

# WHAT BEING JEWISH MEANS TO ME



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Writer

I was forty years old when I discovered that I was of Jewish descent.

My father, who was born in Tsarist Russia early this century, witnessed pogroms and saw the evils of anti-Semitism at first hand. Lacking any religious conviction, he came to view being Jewish as burdensome, irrelevant, and downright dangerous. When he and my (non-Jewish) mother got married, they made the decision to hide his Jewishness from their children. I grew up knowing almost nothing about his past. His family, my mother told me, had all been killed in the Russian revolution; it was too painful for him to talk about it.

It wasn't until he died four years ago that I discovered the truth - that his family was Jewish, and that his parents, far from having been killed in the revolution, had fled to Poland, and were still living there when the Nazis invaded in 1939. Along with hundreds of thousands of other Jews, they were herded into the Warsaw Ghetto and deported from there to their deaths.

The discovery of my Jewish ancestry had a profound effect on me. The grandparents whose

faces I had never seen - whose names, even, had been kept secret from me - became a silent presence in my life. I began reading everything I could lay my hands on concerning Jewish history, culture, and tradition. The things I read spoke to me on a curiously personal level: I was not simply gathering information, I was reading about my own family, my people, steeping myself in the birthright which had been denied to me.

The more I learned, the stronger grew the bond between me and my Jewishness. I began studying with a rabbi in preparation for formal conversion, learning basic Hebrew, studying Torah, attending synagogue services. It amazed me how hungrily and how easily I took to it - almost as though it had been "in there" all along, just waiting to be awakened. When I stood before the Bet Din, the rabbinical court, and recited the Sh'ma, that most powerful and eloquent affirmation of Jewish faith and identity, it was one of the proudest moments of my life. Taking my murdered grandmother's name, Fania, I became a Jew at last.

The Holocaust has always loomed large in my consciousness. Its images haunted me long before I knew that my own grandparents might be among those starving, wraith-like figures in the photographs from the Warsaw Ghetto. Inevitably my sense of myself as a Jew has been heavily influenced by it.

For what happens to one Jew happens to all, and it is this very feeling of connectedness, of shared history and common experience, which makes being Jewish such a precious gift. As a Jew, I belong to an enormous, venerable, worldwide family, whose tragedies I mourn because they are my own, and whose triumphs I celebrate - often with shameless immodesty - as though they were those of a beloved sister or brother.

Some people dislike the term "conversion", preferring to call those who enter the Jewish family other than by birth "Jews by choice". Well, I am a Jew by choice, and if I had to choose again I'd choose Jewishness with all my heart, and without a second's hesitation - only this time I'd choose it forty years sooner.

*The American Jewish Committee is proud to present this message, the twelfth in a series, on the meaning of being Jewish today. The Jewish community offers an abundance of exciting intellectual, spiritual, and cultural opportunities that can enrich and enhance one's life. Jewishness can provide a sense of meaning and of belonging, and a connection to the ideals and aspirations of our people.*

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