

Flora's Vest: The Personal Is Political Is Personal Again

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Sexual violence against girls and young women may have contributed to the reasons why Jews left Russia in the early 1900s and immigrated to the United States. A common feature of anti-Jewish pogroms rape continues today to be an instrument of war and oppression. The author speculates on the reasons why her great grandmother left Russia alone at age 18 to sail for America, and draws connections between her work today and her family herstory.

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I was born in 1953, and because Jewish custom forbade naming a child for a living person, I was named for my maternal great grandmother, Flora Fialkov. Born in 1882, Flora came to this country alone when she was 18. Ironically, I knew more about the circumstances of her death than about those of her life. Flora died of a stroke in 1937 while vacationing in Old Orchard Beach, Maine. In 1937, before air conditioning and refrigerated rail cars, it was impossible to bring her body back to New York for burial in a timely manner. Thus, Flora was buried far from her family's home in New York City. When I attend family violence research conferences in New Hampshire, I take pilgrimages to the old Jewish cemetery in Portland, Maine, where Flora is buried in a row of nine other women, also with no partners or children close by.

The first time I went to Portland, my great aunt Minnie, Flora's youngest and last surviving child, gave me the information to find the cemetery. Flora's gravesite is located four rows down from three majestic oaks. At her

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grave, I recounted the names of her family and gave her a family update. I knew just a few things about her life in America. I knew that when her children were young, she moved a lot; that she loved dogs (something we have in common); and that when she separated from her husband, she took back her maiden name, as did her four children.

When great aunt Minnie died 5 years ago, her daughter, Betty, passed on to my mother, Suzanne, who passed on to me, an exquisite black silk bolero-style vest with a soutache braid in a serpentine pattern that my great grandmother wore to this country. I took the vest to Laurel Wilson, the textile historian at my university, who immediately identified it as a commercially made, store-bought, late 1800s, turn-of-the-century Russian vest. "The person who had this vest had money," she said. I was stunned. That news did not fit with my sense of family history at all.

Growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, I was given only partial information about my family heritage. Like many grandchildren of immigrants, I was told that our family came to America to "make a better life." My paternal grandparents, Sylvia and Max Stillerman, also emigrated from Russia, and I asked my grandmother to tell me about growing up there. Nana Sylvia reluctantly told me a few stories about dropping out of school because bullies beat her and having to hide in the cellar when the Cossacks came through town. Things were bad in the old country, but wanting to protect young ears and hearts, as well as her own heart, Nana Sylvia avoided speaking of oppression, violence, or pogroms.

When I inherited Flora's vest, I realized just how little I knew of the specific circumstances surrounding her immigration to this country. When Sylvia and Max came to the United States, they helped bring other family members over. But would there be the same expectation for an 18-year-old woman who traveled more than 6,000 miles by herself? And what circumstances would account for parents allowing a young woman to make such a trip without knowing if they would ever see her again?

Through my cousin Betty, I learned that Flora's father Luis owned a tavern in Pinsk, once a thriving urban area where 70% of the population was Jewish. Pinsk, destroyed during the Holocaust, was located 138 miles southwest of Minsk, a major Jewish urban center. Betty also gave me excerpts from a well-researched, self-published book by Stephen Turett (1986), a fifth cousin, about his grandfather, who was the son of Flora's older sister, Sarah. Thus, my great great grandparents were his great grandparents, and this book provided some insights into the family and their environment.

For several centuries, Jewish life in Russia was marked by social, economic, and political oppression. The czars enacted more than 600 laws against Jews. In 1780, Catherine II ordered all Jews to register and live in what became known as the Pale of Settlement. By 1881, the Pale included 15 provinces in the northeastern and southwestern regions of European Russia, including Belarussia, Lithuania, the Ukraine, Bessarabia, and New Russia (Klier & Lambroza, 1992).

More than 4 million Jews lived in Russia, including nearly 3 million in the Pale itself. To Jews, staying within the Pale represented relative safety; going "beyond the Pale" was risky and dangerous. The Christian population saw Jews as their social, religious, and economic inferiors and rivals (Klier & Lambroza, 1992). Through the lens of anti-Semitism, Jews were seen as responsible for everything from delayed mail delivery to the prostitution of Christian girls (Berk, 1985). "The peasant saw the rich Jew as an exploiter, the poor Jew as a rival, and the intellectual Jew as a revolutionary," a view that was encouraged to focus attention away from fellow exploiters, rivals, and revolutionaries (Turett, 1986, p. 8).

Flora was born in 1882, during the first of the three biggest waves of anti-Jewish pogroms (1881 to 1884) and left the country before the second (1903 to 1906) and third waves (1919 to 1921) markedly devastated the Jewish population (Klier & Lambroza, 1992). Disguised as spontaneous riots, pogroms were well-organized violent actions that were designed to terrorize the Jewish population and ultimately drive them from their lands and lives. In 1881, one of the participants in the assassination of Alexander II was a Jewish woman, Gessia Gelfman, and her participation in the insurgency helped to stoke the already strong anti-Jewish sentiments of the Russians. During the first wave, pogroms were recorded in 259 villages, 4 Jewish agricultural colonies, and 36 large towns. Within 2 years, hundreds of Jews were killed, wounded, mutilated, and raped (Berk, 1985).

From 1881 to 1914, almost 2 million Jews left Russia, about 75% of them going to the United States (Berk, 1985). A Danish account of Russian Jews waiting to leave for America at the Berlin railroad station included "idealists with no direct experience of the pogroms and families who had lost sons, daughters, and husbands to the pogromshchiks (participants in the pogroms) and *women and girls who had been raped* [italics added]" (Berk, 1985, p. 148).

Throughout history, Jews and women, in general, have always shared the role of scapegoat (Dworkin, 2000). Jewish women had a double whammy; they were instruments of the devil for being Jewish and for being women. Like Black women, Jewish women were stereotyped as seductresses and blamed for the rapes that they suffered (Brownmiller, 1975; hooks, 1981). Rape has always accompanied war and genocide (Brownmiller, 1975; Dworkin, 2000). Women of enemies are considered the booty, the spoils of war. And aggressors consider the raping of enemy women in front of their men the ultimate in humiliation and disgrace. Women were raped from biblical times to the concentration camps of World War II. Recently, when I listened to the latest news on the radio about the Sudan, I heard the reporter say, "the rapes are really bad."

Brownmiller (1975) collected a number of accounts of rape during the pogroms. A Russian Red Cross report stated that although the pogrom's gang broke into "Jewish houses killing without distinction of age and sex everyone they met, with the exception of women, who are bestially violated before they are murdered" (Brownmiller, 1975, p. 122). A report from the

pogrom in Kremenchug stated that 350 cases of rape were registered, including children as young as 12 and women aged 60. In Fastov, where 600 were killed and 1,200 were wounded, “the soldiers threw themselves upon the girls under age with a perfectly brutal fury and ravished them before the very eyes of their parents, powerless to interfere” (Brownmiller, 1975, p. 123). In Ekaterinoslav, “all Jewish houses in four streets were plundered and outrages committed upon hundreds of Jewish girls and many Jews killed” (Brownmiller, 1975, p. 123).

Like data on the incidence of sexual assaults today, there is no accurate count of how many women were raped during the pogroms. It is highly likely that the number of rapes was undercounted, because women were not likely to admit to being raped or to undergo medical examinations to certify the rapes (Brownmiller, 1975). The rape of Jewish women also posed dilemmas for the rabbis because it had been long held that a married woman who was raped was unfit to return to her husband’s bed. Being pragmatic, the rabbis suspended that edict during the pogroms (Brownmiller, 1975). However, today, punishing women for being raped is still prevalent all over the world.

Hideous accounts of the ways in which women were raped and tortured must have spread throughout the Pale. Families with economic means found ways to protect their most vulnerable members by sending them to safety. Perhaps Flora was sent to this country to keep her safe from the physical attacks against Jewish girls. Perhaps, like the women and girls at the Berlin railroad station, she was already a survivor of sexual violence, on her way to a new life and a chance to find a husband who did not know about this event in her life. I will never know. But I do know that the fear of rape must have been a fact of life for my great grandmother.

When I inherited Flora’s vest, I came to realize that my career in the movement to end violence against women may not be an accident. Perhaps it was karmic, or I had a genetic predisposition to the field. I was an undergraduate student in the early 1970s, during the reemergence of the feminist movement, and was part of a group that established a campus women’s center. We organized consciousness-raising groups; distributed information on birth control; held women’s conferences; and used rape as an inclusive organizing issue, relevant for all women of all races, ethnicities, ages, and sexual orientations. We learned that the personal was political—that what happens to an individual woman may be a consequence of institutional and structural bias against all women.

Like others in the violence against women field, I have always been passionate about this work. I was not sure where the passion came from; it was just there. I called it “finding my niche.” And so remembering the lessons learned from the second wave of feminism and honoring the memory of the woman for whom I am named, as well as my immigrant grandmother, I am reminded once again that the personal is indeed political and that the past connects with the present in ways that we do not always know.

How might my life have been different if I had grown up knowing that I came from people who had enough money to pay their daughter's passage to America? Would I have grown up in a family that was angry at having lost everything or grateful for our relative safety and an opportunity to start all over? Would I have embraced the profession of social work or stayed within the family tradition and opened a bar and grill, as my great great grandfather did? What if Flora could not find the courage to travel alone and stayed in Pinsk? Most likely, I would not have been born.

What would I ask Flora if I had a chance? I would ask her what it was like to be a young Jewish woman growing up in a country that institutionalized oppression against all Jews. I would ask her what it was like to travel alone as a single woman to America. Were there other single women traveling alone on the ship? Did she make friends with them? Did she organize them into a group for social and emotional support? What did they talk about? I would ask her about her strengths—the abilities that she had to help her make this journey. I would look for more commonalities between us. But would I have the chutzpah to ask my own great grandmother whether she suffered rape and abuse? Is this something one can ask of a family elder? Could I ask her this question as easily as I have trained myself to ask it of clients or as I have taught my students how to ask the question and break the silence? Would I regret not asking?

In summer 2004, I visited Russia, and although I knew we were not going anywhere close to Pinsk, I carried a picture of Flora with me. In this picture (see Figure 1), Flora exudes pride, resolve, steadfastness, and determination—traits that I have always associated with feminist social work. Flora's vest reminds me that I was deliberately sheltered from knowing about the cruelties against Jews, women, and Jewish women. But now I know. The courage and determination of Flora Fialkov and Sylvia Stillerman are the fuel for my passion to create safety and healing for all women.



Figure 1: Flora Fialkov, circa 1900

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