

The Naming of Me

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My late mother was born in Krakow, Poland in 1928. Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. Mom, her parents, and several aunts, uncles, and cousins hit the road on September 3, 1939 and were in New York by 1941. She died in early November 2020. She had just turned 92.

Mom would get indignant when anyone referred to her as a “Holocaust survivor,” especially as she aged, and it seemed that everyone wanted to record her memories “as a survivor.” She made her stance known immediately to anyone who broached the topic: “I was a refugee. I was swooning over Frankie at the Paramount Theater while my family was being murdered. I never would have survived the camps.” It was an earful, and she mentioned Frank Sinatra every single time.

In 1943, Bertha Lewkowicz--my maternal grandfather’s mother and one of my great grandmothers--killed herself in a Polish concentration camp. She had thrown a few cyanide capsules in her bag, along with whatever else one packs in one's going-to-the-Holocaust luggage.

I recall seeing only one photograph of Bertha. It was a photo of her with her son and my great uncle, Frederick, who didn’t refugee with his brother, my grandfather. Frederick died in Tannersville in 1955 before I was born. Great grandmother Bertha looked stern and perhaps angry. She had good reason to not say cheese for the photographer. The photo was taken in 1942, in Krakow’s newly established Jewish ghetto. How odd it seems to me that people were taking pictures and having them developed. A photo lab is not part of my mental picture of the final days of Poland's Jewish population.

Bertha, Frederick, and Frederick's wife were sent to Krakow-Plaszow concentration camp. Plaszow had no gas chambers or ovens; it was a slave labor camp, but Jews were murdered daily by shooting. Krakow-Plaszow was subsequently made famous by *Schindler's List*. According to Fred's wife, who shared a cot with her mother-in-law, Bertha, at the camp, Bertha said she had a headache and took a couple of aspirin. But the tablets were cyanide, not aspirin. Frederick was ordered to dig his mother's grave, put her in it, and fill in her grave. Aspirin is like a photo lab. It's far too ordinary for the enormity of the Holocaust.

Frederick survived the Holocaust and told the family about Bertha's fate, along with the fates of Regina and Felicia, two of my grandfather's and Frederick's four sisters. Concentration camp typhus got Felicia, and Regina was shot, and her body was thrown into the Gulf of Gdansk. My mother believed Frederick hated them for having been on New York City's upper west side and then in Scarsdale, New York, while he was living in hell.

My mother told me that when I was born, my grandfather was relentless in his demand that I be named for Bertha. Instead, my name is a compromise: I am Barbara Ann, named in memory of Bertha via the first letter of my name. Ann was chosen for the middle, because, like the Beach Boys, my mother liked how it sounded with Barbara.

The first time I recall hearing this account of my immediate post-birth life, I was disturbed on two counts: firstly, that I was named for a suicide. Suicide was one of those "spit over your shoulder three times" topics and that my mother had gotten past that amazes me. Secondly, what if my mild-mannered father had not told his father-in-law to knock it off or be banned from my mother's hospital room? What if my father had folded like a card table before his father-in-law's demand? Bertha would have happened, that's what.

My grandfather often told me that I have a beautiful name. He would ask me if I was

honored to be named after his mother. I would nod. He would tell me that his mother's name, Bertha, was even prettier than the name Barbara. I would nod again. Then he would ask me if I wished my name were Bertha. I would nod again. That was a lie. I wanted to be named Melissa or Laurie and have long, straight hair parted in the middle rather than the uncontrollable mess of frizz and curls I was blessed with, and I wanted to wear navy cable pattern knee socks with penny loafers every school day,

Brown shoes like these, usually in
wanted to hear, because it was



not white ankle socks and babyish Buster
oxblood. I'd tell Grandpa whatever he
definitely too late for anyone--even my

determined and single-minded grandfather--to change my name.

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