Remembrance of Things Past

Visits to Kolkata honor a family’s eight generations | By Rahel Musleah

When there is a minyan anywhere in the city, there are only 18 stalwart Jews left in Kolkata—tonight there is a minyan. We sing traditional liturgical songs as well as “Gedera Tzar Me’od”—Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav’s transcendent words in Hebrew, followed by a Hindi translation, “Yeh sari duniyah, ek chota saput, ek chota saput...” The whole world is a very narrow bridge, and the most important thing is not to be afraid. The words originated in the Ukraine, but they could not be more appropriate. I feel myself a bridge, linking past and present, East and West.

Earlier in the day, looking for my links to the past, I walked with my group along Bowbazaar (now called BB Ganguly Road) toward No. 11, where my father had grown up amidst an extended family. We had called my great-aunts and uncle “the Bowbazzars” and their home, No. 11. But my last relative passed away in 2006, and I wondered what I would find. Memories from my previous visits are thinly veiled by a scrim of anticipation and trepidation.

Finally, we arrived at No. 11. A sign with my grandfather’s name used to hang it above my desk at home. Yet standing at the entrance, I foolishly expected I would still see it. The steps I climbed to get to the second-floor apartment, however, were exactly the same—winding, wooden, dusty. The group lined up behind me like a twisting row of dominoes. But when I reached the top of the stairs I stopped cold. The heavy wooden door was gone. There was no mezuzah or even the impression of one. I touched the space anyway, kissing it in my mind. I pushed the glass door open and walked inside to find a light, modern office. The Indian staff looked at me in bewilderment as I explained that my relatives used to live here. Though the heavy rosewood furniture was gone, and I doubted anything familiar remained, I asked if I could walk through anyway. “Come back tomorrow when the manager is in,” one of the women replied. My short visit would not permit a return, I responded. In that case, she said, “you cannot inspect it.”

I left, disappointed. At the Kolkata Jewish Cemetery the next morning, I thanked my great-grandfather for the sweet voice I was told he had, and which I hope I inherited. I leaned down and told my grandparents, whom I had never met, that I had visited Bowbazaar, that I had sung for them in Maghen David and that I carried them everywhere with me.

The author sits in her father’s synagogue seat.

Jewish India; they will witness my homecoming, the most personal part of a broader tour of the Indian subcontinent.

My heart is a brew of emotions as we turn down Canning Street. The heat of Maghen David rises dramatically in front of us. Its steeple topping a clock tower that dramatically in front of us. The steps I climbed to get to the second-floor apartment, however, were exactly the same—winding, wooden, dusty. The group lined up behind me like a twisting row of dominoes. But when I reached the top of the stairs I stopped cold. The heavy wooden door was gone. There was no mezuzah or even the impression of one. I touched the space anyway, kissing it in my mind. I pushed the glass door open and walked inside to find a light, modern office. The Indian staff looked at me in bewilderment as I explained that my relatives used to live here. Though the heavy rosewood furniture was gone, and I doubted anything familiar remained, I asked if I could walk through anyway. “Come back tomorrow when the manager is in,” one of the women replied. My short visit would not permit a return, I responded. In that case, she said, “you cannot inspect it.”

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Y ou could call it traffic, the dizzying crush of cars, bicycles, taxis, trucks and handcarts on Brabourne Road, the street that leads to the Maghen David Synagogue in Kolkata, formerly called Calcutta. Unable to cross, I am standing at the corner, gazing at the synagogue’s steeple, which pokes up unexpectedly into the sky like a lotty wizard’s hat. Despite its solid facade, it seems almost a mirage.

The Indian city I left for America with my family as a child of 6 has bewitched me like a distant lover for much of my life. I have returned twice before with family, and it’s been eight years since my last visit. This time, in 2015, I am leading a group of 20 travelers on a tour of...
One year later, I am back in Kolkata with another group. This time my daughter Shoshana, 23, accompanies me, her first trip to India. It is eye-opening to see everything through her eager youthfulness and, at the same time, her profound maturity. I take her to the family landmarks.

I am wiser now, so we have made an appointment at No. 11. The long rows of office cubicles provoke a sinking sense that we have come on a wild-goose chase—until I describe the veranda that once housed the sukkah. Suddenly, a set of keys is procured and a concealed door in the wood-paneled boardroom opens to reveal another door, this one slatted and dingy green, and then the screened-in porch. When the manager brings us tea on the veranda, the atmosphere changes. We are not strangers here anymore.

For Shoshana, the experience is one of trying to find connection. “I thought about all that had changed—but the history was still there in little hints of home,” she says later, acknowledging that despite the many stories she had heard it was difficult for her to feel connected with people she had never met.

We visit the cemetery, especially the grave of my grandmother Flora, for whom Shoshana is named. Many of the inscriptions have faded, but the words on my grandparents’ graves are vivid.

“IN THE CEMETERY, I TOLD MY GRANDPARENTS THAT I CARRIED THEM EVERYWHERE WITH ME.”

“I didn’t know my ancestors,” Shoshana says, “but I felt I could make them proud by who I’ve become. I do know Saba, and I could only imagine where he got his compassion and helpfulness and tradition—from his family.” We put some stones in our pockets to take back home to my parents, as if the rocks could vicariously transmit the powerful spirit of that moment.

Before Shabbat morning services at Maghen David that I am again privileged to lead, Shoshana sits in her grandfather’s seat and I sit in my grandfather’s seat—mirroring how my father and I sat here almost 20 years earlier. “I tried to channel Saba the child,” she says, wondering if he daydreamed when he sat by the open window. She is awestruck by the synagogue’s beauty and the energy she feels still coursing through it. In the balcony we find my mother’s seat. Shoshana has prepared a short aliyah, “a rite of passage,” she says. She has not read Torah in seven years, and though she is nervous, she is inspired by her savta’s dedication to reading Torah—her grandmother learned to read when she was 65.

Wrapped in the talit I made for her bat mitzvah with my sister’s help, sitting in the place her grandparents had started their lives together, Shoshana feels surrounded by family. The words she chants describe how the Israelites carried their knapsacks filled with matzah on their shoulders as they left Egypt. As she stands before the open Torah, the eighth generation of our family in India, the words she sings resonate beyond their original meaning.

“Misharotam tz’rurot b’simlotam al shichmam.” We carry our heritage with us. It can hardly be a coincidence.

Rahel Musleah, a frequent contributor to Hadassah Magazine, runs Jewish tours to India and speaks about its communities (explorejewishindia.com). For a longer version of this story, go to hadassahmagazine.org.