papers told a different story, and he appeared to work his team of horses hard on the Williams Road. Until he went mad.

I think about how these people might have been attracted to each other. Is it in the same way that I am when the right person comes along: that sharing of interests, an electrical current of lust and intrigue? Or, bluntly, making up the requirements of living in a society, satisfying urges of comfort and bodily needs, and biology perhaps. Was coupling necessary, a survival strategy, and not just the bonus it is for me?

brina

What Brina looked like. Does it matter? I have to imagine all of it. As a free settler, there is no recording of her physical features as there is with Theodore. And no photographs, of course. What I have, more resonant anyway, is a set of correspondence from 1874 on microfilm, letters back and forward between a woman who signs herself Mrs Brina Krakouer and the Colonial Secretary. About who was to pay for the keep of her lunatic husband in the asylum. They wanted her to pay. These writings, in her loopy hand, tell me many of the things I want to know. My embellishments can come out of her modest little letters, heartfelt, pleading, compelling.

Having seen one photograph of her youngest child, my great-grandfather David as an adult, I want to construct her physical shape, her distinguishing features. I am interested after all in bodies, in such definitions. Women's bodies give me pleasure. By the age of thirty six, around my age as I write, she had nine living children, her first born when she was twenty. Her defacto husband was dead and she was a widow at the age of forty four; she wrote these letters when she was forty one. In moments of high imaginative flourish, I want to be like her as I get older; I want to be emotional and tough, and stick to my guns. Brina was resilient, and I think she must have won this fight she had with the authorities. Won it at least by maintaining her stance, her honour.

So, how she might have looked. This is the picture in my head. She is little, a tiny woman even before she began to shrink. Dark hair, penetrating eyes, a larger than usual nose, a quick wit, sharp temper. A discomfort with the climate: it gave her prickly heat in her armpits and inner thighs, made her prodigious child bearing saga a pain in her skin and right through her body. Giving her a roughened face: ruddy, a hard complexion. She went grey early, craved some space for herself, wore her hair long. Dreamed of her father and mother, wondered about how it was that she and Esther had decided to take this adventure as young women.

Bird features, dainty, dark and delicate. The two girls on the boat, a supreme sacrifice by Brina, at nineteen, to leave home in London and to travel with her younger sister to Australia. They did it because Esther was pregnant and only sixteen years old, and the girls decided to get away and start in a new place. Did their parents know about this, did the family withdraw their support? In every generation since has been this transgression in my family: the beginning of a baby out of wedlock. How do these patterns occur? Are we meant to follow such difficult routes? By the way that such evidence has been hidden, you could imagine it was unique, a rare and shameful slippage that didn't, doesn't, happen in other families.

In all of these years in Perth and Fremantle it is likely that she didn't have the chance to read or own a single book. She was literate, and so was Theodore. For Jews, books and learning are precious, central in a life and a family. The idea of this progression, towards knowledge, to change and learn: it is enabling. It was precious to my grandfather, who was not a Jew, and to me, but for the rest of the generations between Brina and me, it has not been important.

I have figured Brina in my head as a stereotype. I explain this to myself as the best way to manage such a task. Probably the only way.

Similar features, inherited looks. I think I can see some of the physical features of Brina and Theodore in the four generations of women I have known in my family, despite the scarce evidence of their appearance. Jessie Krakouer, her daughters Fay, May, Nancy, Ena, Peggy, and their daughters, including my mother Andrea, and Andrea's two daughters. The men are more of a problem: swarthy, but without the same precision in their features. The collection of disparate outlines of Theodore I have found in the official record is fascinating: he appears so differently every time he was officially observed.

comfort

Where did these girls, Brina and Esther, sleep when they first arrived in the colony? I know from my readings of history that there was a shortage of accommodation and a crisis of oversupply of domestics after a critical time of not enough people or interest in this place to even sustain it. This was a colony badly organised. They got it wrong, often, and the community teetered on the edge of collapse for decades.

Had they arrived as domestics, as prostitutes, as wives, to service the colony, like many of the other women on the bride ship, the *Travancore*? Was there a round-up point, a home for strays and waifs, a bed for those first few nights or weeks. Or did they live on the streets. I'm not forgetting the evidence that suggested Esther was either pregnant or had recently given birth.

How I imagine myself lowering my head onto pillows in houses that are not my own. An obsession with other people's homes, staying in them, and imagining what life is like for them in that private space, what happens there. I usually get it wrong. The legacy of having lived alone for too many years.

An image I carry with me, a potent one, of a silhouette in the hallway of a darkened house in the middle of the day, a winterish day, a good day to spend in front of the television with a blanket and pillows on the couch, or in bed with a lover. But on this Sunday I am walking the streets, exercising, and this is what I see. A woman in the house, a ghostly apparition. The gap of window, bare, across the front door of the terraced house. I am innocent, outside, uninvolved,

have never seen her before. I glimpse her naked body in action, through that window, in that front bedroom. I cannot tell if she is moving in ecstasy or pain, whether it is fear that she is moving to or from. I also recognise elements of the gestures she uses - I have seen myself do them. In a mirror, or just in my mind's eye? I wonder, and feel confused.

I am circling around fantasy and what I know, both from the present and the past. Open to persuasion, to changing my mind, to seeing the world as quite entirely new.

That fleeting image sends me swimming back to the first steps of those girls on January 13, 1853 when they disembarked at Fremantle after a journey over the high seas for nearly four months. Making a picture of all the scariest images of Wild West towns and outposts I have seen in films, hot and as dry as hell. And then the intimacy and comfort of an interior space, a home, a bedroom. Did they have a baby with them? Was a baby delivered on the high seas, or did the baby wait to enter the world in the Swan River Colony. There are no medical records, no surgeon's journals of that voyage.

families

Keeping secrets about pregnancy runs in my family: the sham of shame. Shame about breaking the rules. That babies are to be born into families, and marriage is what defines a family. What happens when this sacred understanding is broken? I can tell some horror stories from my family, mistakes and risks taken, the way the women were made to pay. Starting in 1853 with Esther, and because she was there, Brina was implicated. They changed their lives because of a pregnancy. All of Brina's children were illegitimate. Not really legitimated, even though she signed herself Mrs Brina Krakouer.

Ena, my grandmother, who gave birth in 1929 to a daughter she named Merle, lived with her for nine months and was then forced to give her up for adoption. Audrey, her adoptive parent's choice of name, found her mother only a couple of years after Ena died, after looking for her all of her life. Isn't that what they all say? That it is a quest of epic proportions, to find the missing piece, to find the first part of your identity, where you come from.

Ena's next two daughters were married shotgun style: she forced them to marry boyfriends who may not have been suited as life partners because both girls fell pregnant, fell into disrepute. I was the issue of one of those mistakes. It always reads as if these girls were the only ones in the 1950s who had sex before marriage, the way the family tells it. Each family.

What eclipses all of these losses is a story that continues to shock me to my core, one that comes at the end of the 1970s, when you might imagine more leeway for mistakes, more compassion and support. My cousin Julie, aged nineteen, close in age to Ena when she first gave birth to an illegitimate child, became pregnant in the small country town she lived in. She felt the shame of this keenly: I know this, not because she had the chance to tell me but because of her actions. She told no one, perhaps she even kept it from herself, went without medical supervision, a proper concern for nutrition, and continued to wear her tight black jeans. She killed herself, but it was a subtle suicide: the foetus died at an advanced stage and her body was poisoned with septicaemia. The doctor described it as gangrene, I expect because that was more identifiable, an easier concept for us to understand.

It was too late, and she died in the flurry of emergency. Not for her the ignominy of a botched abortion attempt, or the struggle of single motherhood. She held her secret within her body, enclosed it, as tight and fearfully as you can imagine. Died with her shameful evidence integrated in her life. That protection from hard truths: who was she afraid of? Following the line of transgressors in the family - her own mother, her aunts, her grandmother.

At the funeral, did Ena think about her own, similar experience in 1929? Did she think about her secret. Because it was still her own secret then, and she had held it close and told no-one, certainly none of her children. It was revealed much later. When Julie died, Ena's own illegitimate baby was turning fifty. I plunder my memory of that day, that terrible funeral, for evidence of how my grandmother behaved, for any slippages.

There is a gap in the family now: Julie's place. It is not discussed, but is more potent than each of the other losses, all of our gaps.

What does it mean to write personally? By telling the story of my family, am I short selling any of its individual members? Revealing any secrets. Who do they belong to?

Details about a family I've not known enough about ignite in my imagination. I want to find out all I can. Before I knew about my Polish genealogy, I travelled in Europe with my sister in the freezing winter of 1981, during the crisis of Solidarity, wearing a Solidarnosc badge bought in the Hay Street Mall in Perth on the lapel of my overcoat. Men stopped me in railway stations and on the streets and spoke with passion in Polish about imminence and support. In Vienna, we visited a Polish worker's cafe daily for lunch or coffee. Away from the bourgeois centre of that formal city we found a smoke-filled, homely place of mostly men, offering good cheap food and comfort. I felt like a fraud with my badge but I couldn't take it off. I had been swept away by the mood, by the romantic spirit of Walesa leading the people in their struggle. That spirit hasn't left me as I now make my retrospective linkage, a claim of blood. It has nothing to do with Jewishness, nothing. More about unearthing secrets. Call it yearning.

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