Cultural Daily

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Pandemics Old & New: Two Letters

Sylvie · Wednesday, April 15th, 2020

At the end of World War I, my grandmother Louly Arbib Barda, my mother's mother, sat down in Alexandria, Egypt, to write a six-page letter to her brother Robert Arbib in New York City.

Robert and three other brothers — Angelo, René and Victor Arbib — had emigrated to the United States some time before the start of that fateful war — the one that was so decimating that it was supposed to "end all wars." Louly, born and reared in Libya, the only daughter in a prominent Sephardic Jewish family of Italian traders, had left her native Tripoli for Egypt to marry my grandfather, Henry Barda. Most likely the marriage was an arranged one, as was the custom at the time. I don't have an exact date, but it happened at the end of the 19th or beginning of the 20th century.

Louly's letter to her brother was dated November 12, 1918 — one day after the signing of the Armistice. It is filled with giddy joy and high expectations. Transatlantic mail, that had been suspended for the duration, was now being resumed and she could hardly wait to receive news of the American branch of the famiIy after those long four years. What she makes clear is that she's not only expecting an immediate reply, but also counting on a physical reunion, soonest…

In the middle of her outpourings of joy though, Louly shared a disturbing aside. Alexandria, she wrote, had become a hub for the deadly Spanish Flu. (It originated in Kansas, but acquired its worldwide misnomer after it manifested itself with a vengeance in Spain.)

"There have been some devastating cases in almost every household in town," she wrote, offering an account of the sudden death of a promising young attorney of her acquaintance. "I thank heaven a thousand times that everyone in our household appears to be fine."

Two days after she mailed the letter, one of two Croatian nannies who took care of the children came down with the disease. Ever the guardian angel, my grandmother insisted on caring for the patient herself. The nanny recovered, but my grandmother was infected and was gone in a matter of days. She was mourned and buried before her letter ever reached America.

It was a fulminating case brought on by the lack of scientific knowledge and the bad luck that went with it a century ago.

Sound familiar? Like the current scourge, 1918's Spanish Flu took people by surprise. They were unprepared for its viciousness. It was scoffed at, behaved erratically, had no known cure, no reliable treatment and no vaccine. In other words, it was at least as indecipherable, capricious

— and randomly fatal — as our present pandemic.

Louly Arbib Barda

Born in 1882, Louly Barda was just 36 years young when she died. She had lived an even 18 of them on each side of the centuries' divide. My mother was ten when her mother passed away, and although she rarely talked about it, there can be little doubt that losing her mother so suddenly at such a tender age had a profound effect on the rest of her life.

My other grandmother, Corinne Franco, my father's mother, was hit sideways by a different kind of pandemic. It was the widespread threat of tuberculosis, a slower but persistent ravager of human life in the pre-penicillin world. Like today's coronavirus, it consumed the lungs of its victims, earning a second, more descriptive name: consumption.

Corinne had lived in Hania, Crete, when it was still the capital of that ancient Greek island. I'm not sure if she had been born there — details are sketchy — but it was there that she married my grandfather, Leon Franco, and there that she bore four of their five sons.

She was pregnant with the fifth, when her husband prematurely passed away — of what, I know not. What I do know is that her fifth son was born in Alexandria, Egypt, which is where she decided to go, because she was only 25 years old, with five sons, little wealth and no reliable means of support. There was family in Alexandria that could provide emotional buttressing and probably some material help until she could land on her feet.

Corinne Franco Albali

Unlike my grandmother Louly's head-on collison with the Spanish Flu, Corinne's distress came more perniciously with an attack of tuberculosis on her oldest son, Nisso. He became infected in his mid 20s and, as the disease progressed, he was sent to a sanatorium in Davos, Switzerland. Now best known for hosting the world's financial summits, Davos in the 1920s was an established destination for consumptives, lined with sanatoriums, thanks to the purity of its Alpine air. The care these patients received eased their suffering and extended their lives, but it did not cure them. Nisso died at 27 and was buried there.

When my father passed away, I found a neatly folded letter in his wallet from his mother that she wrote in 1943. It was addressed to each of her surviving sons with directives about what to do after her death. Beyond thanking them for their devotion to her and to each other, she implored them to continue the payments she had been making to a company in Davos charged with maintaining their older brother's grave.

Did they follow up? Probably not. The letter preceded her death by roughly ten years. It included no instructions, no name or address for the maintenance company, no specifics on where Nisso was buried. My father never spoke of it. It wasn't exactly dinnertime conversation. And now all the brothers are gone.

Nisso Franco

Why am I telling you this? Because the current pandemic has revived these infrequently

visited memories. Viewing them through that lens, through the isolation of the long, stay-at-home days with their own insecurities and the upending of life as we've known it, has made me more contemplative. Everything that matters and surrounds us suddenly looks more vulnerable and fragile than ever.

I've been lucky to not have contracted the disease so far, but Covid-19 has just begun flexing its influence in ways we could not have imagined ten weeks ago. It forced a re-entry into my family's past that no other incident would have had the power to unlock.

We spend most of our lives deluding ourselves that we're in control. We flatter ourselves that we're superior animals, that we've earned Brownie buttons for behaving reasonably well, pursuing creditable goals, doing our best, and all the other bromides that anesthetize us to the one thing we seem constitutionally unable to grasp: the humility required to live productively *together* as a single race — the human one. The planet we inhabit demands that respect, as do the creatures with which we share it. It was not designed as target practice for our powers of exploitation.

Plagues are hardly new. And they're generally similar. Every so many years we get our behavioral clock cleaned and reset by an invisible enemy more potent than the lot of us put together. If we could only figure out that it's up to us to undertake that cleaning before it comes due, the resetting might be less shattering.

Diane Ackerman, a favorite poet, writer and reporter, wrote this in her book, *An Alchemy of the Mind*: "I'm an Earth ecstatic, and my creed is simple: All life is sacred, life loves life, and we are capable of improving our behavior toward one another. As basic as that is, for me it's also tonic and deeply spiritual, glorifying the smallest life-form and embracing the most distant stars."

That truth doesn't change. But we must.

Top image: Letters from my grandmothers.

Photos: Courtesy of Sylvie Drake

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