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An Act of Devotion

DEBORAH TANNEN

CHARACTERS

FATHER, a man of 85

DAUGHTER, a woman in her late forties

TIME: Summer 1993

DAUGHTER

As soon as we'd checked into our hotel in Warsaw, we all got into a taxi. My husband David, my mother and I squeezed into the back. My father sat in the front and told the driver in Polish to take us to the address where my father had lived as a child. The street was still there, with its sign, Twarda [*pronounced "tvARda"*], but in place of the apartment house he had lived in was a grim gray building with a cement wall covered with obscene spray-painted graffiti—a big mouse with a huge phallus that he was gleefully inserting into the rear end of a smaller mouse. I couldn't believe I was standing on the street I had heard my father talk about all my life.

FATHER

We stood under the sign, Twarda Ulica [*pronounced "tvARda ooLEetsa"*]. How dull and quiet it was, how faceless and bland the buildings that had been put up since the war. When I was a child, the neighborhood was always in commotion and crowded with life. Both sides of the street were lined with stores, and the sidewalks were teeming with people—Hasidim with their long beards, black boots, and the ritual fringes of their prayer shawls peeking out from under their vests. Working men, women shopping, men going to and from the synagogue. There were "tragers"—carriers—men hired by people too poor to hire a wagon, carrying amazing loads on their backs—a desk, a bed. Epileptics would fall down and have convulsions in the street. No one stopped to watch, because it was common. And beggars, everywhere beggars in torn

clothes. Some wore garments sewn from sacks, some had rags on their feet instead of shoes. Many of the beggars were cripples. When I came to America, I always wondered: where were the cripples?

DAUGHTER

On the second day, we went to the National History museum, where we'd heard there was a film about the destruction of Warsaw during World War II. The narrator told how the inhabitants of the city were deported to another part of the country as the Germans systematically demolished their city. When the war ended, the city's inhabitants returned. There was inspiring documentary footage of the Poles handing stones from man to man as they rebuilt Warsaw—but nothing about the killing of 30% of the population of the city—the entire Jewish population. There were a few fleeting shots of Jews being deported, as the narrators voice said, "The Jews were the first to go." He neglected to mention that they didn't come back.

FATHER

In the street were *droschkis*—horse-drawn carriages that took passengers, and open wagons for trade. The drivers were beating and yelling at their horses, and yelling at pedestrians to get out of the way. Streetcars were clanging. The streetcar tracks ran down the middle of the street, so people waited at the curb and walked out to the streetcar when it stopped. One day an old Hasid stepped off the curb just as an automobile came rushing into the space between the streetcar and the curb, and its wheel ran over the old man's foot. As the man shrieked in pain, the driver stopped his car, got out, rushed over to the old man, and began loudly berating him for getting in his way. Soon after I arrived in America, I saw a cab driver and his passenger standing by the cab, arguing with each other. I couldn't get over the contrast. In Poland, if you were rich enough to drive an automobile, you had the right to yell at anyone. In America, a cab driver, in his worker's cap, was shouting at a rich man in a silk top hat.

DAUGHTER

We went to the Jewish cemetery where my father's grandmother was buried. He said he felt as if he could walk right to her grave, so clear was his memory of attending her funeral. But of course he couldn't walk up to it, because the cemetery he'd visited as a child had been destroyed during the war by vandalism and neglect. Headstones had been smashed

or uprooted by trees that sprouted up; paths had been obliterated by undergrowth.

FATHER

Our apartment building was built around a cobblestone courtyard. You entered through a huge archway with wooden doors that were locked at night. There were storefronts facing the courtyard, at ground level. One was a small factory that made frankfurters and delicatessen. We couldn't afford to buy from them, but I always loved the smell. During the day vendors came in, shouting about what they had to sell. Beggars came in and went from door to door, asking for a kopek or a piece of bread, which they'd put into a sack. Singers and fiddlers came into the courtyard. People would wrap coins in pieces of newspaper to throw down to them. There was a joke that you couldn't tell if the coin was alms or payment to stop the dreadful music.

DAUGHTER

We went to the memorial to the Warsaw ghetto uprising. There's a long approach to the monument, leading up to a dynamic statue hurtling out of a stone wall: muscular young men brandishing arms, who chose to die fighting rather than follow orders for deportation. On another day, a Polish woman, a friend of a friend, took David and me back to see the other side of the monument: a frieze of a throng of people streaming to their deaths: a rabbi carrying a torah, families with children dwarfed by the legs around them. This, she told us, was the truer representation. There were sixty thousand people left in the ghetto at the time of the uprising. Three hundred thousand of the ghetto's inhabitants had been murdered in Treblinka in the months before. We had missed this part of the monument on our first visit. We hadn't thought to walk around and look at the back.

FATHER

There was a man who'd push a wheelbarrow into the courtyard and set up shop. He took iron pots blackened from cooking and returned them sparkling and shiny. One time my grandmother sent her youngest son, my uncle Boruch Zishe [*pronounced quickly, it sounds like "brook-zeesha"*], down with some pots, but when he brought them back, one was only half done, so she sent him down again, and he got into a loud argument with the man. An audience gathered to witness his victory, but I was stuck in the house because I was sick. I had to strain to see what I could

from the tiny balcony. I couldn't get over the injustice—all my friends got to enjoy the show, and I missed it—and it was *my* uncle!

DAUGHTER

At the ghetto monument, my father got into a conversation with a young Danish woman holding a guidebook. As he walked away, I told her that he had grown up in Warsaw, that his grandfather had died in the ghetto, and that other family members and people he'd grown up with had died there, or lived there and died in the camps. I brandished this information as a badge of honor, as if it gave me a greater right to be visiting the memorial. I also figured it would make her visit more memorable. I've always had this impulse to be helpful to strangers.

FATHER

Our third-floor apartment was my grandfather's home. I was born there, and so was my mother. I lived there until I was seven. My mother was one of the oldest of sixteen brothers and sisters. The youngest was only six years older than I, so I was like the youngest brother, and my grandfather was the closest I ever came to having a father.

DAUGHTER

On the approach to the monument, vendors had set up tables selling trinkets and books. David bought a book about the Warsaw ghetto.

FATHER

For years I thought my grandfather's name was "zahzogit" because that's what my grandmother called him: "Zahzogit, would you pull out that chair?", "Zahzogit, may I have money to shop for food?" Then I found out that "zahzogit" meant "be so good." When she spoke to him, she began that way to be properly deferential to her husband. His children feared him, because he was stern and authoritarian with them, but he was always kind and gentle to me. He once took me by the hand to the "mikvah," the ritual bath. As we walked, I asked him why paper money had value but other paper didn't. At the mikvah, he patiently instructed me on how he covered his facial openings while immersing himself in the water: thumbs on the ears, index fingers on the eyes, middle fingers on the nostrils, and ring fingers on the mouth. I guess the pinkies rested on the chin. (*As he speaks, he places these fingers on his face.*) I remember because I was amazed to see him naked!

DAUGHTER

When I was seven or eight, I wrote my first story. It was about my father when he was a child. The story took place in the stairwell outside his apartment in Warsaw. It was a story he'd told me: when he was very little, his mother dressed him in his older sister's outgrown dresses, rather than spend money buying boys' clothes for him. He was too ashamed to go out and play dressed as a girl, so he sat in the stairwell all day and cried.

FATHER

One year I decided to fast on Yom Kippur [*pronounced "yum KIPper"*], because that's what grown-ups did. When my mother couldn't get me to eat, she enlisted her father's help in persuading me. He explained that I didn't have to fast because I wasn't bar-mitzvahed yet. If I fasted, it wouldn't please God, but it would displease my mother.

DAUGHTER

I had no idea what the building my father had lived in as a child looked like, so I pictured him in the vestibule of the apartment house across the street from our house in Brooklyn, with its white marble steps, wrought-iron railing, and tiny black and white tile floor. I pictured him as the age I was when I wrote my story, but he was probably only three.

FATHER

My mother was married at eighteen to a man she'd never met, and she never liked him. She threw him out when I was two. She never told me directly that I was ugly, but whenever she spoke of my father, she'd say how she hated his looks, especially his long hooked nose. And whenever she spoke about me, she'd say I looked exactly like him. When I did something she didn't like, which was just about anything I ever did, she'd say, "Just like your father." If I slept late, "Just like your father"; if I stayed up late, "Just like your father." The way I ate, what I ate, the time I ate, how I dressed, if I spent money, how much I spent, what I spent it on—it was all the wrong thing, all the wrong way, and all "just like your father." It wasn't until I was an adult and talked to people who knew him that I found out my father had been a wonderful man. They said he was kind, gentle, intelligent, and generous. Everyone loved him, except my mother.

DAUGHTER

My father talked so much about his childhood that I felt it as if it had happened to me. But it hadn't happened to me. I believed that nothing that happened to me could be as significant as what he had suffered. What right did I have to be miserable—which I was.

FATHER

My father wasn't a good businessman, and he wasn't practical. He opened a leather goods store with my mother's dowry, and lost it all. She used to tell with disgust how she'd bring him the wholesome lunch she prepared for him and find him eating lox and chocolate. Somehow that captured for her what she scorned in him.

DAUGHTER

In my memory, my childhood is an endless train of days spent with my mother, waiting for my father. He left the house before I woke up in the morning, and he often worked overtime, so he came home after I had gone to sleep. My favorite object in the house was an old black typewriter with yellow keys rimmed in silver. I'd spend hours typing letters to my father, telling him what had happened to me during the day and laying out my grievances against my mother. I couldn't have any grievances against him, because he wasn't there.

FATHER

My father had tuberculosis. My mother told people that that was why she threw him out—so he wouldn't infect my sister and me. And she said she never remarried because she didn't want her children to grow up with a stepfather. Maybe it was true. But I always believed she preferred to live on her own. She wasn't the kind of woman who wanted to spend her life waiting on a man.

DAUGHTER

When I was a child, my father used to say, "We're so lucky we have your mother. If it was up to me, I'd just ride around the country on a motorcycle. Thanks to your mother, we live in this nice, clean house and have regular meals." But I thought riding around the country on a motorcycle with my father sounded fabulous!

FATHER

My mother and sister and I shared a room in my grandfather's house. One night my mother woke me out of a sound sleep, and I saw that my father was there; he must have come by to discuss something with her. She had cooked frankfurters for him, and she woke me up to give me a bite. (She knew I loved them, and they were so rare during the war.) I guess I was still sleepy, because when I swallowed the frankfurter chunk, it got stuck in my throat. I don't know if I remember this because it was one of the few times in my life I saw my father, or because I nearly choked.

DAUGHTER

On the day he was coming home in time for dinner, I'd wait for my father to return from work. My sister and I would watch for him in the direction of the subway station. When we spotted him, we'd run to him, and he'd lift us up and enfold us in his arms. Then he'd put us down and walk with us back to the house, holding our hands. I loved the feel of his huge, calloused hand engulfing mine.

FATHER

In two more memories I have of my father, he is talking to my mother. In one, they were standing in front of the archway of our building, saying things I couldn't understand. In the other, he is sick in bed in a small room, and my mother is talking to him at his bedside. I was in the room with them, but I couldn't get near. Because of his illness, my mother made me stand at the door.

DAUGHTER

If he was home at our bedtime, my father told us stories that he made up himself—long elaborate tales of dragons and eagles in which we were the heroes. We especially begged for "stories with actions." As we lay in our beds, he'd move around the room, acting out all the parts, suddenly rushing right up to our delighted, mock-scared, laughing faces. And then, when it was time to sleep, he'd lie down with us, and we'd snuggle up to him with our heads on his shoulders. That way I could always fall asleep.

FATHER

The only other time I remember seeing my father is also the only

memory in which he spoke to me. I was walking with him in the country, and we came to a brook. He wanted me to cross it with him, but I was afraid. I was convinced the bottom was quicksand and would suck me in. He picked up a large green pine cone and threw it into the water, to show me that it didn't sink. For some reason, that reassured me, and I crossed the brook with him. Later we came to a field of wheat. I still recall it as one of the most beautiful sights I've ever seen: the yellow wheat curved in the breeze as far as I could see. I asked my father if the wheat field went to the end of the world.

DAUGHTER

When I was a teenager, I prided myself on my irreverence. I liked to shock people by saying, "If my father had stayed in Poland, he'd be a lamp shade."

FATHER

When I was six, my father died. He was 27 years old. Since I didn't know him, I wasn't sad; I thought it was an interesting piece of news. When I ran into a neighbor on the staircase, I boasted excitedly that I knew something she didn't. "What is it?" she asked. "That your father died?" I saw from her manner that my excitement wasn't the right emotion to have. "No," I lied. "That isn't it." But I wouldn't tell her what it was.

DAUGHTER

When I call home, I talk to my mother. It's always been that way. When I was younger, she was the one who called me. A few times, after I'd talked to my mother for a long time, she said my father wanted to talk to me. I got a rush of excitement, feeling important and cherished—my father wanted to talk to me! It was like a boy you had a crush on finally calling. But when he got on the phone, he said, "Well, it was nice talking to you." "Wait a minute," I said, "you haven't talked to me yet." "We'll talk when we see each other," he said. "We don't have to make the phone company rich." He had gotten on the phone just to get me off.

FATHER

Though I never knew my father, I certainly knew my grandfather. There was no question in my mind that he was the most powerful, most dignified man in the world, and I was sure everyone else knew this too. But one day, after World War I finally ended, he took me with him on

an expedition to the home of someone who owed him money. I was shocked to see the manner he assumed in this house, as he doffed his cap in deference. I couldn't believe my eyes: my grandfather, taking his hat off to someone!

DAUGHTER

Years ago I had a dream. I'm having a birthday party. My father is there, but he's suspended about two feet off the ground, with his head near the ceiling. I don't know what he's doing up there; he doesn't seem to be doing anything, just floating in his own world. I can't reach him, and he doesn't hear me or see me. I desperately try to make contact with him, but he's stuck up there and I can't get him to come down.

FATHER

When we were about to leave for America, my grandfather called me to him and took me on his lap. Tears streamed from beneath his gold-rimmed glasses, down his cheeks, and into his beard. He knew he would never see me again. With his arm around my shoulders, he said, "Never forget that you are a Jew."

DAUGHTER

I'd always known that my father's grandfather died in the Warsaw ghetto, but somehow I'd assumed he had died of old age, and the ghetto happened to be where he lived when his time came. In my mind, the "ghetto" was just a dilapidated section of town where Jews were forced to live. But when I read the book David had bought, I realized how much I didn't know—that Jews had been moved into the ghetto from all over the city and the country; that 100,000 people died in the ghetto from starvation, and from epidemics that broke out, caused by the overcrowding and unsanitary conditions. Naked corpses lay in the streets—corpses in the street because people had to pay a fee to bury their dead and they had no money; naked because every shred of cloth had to be salvaged and used. Women nursed infants in the street, but they had no breasts, no nourishment to give their dying babies. German soldiers strolled through the ghetto on their way to somewhere else and shot people for fun. I thought I knew about the Warsaw ghetto, but I really didn't know anything about it at all.

FATHER

Those were my grandfather's last words to me: "Never forget you are a

Jew." He believed that when Jews went to America, they ceased to be Jews, because they stopped being Hasidic. Have I betrayed him? What do my daughters know of their Jewish heritage? Only one of them married a Jew—and she doesn't have children, so what difference does it make?

DAUGHTER

We went to the Umschlagplatz, where each day thousands of Jews gathered to be shipped to Treblinka, where they'd be gassed. Today it's a green park with a monument, a series of stone walls. One wall is a glittering white stone slab with Jewish names, meant to represent the three hundred thousand people who had been sent to be killed from this square. Mordechai, Moishe, Shmuel, Abraham, Rachel, Rebecca, Naomi, Leah, Sarah, Miriam, Deborah. Another stone slab bore the words of a poem. We all lined up facing this wall, and asked my father to translate the Polish text etched into the stone. He began to read the words, but his voice faltered, and he stopped. I turned to see that his body was shaking. He put his right hand up to his left cheek, palm out, making a barrier between our eyes, so I couldn't see his face as he sobbed. I put my arm around him. He gathered himself up and started to read again. But again, he stopped. Again, he held his hand to the side of his face, like a shield against my gaze. On the third try he read: "Earth, do not cover my blood; wind, do not silence my screams..." As we walked away, my mother whispered to me that in the sixty years of their marriage, she had never seen him break down before. Days later, he told David that what overcame him was a picture in his mind of his grandfather and his uncle Joshua, the one son who had stayed behind with the old man, and of Joshua's wife and five children, who had almost certainly been shipped to their deaths from the spot on which we stood. And he kept thinking, "What had they done to deserve their fate? They had never done anything to hurt anyone." I was envious that my father had confided this to David and not to me.

FATHER

I stood under the street sign, Twarda Ulica. Inside my head, it was all still there: the busy courtyards, the people calling out of the windows, the streetcars clanging, the drivers yelling, my grandfather going to shul. But outside, there was nothing. No trace of the world I grew up in. In place of the three-story apartment house with its courtyard was a gray utilitarian building covered with obscene graffiti. After I'm gone, who will remember? If no one remembers, what will remain?

DAUGHTER

My father wanted to take pictures of the Jewish cemetery, but he hates to waste pictures with no one in them, so he asked David and me to stand in front of a wall that had been built of the broken pieces of tombstones that had been smashed during the war. David posed for the photos, but I hung back. I couldn't figure out if it was a desecration to pose for pictures, like tourists, in a place like that, or if it was an act of devotion, to try to remember.