Telling Bobbeh Meisehs: Notes on Identity

and the Creation of Jewish Lesbian Culture

© Judith A Stein
Jan. 13, 1982

This piece is part of a collection of Jewish lesbian writings called Bobbeh Meisehs: Jewish Lesbian Rituals and Tales. For a list of other Bobbeh Meisehs, or more copies of this piece, write:

Bobbeh Meisehs Press
Forward

The book referred to in the first section of this piece, The Auschwitz Album, is a collection of the only photographs taken openly within Birkenau, the largest of Hitler's death camps. The photographs were found by a woman named Lili Jacob Meier when she lay ill in what had been an officer's bunk in the German camp of Dora. The first photograph in the book was a picture of the rabbi from Lili's tiny home town, Bilke, in Hungary. She took this for a sign that she was meant to have the photographs. She held onto them despite many attempts to take them from her. Thirty-six years to the day after her liberation from the camps, Lili was approached by a man who had traced her from Europe to her home in Miami. She was convinced by the timing of this event that it was time to donate the album to Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial in Israel. She did so on August 27, 1980.

1. The Vision

Last night, when we were making love, they were there.
The women of Auschwitz, standing, looking through the fence.
White kerchiefs on their heads, they were looking, merely looking,
watching, sharing what they had such small access to.
No judgement, condemnation, and certainly no horror
from those about to become the ashes.
Those few that survived, how did they love women?

It was my own fault, I knew it would happen even as I looked at that book.
The Auschwitz Album, just what its name suggests, a family album of what
family I might have ever had. I knew as I looked at the pictures that I would
have nightmares. I always do. Even this time, when the horror of the
pictures exists entirely in what will come next, in what we know will
become of these women, in what they never will become, even this time I
knew there would be nightmares.

It was my own fault, to look at that book and then make love as we did.
When I looked over your strong fat shoulder, my body around yours, the
women were there. "Come back later," I plead with them. "Come back
when I'm sleeping, later, later." They stood, with their kerchiefs,
watching, only watching, their dark eyes seeing what they might never know.
They asked no permission, and they would not leave, would not wait until I
reached the more familiar territory of my encounters with my past, my
family, my fear.

So we made love. Our strong fat bodies joined in heat, in passion, in a
life force that surely these women understood. No judgements, and certainly,
no horror.

When I began to weep you told me that I did that a lot lately. Many times,
our making love would reach the places behind walls I had put up so
tightly that I forgot they were there. And I cried for those women, for
what they had missed, for what they had known, for their daughters who
were murdered at the moment of arrival, for their lovers, for me, for them,
for us. How many of those women were Lesbians? Would they have been my
mother, my lover's mother, my lover?
11. The Task

I want to write something brilliant and clear and startling enough to make reality out of something unreal in its complexity. I want to write about what it means to be a Jewish dyke, to carry death with me even in passion, to carry life with me no less fiercely. Those women at that fence, the nightmares, the loving, all these demand that I search my mind, speak my heart. Those women at that fence, the Lesbians they became in us, our lives now, together, my fear of our ignorance, demand that I speak. I fear the quest for simple answers, for good and evil, easy dualities, Black and white. Some of us are something else, white and other, racist and victim, nothing simple to be found. Some of us are children of security who cringe when we hear the German tongue, the sirens coming.

Like most queer Jews I know, I am a bundle of contradictions, of paradox, of opposing realities existing at the very same moment. To ignore this is to deny any chance of living with integrity as a secular Jewish lesbian. My life is learning to live with contradictions, inconsistencies, ambivalence and disorders, under constant scrutiny and in fear of the one false step I am sure to make, more than once. I am a woman learning to live a different life, to be Jewishly lesbian, and lesbially Jewish. Making sense of those words becomes part of the process.

111. The Past

Secular (non-religious) Judaism has a long tradition. Growing up as I did in the mid-west in the fifties, I had no such choice. To be a Jew meant to be Jewish religiously. I understand now, only as I create other choices. I mourn the passing of this century's old radicals, the feminist women, the lesbians. They were embedded in the Jewish community like a thorn, like a flower. That past, the Yiddishkeit, a Jewish community politics of Jewish born radicalism, those times are gone. In America, those radicals are aging or dead, their numbers grow smaller each year. In Russia and Europe, 40 years ago, the radicals died, murdered with that 90% of the Jews. How many were lesbians?
In America, their children are my parents; they moved into Americanism with a fervor prompted by their very survival. Why did they live when the others did not?

Some of my parents admire the Reagans, pretending the American dream will work for the Yid by grace of the Yankee. They think they are real Americans, no different, no less secure, no more despised. Their carefully constructed assimilation will never be pulled out from under them, they think.

Some of my parents are more nervous. They mumble their fears quietly, so as not to draw attention to themselves. They know the signs of hatred rising. This year, when they opened the door at the Pesach seder, the blood of dead Christian children marked the doorposts of their American homes. This year, they are growing more afraid. The old fears begin again, they never really ended.

I am their daughter. I did all the proper things for a nice Jewish girl growing up in the fifties, except for two: I was too smart; I was too fat. My punishment is clear -- I have no husband, I have no children, I have no place within the community of my people. I am a dyke, and like the women of Auschwitz who came to share my lovemaking with me, I must force my presence upon the community to have any existence at all. Quietly, but with great insistence, I am part of all who came before me, of those children not yet born to us.

I am a daughter of the fifties, of American-born parents just one step removed from the shame and poverty of their pasts. I learned lessons of conscience along with its absence; I learned an ethics of caring in the midst of abuse.
I learned that we are safe here in this land of opportunity, as I was taught to mistrust the goyim. I am an alphabet soup of mixed messages, with the letters in English and the meaning in Yiddish. I am an archeologist, scrutinizing the burial mounds of my past, sorting the silences to find their meaning, gleaning, like Ruth, from what is left behind to rot.

I am a Lesbian, a queer child of my people. The longer I live as a dyke, the more I know that it sets me apart, informs me, creates my ethics. The more I develop Lesbian ethics, the more they look like Jewish ethics. The best of Jewish ethics gives power and caring to my relationships with women. I laugh at myself, sitting with my other Jew dyke friends, asking, "What does it mean to be a Jew in the world?" I see generations of Jews, sitting together, asking that question. I weep for myself that their answers might be both so similar and so different, that I can never know. I rage at the lack of women's answers, from lesbians centuries past. How did they live, as Jewish dykes, among their people, surrounded by goyim?

IV. The Naming

In the end, I must be Jewish because I am a Jew, and the world allows me no choice.

In Indiana as a child, I was asked by my friends if I had a tail. Later, they told me in a great fit of forgiveness, that the Pope had decided that I did not kill Jesus. The jokes my eight-year-old neighbor made about Jews baking in ovens taught me early that safety in America is an illusion they create for us to make us more vulnerable. Safety, for this Jewish child in America's heartland, was a delusion which allowed me to go on with my life. Even then, I knew the idea of "safe space" for the old vicious joke that it is.

Years later, I returned, an adult, and my lover and I were buying beautiful rag rugs from an 80 year old deaf man at the Farmer's Market. I carefully spelled out my name to him. His first reaction was "Jewish?!" and I was afraid. This is suddenly, again, not my farmer's market. My farmers are all ashes, their farms are all graveyards. I cannot explain my fear very well, except to say that it is like that of an old friend, who, as a six-year old in the fifties in suburban New Jersey, hid under her bed
when she heard airplanes overhead. She was hiding from Nazis. How did we, American children of American parents, absorb all this knowledge, this fear? At the very bottom line, I must be a Jew because I am a Jew, and the world allows me no choice.

But there is so much more than the bottom line, and this is what I struggle to create. If I am Jewish only because I am forbidden to be so, only because there are people who hate me for it, would kill me for it, have killed me for it; if my only reason to be a Jew is to respond in defiance, then they, the goyim, have won a victory in my soul.

As a lesbian, a 30 year old American dyke, I must create my own patterns for being a Jew. The old molds for Jewish women do not fit me at all. I am too fat and strong for them, I push out their seams, they are insufficient for me. I am indifferent to the God or the goddess of rituals. I have no knowledge of Hebrew, and my response to Yiddish is to a language of loss and of death. It makes me weep. Everything I do must be defined for my own needs, extracted, created, invented, supported, and felt from my heart and my guts to be true.

V. Dedication

In the end, I must be a Jew because not to be is not a choice. The answer to "why?" is "because." It is the wrong question. The answer to "how?" is where the work becomes interesting.

My work began four years ago when I needed to say something to myself about my grandmother, living then in a geriatrics ward of a state mental hospital. She was marginally connected to living, not communicating at all with anyone around her. Confusion about who was where, who, when, had passed into silence. Five years before that I had been to see her in this ward full of dying women. Pieces of that visit stayed with me, for so long, that I knew not to name them kept me locked away from myself. I wrote the first of the four "Rivka Poems" then, about an event six years old.
Soon after that, on a second visit, this time with my sister, my relationship
with my grandmother became clear. Through her, I would learn the loss of
my past; what it means to myself, in my family, for my people. Feeling this
loss, sharply, constantly, I needed to create some link with the past,
to the generations of Jewish women who have always created and renewed
Jewish life.

I began by studying Jewish holidays, to look for what remains intact
in those stories once "god the father" and his miracles are removed.
With those things gone, I thought I could find the women's truths,
our own stories, and also, I knew I could find the Jewish dykes who were there.
Those women were very clever; they made sure to leave traces of themselves
amidst the muck created by five thousand years of Jewish patriarchy.
So I began to dig a little, to search for what I knew had been hidden
within.

In searching for Lesbians, for a Jewish dyke past, I create for us
a heritage, a ritual, a story. When I cannot find a memory to build
upon, I simply invent. But it takes so little to find us,
the strong women, the dykes in our past -- Ruth and Naomi; Lot's wife
who looked back to the women left behind; Miriam the prophet whose true
powers were suppressed by her brother and his god. I build my stories
from simple things: the need for a past, the knowledge that Lesbians
were always there, and chutzpah enough to turn their stories upside down
and look again.

Creating the Bobbeh Meisehs is my affirmation of my Jewish dyke self,
my love for our lives, my respect for my past. It is my piece of the
fight against erasure, denial, assimilation. I do it, most of all
because I need it; but also to pay respect to the Lesbians whose past was
lost to illiteracy and left unrecorded; or burned at the stake; or
burned in the ovens. In pride and defiance, with a deep love for my people,
I write us a story. When my story is true, it touches me in a deep place
not otherwise reached. If the story is true for more women than me, then
we are moved, as Jews, together. It is very powerful, this process of
connecting, very womanly, and very Jewish. And, if we succeed, and our
connections grow strong enough, we are very dangerous. As Jews, as dykes,
as Jewish dykes, we create our survival.
Title page: Telling Bobbeh Meisehs has the traditional connotation of telling stories, or fibs. This is based on the usual translation of Bobbeh Meisehs to "old wives tales".

Forward: The number thirty-six has significance in Jewish numerology because it is two times eighteen. Eighteen is the number assigned to the Hebrew letter Chai, which is the first letter of the Hebrew word for life -- chaim. The number 18 and its multiples are considered lucky, powerful or especially significant.

page 2: Yiddishkeit: literally means Jewish-ness, Yiddishkeit has no one translation to which everyone agrees. It refers to an entire culture of East European Jewry which was based on a common language, Yiddish. A Jewish presence, a community, a way of life.

page 3: "the blood of dead Christian children..." refers to the charge of blood libel. This is the charge that Jews needed the blood of a Christian child to make their Passover matzoh; it has been used against Jews throughout the middle ages, and as late as the mid-19th century. During the Passover Seder, Jews traditionally open the door to welcome the prophet Elijah. Some historians feel that in addition to this ritual meaning, Jews opened the door to show the harmlessness of the family dinner occurring inside, and to watch for the planting of a corpse on their doorstep.

page 6: "I cannot find a memory to build upon, I simply invent." Thanks to Monique Wittig for this thought, from Les Guerrillieres [Bard Books/Avon; 1971] The original quote reads:

...There was a time when you were not a slave, remember that. You walked alone, full of laughter, you bathed bare-bellied. You say you have lost all recollection of it, remember. ...You say there are no words to describe this time, you say it does not exist. But remember. Make an effort to remember. Or, failing that, invent. (p. 89)