



The Shawl

*Grandchildren are the dots that connect
the lines from generation to generation.*

~Lois Wyse

Most children are put to bed with cozy bedtime stories, but not so for me. At bedtime, my grandmother Bea would tell me the story of how she, her mother and her five siblings had escaped the Russian pogroms. As told by my grandmother, the Russian Cossacks stormed into their town and killed many Jews.

When the Cossacks stormed into my grandmother's house, my great-grandmother screamed, "Run, Kinder, Run!" My grandmother and her sister fled and were hidden by a non-Jewish neighbor in a cold and dark potato cellar. They stayed there for over two days, with rats crawling on them while the neighbor risked her life by telling the soldiers that she had not seen any Jewish children. Later, the neighbor took them out of the potato cellar and told the soldiers that they were her own children, again risking her own life to save the lives of my grandmother and her sister. Eventually, the family was reunited and my great-grandmother, Sara, led her six children on a journey away from Russia. This journey took over two years, during which they traveled and hid.

On a bitter cold, blustery night in 1910, Sara and her six children arrived in Buffalo, New York. They were tired, cold and hungry. The only warm item of clothing they possessed was Sara's winter coat. Sara cut her coat into six pieces, so that each child would have some warmth. Sara had nothing to keep her warm.

A kind woman named Esther Mintz heard of Sara's plight, as the Jewish community was very small and supportive of the newly arriving immigrants. Esther stayed up an entire night and knit Sara a beautiful and warm black shawl. She gave Sara the shawl and a basket of freshly cooked food. The food was quickly eaten, and the shawl saw Sara through her first cold winter in America. Sara never forgot the kindness of this stranger.

Forty-six years later, Renee, the American-born grandchild of Sara, told her grandmother that she was engaged to be married. Renee was to marry a man named Joseph Mintz. Sara quickly realized that Joseph was the grandchild of the woman who had knit her a shawl so many years ago when she arrived in America, a cold and hungry immigrant. Sara had saved this shawl, and she took it from her attic and showed it to Renee. Holding the shawl to her heart, Sara spoke in Yiddish, telling her grandchild that this marriage was *besmert*, meaning that Renee and Joseph's marriage was planned in heaven before Renee's birth, and the shawl was a sign of this destiny.

Renee and Joseph are still married—they are my parents. Sara and Esther died years ago and I never knew them. My grandmother Bea, who told me the story of her escape from Russia, died when I was pregnant with my own daughter, Jennifer. While dying, she symbolically, but likely unconsciously, continued a family tradition: She knit a blanket to give warmth to the great-grandchild she would

never meet. Today, I am writing this story with Jennifer sitting beside me. The blanket, first knit for Jennifer, has since sheltered my youngest daughter Allison and my sister's son Steven. While the original shawl has unfortunately been lost, its story, and the new knitted blanket, keep us warm inside and connected to the pain, kindness, love and perhaps even the destiny of past generations.

~Laurie Mintz
Chicken Soup for the Jewish Soul
