

IMMIGRATION – AND SECRETS

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Despite this issue's title, *Imagined Families*, I did not see the famous quote by John Gillis: "We all have two families, one that we live *with* and another we live *by*. We would like the two to be the same, but they are not" (Gillis 1996: xv). To me, this sentence seems to say all there is to be said about our relationship to families, in reality and in dream, and it has been an underlying theme in much of my own research.

All the articles in this issue look at "imagined families in mobile worlds", in which especially transnational families are the focus of research. It ties in well with my latest book from 2009: *Mors hemmelighed* (Mother's Secret: On the Track of a Jewish Immigrant History) and I will now explore some of my themes and discuss them in context with the articles in this issue.

My mother was French, born in Paris in 1923 and came to Denmark after the war to marry my Danish father. You could say that she thus founded a transnational family, since her parents stayed in France and she had to keep in touch with them, not through phone calls but through weekly letters. My grandmother died a year after my mother's wedding, so I never met her, but I knew her father, my "grand-père". My mother had no siblings, nor did we ever hear about any aunts or uncles or cousins. It seemed like my mother and her parents had appeared out of nowhere without any roots or kinship. This was a sharp contrast to my father who had a big family and whose mother's family had lived in our town for generations. On my paternal side of the family we were strongly rooted in Danish soil and we knew the history of the family.

Both my mother and grandfather were very proud of being French and I early on learned how brilliant France was: the language, the food, the climate, the culture – in short, that everything was better in France than in Denmark. As a very secular person my mother stressed the advantage of the separation of Church and State. Though she lived in Denmark and also seemed to like it, her cultural antenna was tuned in to France.

In 2004, six years after my mother's death, I started doing genealogical research. It suddenly occurred to me that I knew nothing about her parents nor her grandparents, and I had no clue as to where in France they were born. Imagine my surprise when I found out that her parents were not born in France at all but in Romania. It turned out that they were immigrants, and just had imagined themselves to be French. Even greater was my shock when I discovered that they were Jewish. My great-grandparents had fled Romania in 1899 to avoid the very bad conditions for Jews. The last surprise was to discover that my grandparents had lots of siblings and that my mother therefore had had many uncles, aunts and cousins. My mother was not without relatives as I had always believed. On the contrary, she had a whole world of kin.

Through more genealogical research, I managed to find some still living relatives. I asked them to tell me the story of my mother's family and help me solve the mystery of why they had been kept a secret. They said they had lost contact with my mother and her father after her marriage in Denmark, and since it was right after the war, when so many Jewish

families were uprooted they did not really wonder about it.

I learned about the tragic histories of several families on both my grandmothers' and grandfathers' side during the Second World War. Several members of the family had been deported to Auschwitz, and not all had returned. My grandfather lost his younger brother, who perished in the concentration camp together with his wife and two small children: my mothers' uncle, aunt, and cousins. I wondered if it was this tragedy that had made my mother and grandfather bury their family history and never whisper a word about kin – and certainly never mention being Jewish.

But it was not as simple as that. Though my mother never lied about her background she created a past as she would have liked it to be, emphasizing parts of it and being silent about other parts. One can't say that she made up her family since she never talked about her kin, only about her parents. But she and they imagined themselves to be their own ideal of a secular, French, intellectual, middle-class family when in reality they came from a Jewish immigrant working-class family.

My mothers' cousin told me that in the interwar years my mother and her parents had been part of the big Yiddish-speaking Jewish Eastern European immigrant community in Paris. They had been members of Jewish mutual aid societies, my great-grandparents were buried in the Jewish plot in the cemetery, they had all attended the Jewish holidays and my grandparents were married in a synagogue – after their civil marriage, as is the law in France. But my grandparents had stood out as something special among all their relatives. Everybody worked in the garment industry as tailors or seamstresses, which is typical for the Eastern European immigrants not only in France but also in England, the United States and Scandinavia.

Like immigrants from other countries such as the ones studied by Körber in this issue they had close networks and helped each other to jobs. But unlike the usual working migrants, these Eastern European Jews were refugees who had fled a country that treated them badly. It was not just one family who

left but their relatives, including grandparent, aunts, uncles, and newborns. This means that there was nobody left “back there” to keep in touch with and it also means that these refugees were eager to embrace their new country as their homeland.

My great-grandfather had a little workshop at home and employed some garment workers. My grandfather had been trained as a tailor. But, as my mothers' cousin said, my grandfather had ambitions. He wanted to climb the social ladder, he wanted to get out of the narrowness of immigrant society with all its social control and enter the French middle class. And he managed. After his marriage to my grandmother – who was of course also a child of Romanian Jewish immigrants who were in the garment industry – he got a job as a salesman. He continued in the same trade, since it was fabric he was selling but at least he was no longer confined to a small workshop where they gossiped in Yiddish all day long. My mother's cousin also said that he was always elegantly dressed, spoke correct French, had refined manners and looked down upon his more shabby relatives with their deplorable accents.

My purpose in telling this – and in publishing the story in my book – is to show that my mother and her parents created an image of themselves as they wanted to be. They are in a way an imagined family, though they did not imagine their relatives to be something else. They knew all too well the family they, in Gillis' sense, lived *with*, but they created themselves anew. They are a splendid example of how modernity allows you to untie yourself from kin and to construct the life of your dreams.

I have no idea what the emotional costs of that liberation must have been and I am sure it was not without pain and solitude, but they must have found that their new life was worth it. Being Jewish was a burden, and during the war it was of course dangerous if people knew you were Jewish. I am sure my grandparents and my mother survived because they managed to pass themselves off as secular and French. But for them, being Jewish also meant being immigrant and working class and therefore they had to discard that part of their history.

In the introduction to this issue the authors write

about tracing “the special significance accorded to ‘memories and narratives’ in diasporically dispersed families, as ways of enabling a shared understanding of family in circumstances of separation” (Körber & Merkel, this issue, p. 7). In my family’s case their “memories and narratives” certainly take on a special meaning since the memories are very carefully selected and the narratives are created so that they fit in with a self-created new life.

In my book I place the little history of my family in the context of the bigger history of Eastern European Jewish immigrants. I write more generally about the garment industry, mutual aid societies, traditions and daily life, application for French nationality and the painful story of how France has coped with the wartime Vichy government. I have also looked closely at my own interest in doing this genealogical research that I apparently have in common with many other people. Of course in my case there has been the discovery of this big secret which in itself has changed the genealogical research into a detective story.

But I – who have always subscribed to a constructionist view of the world, who believe that we have feet and not roots, who praise a modernity that makes it possible for us to get rid of our histories and to create our own lives – nonetheless became very sentimental every time I got in touch with a still living relative. And even if that relative had never met my mother or was as remotely related to me as for instance my grandmothers’ mothers’ younger brothers’ youngest son, we felt an instant connection as soon as we met and still keep in touch as if we had been close relatives all our lives. Why have even I succumbed to the idea that you have something in common with distant kin? I still do not have the answer. I can only say that I am not just a clear-headed scholar but also a sentimental, ordinary person.

I do manage, however, to see the irony in genealogy as such. Genealogy attributes blood related kin enormous importance, even if we have never met them. There is also the self deception in believing that we are the direct descendants of our forefathers and foremothers, forgetting that we have to share

them with several other relatives: We all have two parents, four grandparents, eight great-grandparents, sixteen great-great-grandparents and so on. If we go back ten generations, to around the year 1700, we theoretically will have about two thousand direct ancestors. If we go back twenty generations it will be as much as about two million. So which one to choose as the ancestor we see ourselves as direct descendants of? By writing this book I have paid great attention to my four Jewish great-grandparents who emigrated from Romania to France. But they ought not be more important to me than my Danish great-grandparents, some of whom immigrated from Schleswig to the Faroe Islands to Greenland and then to Denmark. There seems to be a lot of mobility in my family.

Through genealogy we highlight blood related kin but downplay the importance other people have played in our lives. My mother and her parents created narratives where relatives had been written out of history and “families of choice” had been given great importance. Though my mother never mentioned her family beyond parents, she very often spoke of her friends from school with whom she formed life-long friendships. She also fondly recalled neighbors she named aunt and uncle, whom she and her parents had chosen as their relatives. In that respect this story is not only about “transnational families” but also about “imagined families in mobile worlds” just like the theme of this issue.

References

- Gillis, J. 1996: *A World of their own Making: Myth, Ritual, and the Quest for Family Values*. New York: Basic Books.
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