

Raise the Sparks Newsletter #24- The Unvisited Grave – Part 1

The eyes of the little girl in the photograph stared out at me in the fading light of the day. I was standing in the bedroom of my mother-in-law Lillian's apartment in Manhattan. I had first seen that photograph of Robbie, the little girl in the picture over 40 years ago.

I was 19 at the time and had become friends with Nancy, who in later years would become my wife. I was visiting Nancy (who now as my wife of many years is known as Nechama Tziporah) in her apartment in Long Island City. I wandered into her parent's bedroom, and I saw a small black and white photograph of a little girl in a light colored dress. Her hair and clothing reflected a photo probably taken in the 1940's. She was a strikingly beautiful little girl. Her face had a certain depth and serenity to it. She also bore a strong resemblance to Nancy.

I returned to the living room and asked Nancy, "Who is the little girl in the photograph?" There was a perceptible pause and silence before she replied, "That's my sister Robbie. She went on to explain that her mother had given birth to her brother Richard in 1940 and 2 years later in 1942, she gave birth to Robbie. At the age of five, Robbie contracted stomach cancer. After a protracted a painful illness she died at the age of six in 1948. Nancy was born two years later in 1950.

Every family has its secrets. Every family has its subject matter that no one talks about. As you can imagine the loss of Robbie to Lillian and her husband Eddie was devastating. I have known my mother-in-law Lillian for over 40 years. During that time she has never spoken about the loss of her daughter. When I questioned her about Robbie, the subject was very quickly changed. Whenever I visited Lillian, who is now 96 and lives on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, I would see Robbie's photograph.

Over the years I had the thought that I should find out where Robbie is buried and go visit the grave. In life, I have found that we have many thoughts that though they are well intentioned, unfortunately never become actualized. That was the case with Robbie. Every so often I would think about locating where Robbie was buried and visiting the grave. That thought was forgotten like so many others. My mother-in-law Lillian had herself not visited the grave in over 60 years. She did not even remember where she had been buried. As a result, finding out where little Robbie had been buried laid dormant for many years.

All of that changed two and a half years ago. On the first day of Succos October 3, 2009 my mother passed away. During my year of aveilus, I participated in many aspects of mourning. I said Kaddish with a minyan 3 times a day. I visited the cemetery with my father a number of times and said prayers at the grave. I gave tzedekkah in my mother's memory. At various times during the year I said Yizkor, the memorial service which included lighting a Yartzheit candle the night before. On my mother's Yartzheit, I led the congregation in prayer and said Kaddish. At the end of the year, I and my family participated in the unveiling of the grave with the erection of a headstone.

During the year that I was doing all of these things in memory of my mother, I would also frequently visit my mother-in-law with my wife. I would invariably see that haunting photograph of Robbie. It occurred to me that no one had ever participated in a Yizkor service for this little girl. Her grave had not been visited in over 60 years. No one said a prayer, lit a candle or shed a tear for Robbie.

Once my year of mourning had passed I began to feel a strong desire to discover where Robbie had been buried. When I spoke to my mother-in-law, she wasn't even sure of the month that her daughter had passed away. She told me that Robbie had passed away on the 18th of the month either in October or November 1948. She also told me that Robbie had been buried in a Workmen's Circle cemetery plot on Long Island.

Armed with this information I went on the internet and used search engines to identify Jewish cemeteries on Long Island. The results were disappointing. No one with the name Robbie Pollak had been buried in 1948 in the cemeteries I identified. I contacted my brother-in-law Richard who was about 8 years old when Robbie died. He had absolutely no remembrance of where his sister had been buried. I felt discouraged and let go of the hope of ever finding Robbie.

About a year passed. It occurred to me that the websites of cemeteries might not be accurate. I then decided to call all of the Jewish cemeteries on Long Island. It was often difficult reaching the cemetery office. Even when I reached the cemetery staff, at the end of each call, I was told that no Robbie Pollak had been buried during 1948.

I remembered that my mother-in-law told me that Robbie had been buried in a Workmen's Circle cemetery plot. Perhaps I had missed one of the cemeteries which had a Workmen's Circle plot. I contacted the Workmen's Circle and I was informed that 3 cemeteries on Long Island had plots from the Workmen's Circle. They were Wellwood, New Montefiore and Beth Moses Cemetery. I was excited because now I had been able to narrow down to 3 cemeteries where Robbie had been buried. You can imagine my disappointment when I contacted each of the cemeteries and was told that there was no record of a Robbie Pollak being buried on their grounds.

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Yours in peace,
Moshe Kessler