

My Mother (1911-2012)

Joram Piatigorsky

"How's Nana doing?" I asked my older sister, Jephtha, on the telephone. She and her husband, Dan, who live in Baltimore, were visiting my ailing, 100-year-old mother in Los Angeles. Nana – mother of two, grandmother of five, all boys, and great grandmother of ten – is what we called her for the last fifty years.

"She's not doing well," Jephtha said. "She's not eating and she's drinking very little, not enough to sustain her." We both knew the end was near.

I had gone to Los Angeles from my home in Bethesda, Maryland, to visit my mother Nana a month earlier. At that time she was at the tail end of a mild case of pneumonia, as if any amount of pneumonia could be mild for someone her age. Her blood pressure was low, her heart weak, her ankles swollen; the ravages of time. She did not want to go to a hospital and I couldn't inflict that upon her; she was better off at home with her long-time loyal Bulgarian caretaker, Ianka Petrova (we called her Iana). To make my mother more comfortable, the doctor had given her oxygen. He was not optimistic about her recovery. Neither was I.

Nana dozed off and on in her favorite armchair in the den as I sat on the too soft sofa next to her, my back aching, wracking



The Author and his Mother.

my mind for what to say. Small talk – the weather for example – was meaningless. A dying person doesn't care about sunshine or rain. I brought up the upcoming presidential campaign, for she was a devoted Obama supporter, but conversation quickly ran dry since political news had passed her by. She liked to talk about her grandsons and great grandchildren, but she had difficulty remembering which great grandchild belonged to which grandchild. I sat saying a word here and there. Why do we always assume that it's necessary to speak, to put the attention on ourselves, to put pressure for an answer?

Her adored and loyal pug, Sparky, lay next to her. How she loved that dog, her trusty companion for nine years that stayed by her side day and night. There's language without words. The television set in the room that my mother had used to watch Wimbledon and other major tennis championships in the past was dark and quiet. Her tennis rackets were gathering dust, and the many tennis tournament trophies she had won were stacked in an upstairs closet. It's strange how importance can fade with time. Books piled behind Nana remained un-

opened. An early draft of my unpublished novel was on the floor next to her chair. I printed it in large type so she could read it easily, but it was too late. After a few pages she lacked the energy to continue reading. I am not sure she liked it anyway. She could be a tough critic.

Elegant stone sculptures of birds and abstract shapes Nana had carved over the last fifty years stood like proud gravestones throughout the house. Paintings I'd seen for most of my 72 years decorated the walls, and African sculptures and masks that my father had bought cluttered tabletops and filled corners in her home, the very same home of my youth. Family pictures caught my eye wherever I looked. Generations fused haphazardly compressing time and mocking generational differences: photographs of Jephtha and me in our childhood stood alongside photographs of our parents and grandparents as well as those of our children and grandchildren. The paradox: death renders meaning and continuity to life.

Sure she forgot this and that as she approached the century mark, don't we all, especially as we age. But at no point was she ever senile. She had been confined to a wheelchair for a year or so, but her mind remained alert and observant. She noticed if I was wearing a new pair of socks or a belt or a watch she had not seen before. She remained curious about my science and writing and worried about *my* health throughout her old age. She never failed to

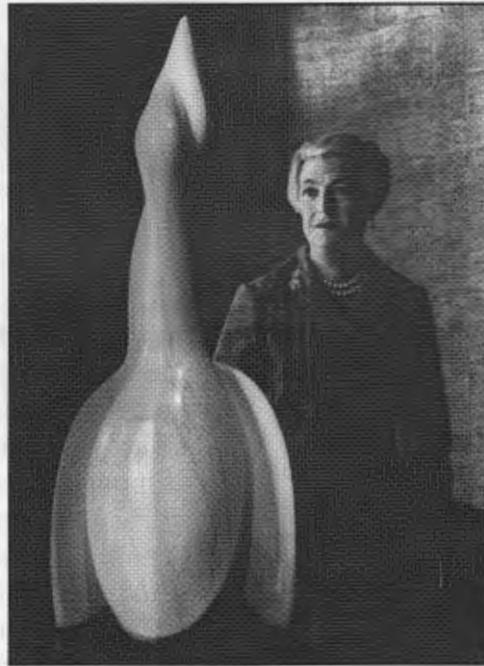
ask what my wife, Lona, was doing and to inquire about our two sons, Auran and Anton, and their families. She recognized everyone who came to visit her, and she had faithful friends and admirers. Although in need of a hearing aid, she recognized voices on the telephone and was always polite and relevant in conversation. In many ways she was the hub of the family ever since my father

died in 1976, maybe even before my father died: Nana the matriarch.

When my mother celebrated her hundredth birthday seven months earlier, she was in good spirits and alert. Reaching triple digits had been one of her goals, a self-inflicted competition against time itself. She planned to start counting backwards after that. With the help of Iana and her grandson, Eric (Jephtha and Dan's son), whom my mother depended on for so many things as she aged, Nana had organized her own party: made a guest list (at least 50

people, half of whom were family), hired caterers, specified the menu, arranged for a tent on the back lawn, bought flowers, the whole nine yards as the saying goes. It was her only self-indulgent expense I can remember, unless giving to others is counted among her extravagances.

Nana – Jacqueline – was born in France to the Rothschild banking clan in 1911. She married my father, Gregor Piatigorsky, the Russian-born, internationally-renowned cellist, in 1937. They were living in Paris in 1939, a notoriously dreaded time in Europe. Jephtha was two years old and I was minding my own business in my mother's womb one



Mother with her sculpture, Fusion.

day in September when my father took Jephtha for a stroll. The story goes that my mother's intuition screamed in her mind: get out before Hitler gets in! Her decisiveness, a life-altering trait she manifested numerous times in our family, shifted into high gear. She purchased tickets on a boat sailing to the United States from Le Havre and packed her bags and those of my father and sister while they were still out strolling, father and daughter. My mother had made up her mind: they had to leave France, immediately, that day, or perhaps the next. When they were on the ship and still in the harbor, France declared war on Germany. The captain hesitated to leave for the United States. They could have been torpedoed; it was war. What to do? After several days of anxiety with the ship still anchored, the captain decided to risk it and they sailed to the United States. The passage was safe. My mother had saved our lives and seeded many more to come.

Perhaps due to my father's intuition, which was as keen as my mother's, for he too was a survivor (that's another story), he had purchased land and a home in Elizabethtown, New York, in the Adirondacks while on concert tour a few years earlier. And so after reaching *terra firma* – the good old USA protected from the atrocities in Europe – my parents and Jephtha went to the serene, rural Adirondacks where I was born the following February. Throughout my youth and early adulthood we were a close-knit family of four – my mother, father, sister and I – refugees from Hitler and war – escaped Jews – writing a new chapter on foreign soil that became our home. If my mother and father were alive today there would be twenty-five in my immediate North American family, but my father died in 1976 (too much smoking: lung cancer), and my mother died last week as I write, on July 15, 2012 at 8:45 PM to be precise. Her death marked the end of a tumultuous and remarkable era.



Mother Jacqueline and father Gregor.

After Jephtha told me in a somber tone of voice that Nana was "not doing well," Lona and I made reservations to go to Los Angeles to see her one more time. I had made a similar trek thirty-six years earlier to see my cancer-riddled father a few days before he died. It is strange how last visits – transitions – persist so strongly in one's mind even after a lifetime of togetherness. I consider myself fortunate to have had a few days alone with each of my parents shortly before they died.

Jephtha and Dan, as well as Iana and Catalina, her house cleaner for many years, were at my mother's bedside when we arrived from the airport at six o'clock in the evening. She looked pale and small – shriveled. She lay on her right side in the hospital bed that the hospice had brought to her home the previous day. Her eyes were closed and she was breathing slowly and heavily. She was sedated with a trace of morphine and seemed comfortable, but who knows what was in her mind?

"She looks just like her mother," Jephtha said, her voice shaky. I pictured our grandmother, Baboushka, in her early nineties after a small stroke or two when Lona and I went to Paris to show her Auran, our one-year-old son – Baboushka's great grandson – before she died. Nana accompanied us. I understand what Jephtha meant when she saw the physical resemblance between Nana and Baboushka – between mother and grandmother from my perspective – but to me Nana looked like a shadow of the ghost of herself, a frame rather than the unique, original art. I was impressed how death, the perimeter of life, conquers passions and heartaches of its victims within the blink of an eye. Genes may replicate with fidelity, but personalities do not. I put my hand on Nana's. "Lona and I are here to see you," I said. I wanted to express more – tell her that I loved her – but it didn't come out. Maybe there were too many people about; I don't know. Intimacy needs privacy. What I felt was different from the euphemistic "love you" after a casual conversation or temporary good-bye that rolls off the tongue like water off oil. But sometimes words are necessary; at those times just being there is not enough. But, when are those times? Was my last glimpse of my seemingly unconscious mother one of those times?

We retired to the adjacent dining room to have dinner while Iana remained with my mother. A few minutes later Iana came into the dining room and said, "I think she has stopped breathing." Iana looked drawn, her eyes fatigued. We went to see for ourselves. Dan, a neurologist, placed his hand on Nana's wrist. He shook his head; no pulse. He didn't need to tell us. We knew.

Was it a coincidence that my mother died within two hours after we arrived? When she was teetering on the edge between life and death for several days, Iana asked my mother to hold off dying for just a little while and wait for Lona and me, that we were on the way. It would be like my



Mother, Jephtha and Joram, 1948.

mother to defy death, to stare it down until she was ready. She was that type of person. She lived on her own terms. But if she had waited to die until we came, she must have felt my hand on hers and heard me say that we had come to see her, although she gave no hint that she had felt or heard anything. Yet, who are we to know what fills a dying mind, what human forces are at work? If I think she felt my presence for a last good-bye and felt my silent love, maybe that's enough. We must hold on to what gives us strength and peace, and dispense with the rest.

I find it difficult to think of my mother as gone. She was too strong a person and had too much influence on everyone to simply disappear. I believe she will remain in the minds and hearts of all of us who knew her for a long time. It is striking how many people told me after her death what a major influence she was for them. That was certainly true for me.

My mother was a quiet person, but that did not mean that she was unresponsive. It was uncanny how she heard what was in my heart and beneath my words whether I was young or old. She read the expression

on my face and knew whether I was sad or anxious or happy, even if I tried to hide it for one reason or another. She sensed what I was feeling even by the tone of my voice on the telephone. I could never fool her, which was sometimes exasperating. And when she spoke, she said precisely what she thought, whether it was what I wanted to hear or not: she was brutally honest and never self-serving. She never spoke to hear her own voice.

It is no secret that my mother was raised in luxury as all Rothschilds were. It is less well known that she struggled in emotional poverty. She had an English nanny that she hated, she was tutored at home in isolation from other children her age, and she saw her parents as if by appointment. She was a lonely little girl, unhappy, often scared and poorly understood. She felt herself a failure and deficient next to her younger sister, Bethsabée, whom the nanny preferred. No one told my mother she was capable and wonderful and able to achieve whatever she wanted to. Money never meant success for her. To a large extent it was the opposite: the wealth of her family gave her an extra urge to excel on her own merits, to prove her worth, which she did in spades throughout her life, and that was one of the most important lessons she taught me. Money does not make the person.

Personal achievements were second nature to my mother. She learned chess from her nurse as a child and played into her nineties. She won a bronze medal at the first Women's Chess Olympiad in the Netherlands in 1957 and finished second in the U. S. Women's Championship in 1965, disappointed not to be first. She won some forty national tennis championships in her senior years. She did not let physical hardships stand in her way. I remember once when she won a semi-finals tennis match despite great pain. She had unknowingly cracked her sternum moving a table the night before. And then there was the time in her early nineties when she broke the elbow of

her tennis arm falling on the court only to return to tennis three months after surgery. She studied piano in her youth, learned to play the bassoon on her own in Elizabethtown, joined an amateur orchestra, and composed an encore under the pseudonym Paul Ari that my father played in recital. Yet she did not consider herself musical. In her late forties she switched from painting in oils to sculpting marble and alabaster. She preferred the tactile, three-dimensional stone to the flat canvas. She had three solo exhibitions of her magnificent sculptures and sold a major piece called "Fusion" of two birds together that was displayed at the city hall of Beverly Hills in California. She was named one of nine Los Angeles Women of the Year in 1966. She published her autobiography (*Jump in the Waves*, St. Martins Press, 1988) and wrote other articles and short essays; all this, but modest to the end.

Jephta and I gave my mother a second chance for a happy childhood that she never had by joining us: she was both our mother and closest friend. She stayed with us when my father traveled on concert tours and never left our side. She swam with us at the beach, which she was never allowed to do as a girl because of a skin irritation (how dumb is that!). She played tennis with us, she went to movies with us, she stuck us in the side cart of her motorcycle and whizzed around Elizabethtown. She was game for adventure and even piloted an airplane (much to my father's horror). She taught me to play chess, but I was careful never to challenge her because it was too painful to get trounced. In a word, she enjoyed herself as we grew up: that was the impression I had then and still have today. She called us "the three musketeers." She was one of us and we were part of her second, happier childhood.

She helped me in so many ways that I cannot scratch the surface here and a few examples seem trivial. Yet they are not. I remember wanting desperately to know how to swim when I was about four. She cracked



Mother, nearly 100.

a chicken wishbone with me after dinner one night and when I got the big piece – the winning piece – she said that it meant my wish to be a swimmer would come true. There was no doubt in my mind that it would; she said it with such certainty. I barely slept that night excited to jump into the pristine Bouquet River in the morning. At the crack of dawn, off we went to see the miracle: I could swim! My mother's confidence in me and my confidence in her made it so.

And then there was the time that I played my first tennis tournament when I was fourteen and lost 6-0, 6-0. That was a horrible experience. But she dwelled on the points I had won. "You'll do better next time," she said. "I'm sure." She had no doubt and she was right again. Tennis became a bond between her and me. We even won the Hotel del Coronado Mother/Son Tournament in San Diego when I was a teen-ager. Ah, sweet victory!

When I was barely a C student in the fourth grade, she was thrilled if I got a B minus. That was her style. It would be wrong to say that she was not a judgmental person, she was, but she judged me by rewarding small improvements, always giving

me the impression that these were the beginnings of a larger prize at the horizon. Many small steps can lead to a long, successful journey, she said. For this, she led by example.

I think that my successes were her successes too, and when I could be a friend or helper to her, she was grateful. This made me closer to her. We both had a wonderful time when we went to watch Wimbledon together one year because it was a common interest in tennis, equally shared. But she would not have gone without me. I also think it consoled her when I accompanied her to Tel-Aviv when her sister Bethsabée died and she did not have to deal with

that alone. Closeness requires reciprocal bonds. I loved her as a mother and a friend, a person who understood me in depth and I, her, although necessarily to a lesser extent.

My mother was my teacher up until the last years of her life. Her philosophy was simple: if you are not growing, you are dying. There is no status quo. I watched her continue to experiment with new abstract styles of sculpting and new thoughts in her writing as she aged. Her article *Growing As We Age* that she published in 2003 starts as follows: "Eighty-eight is said to be a good age. But the bones were not told, so on the tennis court they crackle like castanets. But in the studio they are too busy to sing. Yes, eighty-eight still has future."

She always lived as if she had a future with more to do. Even at 96, she asked me for reassurance that she would not die young, like her brother Guy did at 98. Taken aback, I said, "How can you die young? It's too late." She smiled.

That is how I will remember her: smiling with a future.

My mother's article, Growing As We Age, can be read online at:
www.armchair.com/aware/aging1.html