

My Grandmother *Hanna Josefina*

by Marjorie Agosín

Translated from Spanish by Betty Jean Craigie

My grandmother Hanna Josefina died on July 29, 2002. Her two names, like the story of her life, reveal the extraordinary travels of her soul, the journeys she desired to take and those she did not. Her life, more than anything else, celebrated stability, as in her love for Chile, that long, narrow, mysterious country she never left. While my family joined that great human wave of exiles, emigrants, and dispossessed, forced to succumb to the vicissitudes of history, Hanna Josefina knew that she would find her security through her roots in the land of her birth, which turned out to be one of the most valuable legacies that she, perhaps unintentionally, would leave us: the sense of belonging to a place, the attachment to familiar things.

The physical distance that has separated us from my grandmother for over 30 years of exile prevented our presence at her burial. The farewell ceremony, imagined from afar, is incomprehensibly painful for people who have been prohibited, by either the force of history or the will of its victims, from returning to the homeland. For those who have forever lived in one place, births, marriages, and deaths form a natural part of daily life. But for those estranged from their homeland, these ceremonial events evoke envy and inexpressible nostalgia: simultaneously the desire to be there and the recognition that exile delineates borders that can never be crossed again, borders that appear only in the maps of the imagination and the soul.

My grandmother died in the company of the faithful family maid, Delfina Nahuenhual, who never abandoned her. Delfina is for us a Mapuche princess warrior—short of stature and occasionally short-tempered but loyal and persistent. Now Delfina is the one who occupies the home, the one who will tell us how my grandmother died and how she lived. Having lived with her day-in and day-out, Delfina is the person who will frame the memory of my grandmother and deliver to us her last days. We are left with only our

imagination, and our sporadic trips to the country that was once ours. We are foreign relatives, or guests, and we feel uneasy, unsure of who we are.

My grandmother died on a day of white clouds and black clouds, of sunshine and rain. She died as a Jew and was interred in the Jewish cemetery of El Belloto, where she rests on the outskirts of Viña del Mar. To reach it, one must cross the lavender fields of Limache, the mallow hills, the fruit and avocado plantations. It is a very small cemetery for the area's 1,000 Jewish people.

Our history may be discerned more easily perhaps among the dead than among the living. Walking through the Belloto cemetery, we begin to discover the story of our origins. That cemetery is the surest sign of permanence, enabling us to understand how we arrived in Chile, why we stayed, and how the country that took us in and gave us life then brought us self-recognition in death.

On nights of insomnia, I mentally wander through the Belloto cemetery. My father says that as a child he lived near a cemetery, where the dead were more familiar company to him than the living. For me, the cemetery has meant a homecoming, a journey where memory takes us beyond the tombstones. It is a space where one feels love and absence.

My grandmother Josefina lies behind my other two grandparents Abraham and Raquel Agosín. They are the ones who receive visitors, and their graves are the first the visitors encounter. My paternal grandparents were from Odessa, but they passed through many ports, many countries, before they arrived at their final destination, the city of Quillota in the central valley of Chile, where they prospered as tailors, following the trade they had learned in Russia, the only trade permitted to Jews. They lived in Chile for over 50 years. They learned to speak Spanish and to participate in local festivals. They educated their children, and they became beloved members of the community. Although they wore

odd clothes—they were Russian eccentrics in the little town of Quillota—nobody pried into their lives or their background. For them, Chile was a place of peace, a safe haven, where they could erase their past as tormented refugees and achieve their long desired repose, in life and in death.

Josefina was born in the New World in the year 1904 in Buenos Aires, in the Jewish district of Calle Once. She was the daughter of a tailor and a seamstress who, according to legend, sewed for the czarina at her summer palace in Odessa. Russian was one of her first languages, as was Yiddish, but she gave up both in her love for Spanish. I don't know whether she retained any of the Russian songs her mother, Sofia, would sing to her, but Chepita—as we all called her—clung passionately to her new life in the country that would witness her joys and sorrows, the country that she made her own by her insistent attachment to a single place.

During her lifetime my grandmother recounted many of her experiences. She had a gift for telling stories. She would retell them, reinventing them, sometimes to maximize excitement and sometimes to minimize it, according to the mood of her audience. Listening to her turned me into a writer. My grandmother demanded respectful silence and complete attention. She would develop her characters fully, to show the extremes of their personalities, but she would reveal little about herself and would always maintain a personal barrier that I found impossible to cross. Even so, she had a reputation for frankness, which her friends considered both a virtue and a fault. I have thought often about the things she never said, and about the myths that little by little we created around her. But my grandmother was born to narrate the life of others and to hide her own secret sorrows in a mysterious trunk under her bed. She also had the habit of giving us sealed envelopes to open after her death. We still don't dare open the envelopes, preferring to leave them sealed, so that her words and promises may remain alive—because I want to love her and remember her in the fullness of her life. That may be why fate prevented my going to Chile to see her die.

My grandmother loved all aspects of dressing up, from the rice powder she used for her face to her big yellow straw hats. She said that she did not want to be buried because paradise was here in the music of the dance and in the tales that she, like Scheherazade, told to overcome her sorrows and bear witness to the living.

Relatives and friends say that the day my grandmother died the sky opened to let her pass through, and in the middle of the black clouds a rainbow appeared bright with the colors of heaven. That sign was an emblem of her life. My grandmother was not a gloomy person. She loved being with people, hearing the sound of the buses, sitting in cafés eating apple pie. She had no time for the rest that death offered her, so she fought death until finally she lost the battle, and then she went, in hopes of passing from one form of happiness to another.

I should tell how she arrived in Chile—her adventures



on the trip, her fears. For persecuted Jews, as for most other emigrants, life is not easy. For my great-grandfather Marcos, a tailor, competition with the other emigrants in Argentina was stiff. He had heard that in Chile gold sparkled in the streets and that the people there were generous and healthy. He reported that to my great-grandmother Sonia Sofia, who simply asked whether Chile would be good or bad for Jews. She always had her suitcases packed, ready to travel. So he told her that Chile would be good for Jews and that they should go. Sonia packed her belongings, of which there were few since she always had to pack in a hurry and thus would lose half her things, but she always managed to take her tape measure and her thimble.

My grandmother was only two years old at the time, and she was called Hanna, not Josefina. The three of them traveled on the trans-Andean train that took them from the port of Buenos Aires to Mendoza. Of that journey I know little. It was seldom mentioned, barely remembered. But I did learn of their traversing the mountains by mule. That story is the one that Josefina always told to begin the marvelous mythology of her life that she created for us. When they left Mendoza to cross the border into Chile, the immigration officials couldn't understand her name. They substituted a J for the H and called her Josefina. She always loved the name that an empress once bore, but she asked that she be called Chepita—not Chepa and certainly not Josefina. Thus, my

grandmother arrived in Chile with a brand new name and a beautiful history to make for herself.

At times when the two of us—my grandmother and me—went out on the balcony of her house in Viña del Mar to see the heavens sprinkled with stars like nocturnal gardens, she would talk about their crossing over the mountains at night, with the mule drivers singing, and she would tell about their enthralling solitude. She would say that her mother kissed her to ward off the mountain cold and that she still remembered the fierce wind that howled through the open spaces, through the strange stillness.

In spite of that unforgettable trip my grandmother was not a fan of long walks. She preferred to stay at home watching the clock. She did that often, and she loved feeling that time was not passing, though everything, and nothing, was happening. She would say to me that she did not like seeing the hours go by quickly. Permanence was what she held most dear, yet since she was a child she had liked to walk around the port of Valparaíso, and she would be overcome with emotions watching the arrival and departure of ships and the parting of lovers on the docks.

The family settled in Valparaíso in 1904. They were poor but enterprising. The astuteness and audacity of my great-grandfather enabled them to build a comfortable life for themselves fairly quickly, and enabled Josefina to honor her name. Her brother Gregorio told me that Josefina died like a queen, and I know that she certainly lived like a queen. In her youth she got the nickname “Princess of the Polanco Palace,” which is what people called the building they lived in. That turn-of-the-century building had the Pacific Ocean in front and the rolling hills that surrounded the city, each with its poetic name—Cerro Alegre, Hill of Happiness, and Cerro Las Mariposas, Butterfly Hill—behind it. From the balcony, my grandmother dreamed of long trips and adventures.

Josefina could go hear Caruso, dance with the prince of Hapsburg, own the first automobile in the district, wear a bathing suit, and in general take pleasure in the leisure that wealth provided. When my great-grandfather lost his fortune at the casino and her six younger siblings sank into poverty and despair, Josefina retained the look of a sultana, though without land and without palace. She kept her history locked within herself. She decided about that time to marry my grandfather, Joseph Halpern, or José, whom some called a “crazy German,” but whom she then—and I later—saw as a dreamer with deep green eyes dark as the forests of Chile.

When my grandmother got married, her family had already left the house in Polanco Palace, and her siblings were scattered throughout the district in boardinghouses. Her husband was elegant and noble, of good lineage according to the neighbors. I know that she cared deeply for him, but she couldn't follow the bold paths of his dreams. They lived together for more than 50 years, and she loved and respected him, but at a certain distance, as was her way, and she kept her secrets to herself until the end of her days.

The early years of my grandmother's marriage were shaped by her poverty and the country's economic depres-

sion. Once again she became the insecure traveler she was on that prophetic night in the Andes that would mark her character forever. This time, like her parents, she and her husband went to the north of Chile, almost to its Peruvian border, to the city of Guara. My grandmother told me the story often. In the latest version, the majestic mountains disappeared to open a pass to the desert through which they rode sadly to their new abode. Their house in Guara had a dirt floor, “just like the Arabs had,” she said.

I imagine her in Guara with red hair and silk clothes, which she managed to own despite their financial situation, tall and self-confident while facing an empty horizon in a world without water—and without hope. Now that she has died, I imagine that in her last days she had the look of despair that people have when they know they are near death. She frequently said that Guara was like this, like death, like the rough ground of abandoned cities and parks. After the passing of her first daughter, Eva, who was buried in a small blue casket next to their house, itself next to the cemetery, my grandmother stopped attending funerals. From then on she could not comprehend why Jews would throw clods of earth over their dead. My grandmother and death lived together in perpetual battle. The passage of time produced no reconciliation, and neither did her own demise. After their stay in Guara they moved to the city of Tacna, which was then part of Chile, not Peru. There my mother was born—given the name Frida, which in German means “peace.” My grandparents were still very poor, and my beautiful, delicate mother was bathed in the same watering trough where the animals were bathed before they were eaten. However, that didn't keep her from maturing into an elegant lady with the distinguished appearance and demeanor of her forebears.

Northern Chile had brought Josefina penury and loneliness. But she was a clever woman, with a heart as bold as her behavior. She left Tacna with her husband to go to southern Chile, to the city of Osorno, a place of water, rain, and flying fish. There my grandmother was happier because she could go out on the balcony of her house and feel the rhythms of heaven and earth.

My grandfather tried many different jobs, from traveling underwear salesman to owner of a small business. I want to remember him as the Viennese dreamer who created an association for the rescue of Jews during World War II. He was, actually, the whole association by himself, and he rode the dilapidated trains of southern Chile to bring back grieving Jews—orphans, homeless people, the godforsaken—to whom he gave refuge in his home and hope.

My grandmother's house in Osorno was forever noisy with the laughter of guests, and there were always many comings and goings. My grandmother was a generous hostess, whether presiding over the old yellow wooden house on the town plaza of Osorno or the houses they later had in Santiago. She required no rent, so nieces, nephews, distant cousins, and stray vagabonds came to spend time there. She used to say that she could give them only noodles, which

were inexpensive but nonetheless good for the soul. It seems that all these former guests came to her funeral, and they spoke about her, recalling in particular her frankness and her passion for truth.

The penultimate journey my grandmother took was to Santiago, where she lived for almost 50 years. Jewish refugees were the first visitors to her house on Errazuriz Street, and also to the house at 4898 Simón Bolívar, which we called *la palmera* because it has a big palm tree in the yard. It was just across the street from my house, and I had only to cross over at the corner to be there. That house of my grandmother's is the one I loved most, and the one I best remember, because I spent a good part of my childhood there with her. She would wait at her gate for me to return from school and would give me delicious ice cream before dinner. On Sundays she would give me fried potatoes and Coca-Cola.

Josefina was not strict with her grandchildren. She demanded nothing of us—other than that we learn to be together without arguing. She was not exactly a pacifist, but she said quarrels brought nothing good, that parties were better, and that we should seek peace.

From time to time I would want to skip school, because the hard work wearied me. Then my grandmother would say to my mother that I could stay home, that what I might have learned in school that day I could always learn another day. I knew what advice my grandmother was giving my mother, and when she kissed me I winked at her. Josefina gave me everything I liked, even perhaps against her own will. She bought me a cat that annoyed our neighbor because it urinated on her roses. She bought me many little chicks, which I—in vain—tried to train. But best of all, she would accompany me wherever I wanted to go without asking questions, and she always carried her transistor radio to catch the latest news of robberies and other happenings. My grandmother was not a pessimist, but she did enjoy listening to reports on the crackling radio of the crimes in the neighborhood.

My grandmother and I would frequently go for tea to the Café Paula in the center of Santiago, where we would help ourselves to toast and huge cups of iced coffee with abundant servings of whipped cream, and where she would entertain me with tales of her travels. She loved Italy, Israel, and America; she referred to the last as a land of gangsters. Her commentary was not subtle. She spoke her mind, making clear to everybody exactly what she liked and what she hated. When I got older, she took me with her on trips to Brazil, New York, Savannah, the Elqui Valley where we visited Gabriela Mistral, and San Felipe de los Andes where we went to see Santa Teresita de los Andes, whose picture my grandmother carried in her wallet. My grandmother believed equally in saints and angels.

While she had great adventures abroad, my grandmother dreamed of returning to Valparaíso, where she once lived with her parents and siblings, where the hills reminded her of her first outings with her husband, José. To her, Valparaíso was a place of magic and permanence. She used to tell me that she knew of nothing more wonderful than watching the

glimmering lights on the hills at night. Whenever I would return to Chile, I would do the same: watch those lights on the hills and talk with my grandparents, and especially with my grandmother, who would always listen to me.

When my grandfather died in 1977, Josefina dismantled the enormous house on the corner with the palm tree and headed toward Viña del Mar, where she spent the last 25 years of her life.

The collapse of the Allende government in 1973, the rise of Pinochet, and the vicissitudes of exile divided our family, not just by national borders but also by politics. Our world seemed suddenly split between those who supported Allende and those who supported Pinochet. The political divisions caused fissures in the family that only time could repair. To those of us who emigrated, leaving our country felt like being loaned out to another. North America felt like a way station. We lived for letters, telephone calls, and the annual journey to Chile, which we always took in June, when the mountains looked bold and bright. My grandmother would ask us months in advance of our arrival what we would like her to cook for us—and she asked me the same thing just days before her death. I smiled, but I could not answer her.

For expatriates, contact with a past life, with beloved places, helps us to anchor ourselves, to define ourselves, but more than anything to navigate through the two worlds to which we belong—or rather, the two worlds in which we live. My dear Chepi belonged to Chile, to the land we left behind, and her weekly letters helped us to recapture our past, our childhood, which seemed suspended in an imaginary time.

The letters from my grandmother I keep in my nightstand with my most precious things, like the book in which I write down my poems and my dreams. Her letters reveal a remarkable interest in minutiae. My grandmother would describe in detail the daily lives of all the people she visited, the weather, what was blooming, and what was dying. And her handwriting always made us smile—big, exuberant characters, the i's dotted with large flowers. She would close with a grand flourish: "Your Chepita."

Those letters, sent every Monday, were the greatest treasure my grandmother left me. Through her words, her passion, her storytelling, she kept us connected. Thus I learned that writing requires many ingredients: a grandmother like mine; a talent for telling, retelling, and reinventing stories; and—perhaps the most essential—the knowledge that writing is indispensable play, the coming and going of fantastic ideas populating our daily lives.

During the years my grandmother lived in Viña del Mar, I visited her every summer. Our routine was to have coffee at midday and spend the time watching the passersby or the other café patrons. That street was her kingdom, and she was the sovereign of the numerous people—some she knew and some she did not—who greeted her. We talked about many things, most often about language and about the importance of keeping one's work, and about loyalty. We also spent endless hours speculating about the travels of family members.

This, she said, was what being Jewish was all about. Her voice, like her handwriting, radiated life.

My grandmother could remember everything about the places she had visited, such that she had no need to return to them. Such recall was another one of the virtues she instilled in me. I miss her now, for I will no longer receive her letters or hear her voice. I will never again have the thrill of knowing that she awaits my arrival in Chile. So I will have to resort to imagining that she's still there for me to write long letters about my dreams and my plans for the future. I know that in the space between the worlds we inhabit we are together.

Last night I felt that she was returning to me in the form of a butterfly, a red and mischievous butterfly. This morning when I awoke I imagined her blue satin blouse on my body. I want to visit her grave, though I know that she is everywhere and that she will come to me in the pleasures of life, which she so loved.

Josefina did not want to be buried in the ground. She did not want to be eaten by worms, she told me. But I know that she has become air and water and insubstantial things. That is why on the day she died the rain stopped and the sky turned into a cape of luminous pearl. Wrapped in her white sheet, she is smiling and telling stories.

I think that I will go back to Chile some day, to the city of Valparaíso, where I'll see her in the lights of the hills and hear her in the café. Josefina has not departed at all, only changed her course. She is quieter now; she likes to be still when facing the sun. She wants people to visit her and to leave colored stones—as Jews traditionally remember the dead—on her grave. More than anything, I think, she wants people to write to her, because writing alleviates one's sorrows, forestalls death, and creates permanence.

I was not able to say good-bye to my grandmother, but I believe that is the way she wanted it to be. We didn't like crying. We would don dark glasses and over the years would swear that we would always love each other and would see each other soon. I always feared her departure, and when it finally occurred I could not imagine a life without her. But I soon sensed that she had not gone, that she awaited my letters, that she wanted to give me the latest news about what was transpiring in her kingdom, such as the robbery of a carrot at the local market. So I began writing her a long letter, saying: Dear Grandmother, when you awaken from one dream to enter another I will be at your side in the great realm called memory, called love.

My grandmother was interred with all the rituals of Judaism. I will go back to Chile to visit her grave. But I will always remember her words that the true paradise is here on earth. My grandmother's faith existed in the zones of the spirit. For her, the sacred was the laughter of the people, the fruits of the orchard, the sea. She lived in the present as she lived in the pleasure she took from all that she encountered.

Before she died, she said that she wanted all her clothes to be donated to Hogar de Cristo for the poor children of Chile. For me, that is the way to live and die in peace, with the hope that Christians and Jews may live together in harmony.

I close my eyes as I finish this essay, sensing the caress of a copper-colored butterfly's fluttering wings. It is she who has lighted on my hands, hands that once held her face, hands that now write these words, which will be my path to memory.

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