

2024 ADULT ESSAY CONTEST – HONORABLE MENTION

The Maternal Line

By Dian Seidel

I didn't know my great-grandmother Esther—she died 13 years before I was born—but I know a little about her. Records my mother discovered say she came from Volyn, a region in the Pale of Settlement, the Russian Empire's vast Jewish ghetto. As an ancestral homeland, Volyn doesn't entice me; I don't know which shtetl she lived in or whether it's in present-day Ukraine, Poland or Belarus. When her daughter, my grandmother, remembered the place she lived until age 16, she called it simply The Old Country.

All the rest of what I know about my great-grandmother comes from things she gave my grandmother. Things my grandmother gave my mother, and my mother later gave me. Things from The Old Country.

When my great-grandmother packed for the voyage from Volyn to America, she didn't pack light. Suspended from my kitchen ceiling, her three long-handled copper pots resemble a set of measuring cups, but at eye level they dwarf my biggest stockpot. I'll never know what she cooked in them. Her recipes are long gone. And I'll never know what spice mixes or medicines she concocted in the pocked brass mortar and pestle that now sit on a shelf in my dining room. Like the pots, they are industrial-sized. If I were to drop them, they could surely shatter floor tiles or phalanges. Esther's brass candlesticks aren't quite as heavy, but I imagine they'd be serviceable self-defense during a pogrom or a home invasion.

Clearly, my great-grandmother didn't mind schlepping, or asking someone else to schlep, all this heavy metal. In 1909, after the overland and trans-Atlantic journey, an Ellis Island inspector with a buttonhook declared her husband's eye infected and the family ineligible for entry. So they and all their belongings detoured to Argentina, where they remained for two years before returning and settling in Chelsea, Massachusetts.

About those candlesticks. I don't know if Esther lit Shabbat candles, but I know her daughter did. Most Friday nights, Esther's simple brass candlesticks graced my grandmother's table, but on special holidays she used her silver set. After my grandmother died, my mother rarely used either pair, but she polished both regularly and kept them on display, each in its own nook of the gridded shelving that separated our dining room from our living room.

When, in her 90s, my mother fretted over the fate of the family heirlooms, my sister, named for Esther, took the silver candlesticks. I took the brass and copper. Like my mother, I put it all on display but never put it to use.

Three years ago my daughter married a man who observes the Sabbath as a day of rest. Esther's candlesticks now live with them. For the first time in decades, the brass shows the wax drippings of weekly use.

It's hard for me to picture Esther schlepping her housewares around the world. But I'm grateful for the light that shines on the face of her newborn great-great-great-granddaughter.