

Lala

On a stormy night I saw Lala in my dream. It was the first time I saw her. She had my father's features, with narrow lips and a sharp nose. She had my grandmother's hands, with wrinkled skin, a crooked middle finger and the rough fingernails of a hard working woman. Her hair was blond and shiny, in a thick braid down to her waist and her eyes were glowing. In my dream, Lala was 13. She walked erect, her shoulders wide and her tiny young breasts visible beneath her blouse. Her eyes were joyful and on her lips, I saw the shy smile one often sees on the lips of girls turning into women.

A few days before Lala appeared in my dream, my grandmother, Dvora, her body wrapped in a shroud, had been laid to rest. Heavy rain flooded the cemetery. Family members who came to say farewell said they did not remember such a harsh winter. We stood crouched under the heavy rain, watching the hole in the ground filling with soft mud. Wet and shivering we held tight to the umbrellas that the wind threatened to snatch from our hands.

Before she passed away, at 86, my grandmother laid unconscious for eight days in the hospital. During the first five days, she still showed signs of life and it seemed she reacted with a wink or finger movement to our voices. In the last three days of her life, grandmother's hands lay motionless besides her body and her head rested lifeless on the pillow. Her eyes were closed and her breathing was heavy. On the eighth day, after the doctors stopped at her bedside, the nurse spread the curtain separating her from the patient next to her. It was a sign that the doctors had done everything they could and it was time for the angel of death to come and take her soul. It was there, at my dying grandmother's bedside, that I first heard the name Lala.

Dvora put another old wool blanket full of lice on the feverish Lala. In Transnistria, Ukraine, the winter of 1941 was the harshest in 40 years. Dozens of typhoid sick Jews lay side by side in an abandoned old shack, which used to be a pig sty of a local village. Wooden boards divided the pig pen into small spaces. Straw

covered the frozen ground and the tinted glass in the high windows was shattered, the bitter cold penetrating in. Seven days earlier, Dvora had arrived there with 15 year old Israel and 13 year old Lala. A week before they arrived in the crowded pen, the family had been deported from its comfortable home in Loboka. On short notice, all the Jews were ordered to pack a few of their belongings and gather in the village square. From there, they were driven in open carriages to the pig pen. Before the deportation, Dvora was wise enough to pack some of her dead husband's clothes to sell, one by one, for some food. Lala started showing first signs of typhoid the day they arrived. Stomach cramps tortured her young body. She had diarrhea and high fever, refusing to put anything in her mouth. For the last two days, she was feverish and did not respond to her mother's touch or voice. She mumbled meaningless sounds, shaking her head, her face and hair wet with sweat. Two hours earlier, Dvora had sent her son, Israel, yet again, to the nearby village with an old pair of men's shoes to bring some food. She was sitting at her dying daughter's side, completely detached from the moans and groans of the other sick people around her and holding a piece of cloth, soaked with water, on her child's forehead. She thought that soon, her son would return with a little cornflour, from which she could make thin porridge, or with a small piece of bread, which she could soak in water and crumble into her daughter's mouth.

The memories and smells of the Sabbath delicacies she used to cook in her big, comfortable house, filled Dvora's mind. She remembered how she used to light the big stove with chunks of wood, brought from the near city and every Sabbath, the stove was covered with big, steamy, pots. She could still smell the sweet aroma of the slow cooking foods which her family loved so much. Boiling chicken soup, with onions, potatoes and carrots, fresh from her garden, bubbled in the big pot, to which Dvora added fat bones of a turkey throat to enrich its' taste. In a small pot, she cooked corn flour for a sweet corn pie and three loaves of halla browning in the big oven, filled the house with the irresistible smell of fresh pastry.

The sound of the footsteps of her son, Israel, returning from the village, tore the sweet comforting memories from Dvora's mind. He took five small potatoes and half a loaf of bread out of his pockets and sank on the ground, exhausted from hunger and from

the long journey. Dvora immediately rose to her feet. She scooped out some of the soft part of the bread with her fingers, soaked it in the water tin and went to Lala. With one hand, she opened her mouth and with the other, she rolled the bread between her fingers to soften it, and put it in her sick child's mouth. Lala did not respond and the soft bread mixed with saliva, leaked from both sides of her mouth. Dvora sighed in despair. She knew her daughter was doomed. During their seven day stay in the crowded pig pen, 18 people died and were buried in the mass grave a hundred meters away. Dvora painfully remembered that only a few months earlier, her beautiful, healthy, blooming, 13 year old daughter used to spend hours each day writing poetry. How she loved to sit on her wide bed, covered with white lace bedspread and to write. When she completed a poem, she hurried to the kitchen and read it to her mother, her voice full of excitement.

The next day, when the sun set and the cold was bitter, two men laid Lala's tortured body in the big mass grave and covered it.

The curtain around my grandmother's hospital bed was still spread. On the bed, lay the dead Dvora. Her eyes were closed and her slightly open lips showed toothless gums. I stood there, completely frozen and could not take my eyes off my grandmother's body. I have never been so close to a dead human being. Behind me, my father, Israel, and his aunt were talking about Lala. Israel said they should commemorate her on my grandmother's gravestone and his aunt sighed sadly and asked what name they would engrave. Both were silent. They could not remember her given name, only her nickname. I felt a shiver run down my spine. A girl was born out of love and lived in this world for 13 years. A horrible disease ended her young life, her body was thrown into a mass grave, in a foreign land, amidst a dark war and no one remembers her name.

Lala, the sound is so soft and loving. Lalka means doll in Polish so she must have been the sweetest baby girl and the nickname lingering as she grew up. For a brief moment, I saw the faces of my three children and a feeling of agony and of a great loss weakened my knees. Why were they all silent about her? How

could Dvora, who gave her life and loved her all her short life and after her death, keep her in her heart for 40 years? Why didn't she share her grief with anyone? She told me about everything: the good life they had before the war, the great shock of the deportation, the hell they went through until the war ended and the long journey to Eretz Israel. But she never said a word about Lala. What did she look like? There is no picture. Everything was destroyed in the inferno of the war.

On the 30th day after Dvora's death, the clouds scattered and a warm sun caressed the family members who came to the cemetery. When we stood around the marble gravestone, I put a white rose, with fresh, half-open petals and a soft scent, on the words engraved in the stone:

"In memory of Lala, a pure soul,
who perished in the Holocaust,
when she was only 13."

I made a vow, to tell the story of the girl
whose name was forgotten.

Orly Aish, 2003

