Continuity

Of late, two events have led to me to consider—even more than usual—the peculiar type of loss that immigrants experience. An odd sort of estrangement not only from your homeland and culture but from your past and your ancestors. In a sense, I've been preoccupied with this subject for nearly a decade, the time I've been making my way as a writer and filmmaker. It may even be that I've been preoccupied with it without fully recognizing that it has been my preoccupation. But two things happened last month that thrust this realization at me with a particular immediacy. One was the publication of my novel, The Free World, about a family of Soviet Jews in 1978, waylaid in Rome en route to Canada. The other was the birth, on April 11th, of my second daughter.

In the novel, three generations of the family travel together and, in many ways, what is striking about them aren't the things that unite them but the things that divide them. Of course, one could argue that we could say the same thing about any family, anywhere, but there's something specific about the nature of the divisions within this family. They extend beyond the routine misunderstandings that beset older and younger generations. These divisions have to do with fundamental differences that, for all practical purposes, are impossible to reconcile—differences of language and culture—of a continuity of experience that enables one generation to identify with another. This lack of continuity forms the fault line of the book.

So, that's one way to express it. In abstract and rather negative terms. Let me put it another way. In more positive terms.

On April 11th my wife gave birth to our second daughter. We named her Lena Crabill Young. Lena, after my old friend, the writer Leonard Michaels. Crabill, because my wife's family has a tradition of using ancestral surnames as middle names. Crabill was the maiden name of my wife's beloved paternal grandmother—who, incidentally, lived to be a hundred. And Young, my wife's last name, which for several reasons I much prefer to my own. (For English speakers, my name proves agonizing to spell and pronounce, and in Russian it translates roughly as Without a Brain.)

But it is Crabill, my daughter's middle name, that engages me. It can be easily traced back to the beginning of the 19th century, to a time when my wife's ancestors settled in Springfield, Ohio. How do I know this? Because in Springfield, to this day, there remains the Crabill Homestead, a house built in 1826 in the Federal style. It is an Ohio heritage site, which you can easily find on the Internet. There is a website devoted to it. You can look at pictures and, if you're really curious, you can visit it and take a tour on scheduled weekends during the spring and summer. My wife has a black and white photo of herself taken when she was eleven years old, in which she's standing inside a miniature-seeming room in the house. It happens to be one of my favorite pictures of her. One day, when our daughters are old enough, we will take them there.

Ruth Crabill, my wife's grandmother, was born in Springfield. She later settled with her husband in Columbus, Ohio. But, as a little girl, she would visit her maternal

grandparents in Plain City, Ohio. That house, which must date back at least to the turn of the 20th century, also still exists. In May of 2009, when we went to Columbus to celebrate her 100th birthday we also made a trip to Plain City. The area is in Amish Country and we bought a porch swing, handmade by Amish craftsmen, in a furniture store. While there, my wife's cousin drove by and showed us my wife's great-great-grandparents' house. It was off the main road, up a curved drive, shaded by large trees, with horses visible behind a fenced field.

I could go on like this, by the way, telling the story of my wife's ancestors. It wouldn't be difficult. My wife's grandmother, following a family tradition, left behind an account of her life that she typed up in the 1980s. Every one of her children and grandchildren received a copy. Just as they received copies of the same sort of account that her own mother had composed. Both are written in English, a language all of her descendants understand.

And then there's my wife's maternal side. On a trip to Chicago for my wife's 30th birthday we walked along Wacker Drive—a fairly well-known road in Chicago—which was designed by her maternal great grandfather.

Perhaps you can see where I'm heading with this?

I compare this history with that of my own family, where there are far more questions than answers. In fact, there are mostly questions, and the answers which I have are either difficult or impossible to verify. Where my wife knows or can easily locate her family's ancestral homes, I can do no such thing.

My paternal grandfather was orphaned at a young age. I believe he was born somewhere in Belarus, but I couldn't say where. Neither do I know why, if he was born in Belarus, that he had such a strange last-name—part Russian and part Latvian. I have no hope of finding his birthplace. I only know his father's name because, on the yartzeit reminder letter I receive each year, his name is recorded as Nachman ben Mendel ha Levi. Mendel was my father's name, but it wasn't until I received the yartzeit letter that I discovered that he'd been named after his paternal grandfather.

My father's mother, was named Tauba. I don't know her maiden name, although I have a vague recollection of hearing that it was Shneerson and that she was some relation of the Lubavitcher rebbe. I think she was born in Daugavpils, Latvia, the same place my father was born. I know little else about her origins. I've never seen so much as a photograph of her parents. I don't know their names, what they did, where they lived, or when or how they died. No memoirs or letters were handed down to the succeeding generations.

I know a little more about my maternal grandparents. Dina Katz, my grandmother, was from a shtetl in Lithuania called Joniskis. She fled with her parents and siblings from the Nazi advance and survived the war. Afterward, she married my grandfather and returned with him to Latvia. Her own parents resettled in Vilnius. I have photographs of her parents, including a few of me with my great-grandmother. But their lives before the war,

and all the family history that preceded it, are a mystery to me. My grandmother didn't talk much about her early life, or maybe I failed to ask the right questions. She grew up speaking Yiddish and Lithuanian; I speak neither of these. (Our common language was Russian.) My most intimate connection to her past is that I carry her father's name.

My maternal grandfather, Yakov Milner, who was born in Baltinava, a Latvian shtetl, is the one about whom I know the most. A storyteller, he was also blessed with an uncanny memory. The older he got, the more he liked to talk about his life in pre-war Latvia, a time and place that he cherished and idealized. Most of the stories I have about my family's history, I have from him. A meticulous person, he somehow managed to preserve photos from before the war. From these, I have a record of my great-grandparents, who survived the war, as well as many other relatives who didn't. From him, I know curious details about life in his small town. For instance, that most of the members of the volunteer fire brigade were Jewish and that the brigade was founded by his paternal grandfather. This same grandfather, my great-great-grandfather, apparently also wrote stories in Yiddish. My grandfather remembered seeing him scribbling in a thick book. Sometimes, in trying to account for my vocation, I think of him.

What I wouldn't give to have this book today! But no trace of it remains. Besides, even if, by some miracle, I were to find it, I wouldn't be able to read it. And even if I had it translated, I suspect there would be much that I wouldn't understand. So much has changed between his lifetime and mine. To all extents and purposes, an entire world, an entire way of being, has disappeared.

So this is the peculiar plight of my family. In the course of one very bloody century, we were transformed again and again. Each successive generation was obliged to accommodate a new language, a new ideology, and, often, a new homeland. My grandparents' language was Yiddish; my parents' language was Russian; mine is English. A trickle of the mother tongue seeped into the next generation, but once the living source expired, that trickle ran dry. My parents understood Yiddish, but they no longer spoke it. I never spoke it and understand it only sparsely. My parents spoke Russian, as do I, but I don't have any illusions that my daughters will speak it. And without a common language, their ancestors will seem all the more strange and remote. After all, a language contains so much more than literal meaning. It contains the nuances of culture that can't truly be translated. Which is why, for instance, jokes are always so difficult to translate from one language to another. And sometimes, they are simply impossible.

One of my favorite Jewish jokes has a Yiddish component that simply defies translation. To grasp it, one needs to know the culture. And though I tell it in English, its comedy resides in an understanding of Yiddish, of which I have just enough to get the punch line. Without that, the sense is utterly lost. The joke is about a Jew who converts to Christianity. Maybe you know it?

Wanting to improve his lot in life, Abram decides one day to convert to Christianity. He goes to church and gets baptized. The next morning, he rises as always and starts to lay his teffilin. Sara, his wife, looks at him and cries: Abram, what are you doing, don't you

remember you converted yesterday? Abram slaps his forehead in dismay and says: Oy, goyisher kop!

The term "goyisher kop" has no equivalent in English or any other language. To translate it directly would only make it blunt and mean-spirited. Its humor and subtlety would be lost—that wry lilting note, at once self-deprecating and prideful, that is the genius of Yiddish humor and Yiddish thought.

An even better example is another Jewish joke, this time in Russian. The joke is more conventional, less imbued with Yiddish genius. I'll give it to you in English translation with the advance warning that it doesn't quite work.

In the middle of the night, Abram is roused by a banging at his door. He scurries to open it and finds two NKVD agents glowering at him. They say: We have it on good authority that you're hiding gold. We are here to confiscate it on behalf of the state. Now we can do this the hard way and find it ourselves or we can do it the easy way and you can just give it to us. Abram turns his head back into the apartment and calls to his wife: Saraleh, come out here my gold.

To fully appreciate the joke requires first a grasp of Soviet history. But that isn't enough. The words "my gold"—which serve as the punchline—don't exist as a term of endearment in the English language. To adapt it for English, one would probably substitute "my treasure" but then the joke would no longer make sense. No NKVD officer would come in the night asking after treasure.

In any event, I use the jokes to illustrate a larger point. A great deal is lost in translation.

Now, I'm aware of the irony, if not the paradox, of bemoaning the lack of continuity of a people renowned for their perseverance, their resilience. After all, Jews have been wandering for millennia—exiled, persecuted, and banished—and yet, somehow, they have managed to retain a coherent sense of identity. At the core of this survival was the torah, the Law and, with the Law—at least for men—the study of Hebrew, the liturgical language, and Aramaic, the Talmudic language. Add to these the vernaculars, Ladino and Yiddish, that connected a people over space and time. Supremely portable—torah and language, together or in isolation—sustained and defined the Jews for centuries.

But over this past century, this age-old, reliable pattern was subverted: across Europe—in increasing severity from West to East, culminating in the Soviet Union. It began with an ideological move away from the Law—sometimes voluntary, sometimes not. Followed, at least in the Soviet Union, by the systematic marginalization of the Yiddish language. Finally, and far more decisively, was the tragic fate of most of the world's Yiddish speakers during the Second World War. So, first politically, and then violently, the fabric of Jewish life was torn—to the point where one generation found itself more estranged than ever from the generation that came before it. And the aspects of Jewish life that had proven themselves to be the most durable and portable were eroded to the point of non-existence.

This is what I think about, and mourn, when I consider the history of my family and when I compare it to the history of my wife's family. I mourn that state of disconnection from my past and envy her the good fortune of possessing this connection to her roots. Her family has benefitted from a continuity that is physical, linguistic, and cultural. This is the natural order of things. This is how it should be and but it hasn't been the story for my family.

But as I say this, I am immediately led to question if what I'm saying is actually true. It is certainly true that my family has lost its sense of physical connection to any one place. In the last three generations, we have all been compelled to leave our places of birth to move and move again. In many instances, the places we have left behind bear little resemblance to what they used to be. In three generations, we have been compelled to abandon the language of our parents'. And, as for culture, circumstances have conspired the children to be raised and educated in an environment virtually antithetical to that of their parents. I think that even in the turbulent history of the Jews, this is unprecedented.

But despite all this, despite all these differences and disruptions, something certainly has bound all of us together. Something that goes beyond the animal affinity that a child feels for its parent. We have maintained, in spite of everything, some sense of belonging to a greater community, to a kinship with the past. But why this is, is harder to explain. It wasn't inevitable, and maybe not even very likely. More likely would have been for us to arrive in Canada and drift yet further from our cultural origins, to continue along the path of disengagement. Just as likely would have been for us to arrive here as if into an abyss and to fend for ourselves.

If this had happened, I suspect that, in material terms, in the long run, we would have been no worse off. My parents were educated and industrious, prepared to work hard. But in spiritual terms, our lives would have been different. So different, that I doubt that I would be standing before you today, puzzling over the question that has preoccupied me not just this morning but for a good long while.

So finally, in this roundabout way, I arrive at the question that many of you may have been asking for the past half hour. What does this have to do with the AFJCA conference? What does it have to do with us?

And the answer is that I am here today because, during the course of our emigration from the Soviet Union and our resettlement in Canada, we were not allowed to feel as if we had fallen into an abyss. At every step of the long journey, there were people committed to helping us. There were people who reminded us that we were part of a community, of a long-standing people with a distinctive past. And that what we were undergoing was merely another chapter in the history of our people. I can't overstate how important that was. Speaking to you now, in retrospect, with the benefit of hindsight, I can say that the efforts of people like you made a significant impact on my own and my family's lives. Yes, the material component, particularly at the beginning, was important, but I think that the intangible component was, in the end, even more important. We were given the

opportunity to reengage with our history and our past. We were welcomed into the fold of the Jewish people.

Was this process perfect? Was the experience always characterized by mutual understanding and respect? Did it reconcile all the rifts between the present and the past? We know, of course, that there are things in life which, once lost, can never be recovered. But it's the recognition of the loss and the commitment to preserving what remains that is important. Without this, we would live in a perpetual state of despair. To avoid this despair, to honor the past, and integrate it into the future, is, in many ways, the mission I have set for myself as an artist, and I think that, similarly, it is also describes the work that you do. At the deepest level, it is a mission that you extend to Jewish people in need, providing them with sustenance both material and spiritual, but it is also a mission that you extend to the human community at large. In that sense, that is another similarity between my work and yours. Just as there is something universal to the stories I tell, stories which enable people of different backgrounds to identify with one another, so too do acts of kindness and charity reinforce the idea of a greater, empathetic human community.

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today, and thank you for the impact your work has had on my family and families like mine. I hope you have a productive conference and a productive year.