

A Letter to Ima¹ - By Sara Elkas

I wish you were here today to see me, your daughter, among hundreds of lesbians gathered to celebrate a decade of national lesbian festivals in Australia. Can you see me as women talk, eat, discuss menopause, do belly dancing steps and play table tennis? Are you with me as I walk around the boundaries of the camping area? Are you close by as I pause to look at the sea, when I lie down on the newly cut grass my body pressed against the yellow flowers? As I listen to buzzing bees endlessly flying from one flower to another, with the sun hot on my face even when I pull down the brim of my hat. Ima, are you there?

Will you understand who I am and why I need to be with other women? Why I consider the lesbian feminist community to be my family. Can you imagine my grief at the loss of a very close lesbian friend? The apprehension that this death is to be followed by others. My sadness when I see my friend's partner back from her travels thinner and still very much in pain. Coming to the only place where she can safely share her memories. This being the first anniversary of her beloved's death from cancer. The same disease that took you away from me when I was only six.

What would you think if you could see me proudly wearing the T shirt that says 'Mazel Tov! She's a Jewish Lesbian'? Because I am proud of both these identities. Denying one would be the same as denying the other.

I remember the stories I was told of your bravery when your entire family were refugees in Siberia during World War II . How you risked personal danger and imprisonment to go to a far away market town to trade the cloth which you wrapped round and round your emaciated body. You were prepared to do everything to save your parents and siblings from starvation. I admire the courage you showed and your brave struggle against the odds. These qualities I have learned from you. They have helped me to do what I wanted. They told me never to give up. I thank you for this.

My way in life has been very different from yours. Here I am without husband or children living half a world away from Israel, my birth country. The same country that meant everything to you after the betrayal by the one where you were born. But I have had my children too - my work helping people with disabilities regain independence, my lesbian political activism and my writing of short stories and poetry.

We are also unlike in our religious beliefs. You were an Orthodox Jewish woman who followed customs and rituals. Only recently did I find out that it was your stated wish that I attend a religious primary school. I did not follow in your footsteps; I do not go to shule², keep the Sabbath or eat kosher. I found my own

¹ "Mother" in Hebrew

² Synagogue

spiritual path based on my personal moral values, rejecting all religious structures and dogmas. Yet, when my partner lights the candles on Friday night my heart leaps with recognition. And the place where I truly feel I belong is with other Jewish lesbians.

As I look out of the window to a view of Australian green hills, rows of pine trees, sheep making their way up the slope - an idyllic peaceful scene - I am reminded that you lived as a refugee for five years in Siberia. Five years of moving from one place to another never having enough to eat. Yet, you were among the lucky ones, those who escaped the fate of the six million. This is the heritage you left me, not only of horrible death and destruction but also of survival and a new beginning in your home land.

Do you give your blessing to my six year relationship with a Jewish woman who is as loving and caring as any mother would wish? Whose warm hands and kind words are always there when I need them. Who misses me when I am away, waits eagerly for my phone calls and e-mails, and is always at the airport to greet me on my return. Are you against us wishing to 'grow old together', travel and play with her grandchildren.

Next month I will be flying to Israel to visit my uncles, your brothers, and my cousins. My uncles are not well and perhaps they will join you in the not very distant future. Even though I am so different, I would like to see, talk and really try to connect with them.

Please do not be angry if I decide against visiting your grave in Israel. It is a cold stone and you are not there for me. I want you to be with me and experience what I experience. I want you to be proud of me, Your Daughter.

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