

BUBBEH FAYGA

By Irving Schreiber

In 1926, an eighty-year-old Jewish woman who came from a shtetl in Bessarabia, who wore a *sheytl* (wig) with a bun in the back and who spoke no English, was traveling by herself when she fell down a flight of stairs at the Union Square IRT subway station in Manhattan. As a result, her skull was fractured. She did not lose consciousness and, although she couldn't speak English, she somehow was able to convince the medics and the police that she not be taken to a hospital but be transported to her home in the Bronx (actually, the home of her daughter and son-in-law with whom she lived). After six months in bed, she fully recovered from her injuries. Five years later, this woman was struck by a taxicab as she was crossing Vyse Avenue in the Bronx. This time, the result was a fractured leg bone. Again, she refused to go to a hospital and after long confinement in bed, she achieved a full recovery. And during all of this time, this woman was suffering with chronic high blood pressure. She continued to live and function quite well for about another ten years after recovering from the leg fracture. That woman was my Bubbeh Fayga.

Although I never was as close to my grandmother (my father's mother) as a number of my cousins were, I was always aware of Bubbeh Fayga's powerful presence within the family. My contacts with Bubbeh were limited to the occasional visits she made to us in Brooklyn and the dutiful visits to the Bronx that my father,

mother, sister, and I made periodically to see Bubbeh and our other relatives who lived in that alien territory (double carfare and an hour-and-a-half subway ride from Bensonhurst where we lived). Those of my cousins who lived in the Bronx and Philadelphia, where Bubbeh also spent much time, saw Bubbeh on almost a daily basis.

I should point out that all nineteen of Bubbeh Fayga's grandchildren called her "Bubbeh Fayga" or "Bubbeh," never "Bubbie" (we would never think of using such a "cutesy" term to equate with our grandmother). Bubbeh was held in great esteem by her children, her in-laws, and her grandchildren. (My mother addressed Bubbeh as "*Schviger*" [Mother-In-Law], intended as a term of respect.) While Bubbeh had a strong personality and often took arbitrary action which was rarely if ever criticized, she had no independent means of support and relied on her children and especially her son-in-law for her economic existence.

Much of what I remember about Bubbeh Fayga is anecdotal. My cousins in the Bronx and Philadelphia are the sources of most of these anecdotes; some came from my mother and father.

I was born at home and Bubbeh was involved in overseeing my mother's giving birth to me. Bubbeh instructed my father when it was time for him to go fetch the doctor. When the doctor told my father that there was still time and he (the doctor) would come over in a little while, Bubbeh ordered my father to go right back to the doctor and tell him that Bubbeh insisted that he come over immediately. The doctor arrived immediately and not a moment too soon.

According to my cousin Joe, who lived with Bubbeh until he got married, Bubbeh had that doctor bamboozled. When anyone in the house was sick and the doctor was called, Bubbeh would thank him and bless him profusely, holding onto his hands, and promise to pay him (probably fifty cents or a dollar) sometimes soon. And the doctor would leave unpaid. Eventually, I believe, the doctor was paid. But Bubbeh always went through that procedure, according to Joe. I believe my Uncle 'Srool, Bubbeh's son-in-law, in whose home she lived, could and would have paid the doctor on the spot. During the First World War, again, according to Joe, Bubbeh pressured the doctor to keep my father and his younger brother, my Uncle Bennie, from being drafted. The doctor was a member of the local Draft Board. Neither my father nor Bennie was drafted; whether Bubbeh's pressure on the doctor had anything to do with that I do not know.

My favorite recollections of Bubbeh and me involve her visits to us in Bensonhurst. When we were alerted that Bubbeh was coming, I was delegated to go the BMT station at Bay Parkway and wait for her and lead her to our house. The big moment for me (I was about seven years old at that time) came shortly after she arrived. On the way to our house, she would hand me a full five-cent Hershey bar. At best, from time to time, I would be able pick up a small part of a Hershey bar for a penny at the candy store. And here I had a whole nickel bar for myself. "For myself" is a substantial misstatement. When the kids on the block saw me with Bubbeh Fayga, they knew that I had come into possession of a whole five-cent Hershey bar. So, I was immediately besieged by a legion of "friends." Bubbeh Fayga was also good for some coins before she left, about twenty-five cents worth.

Bubbeh once told my father that he should make sure that I always had a little money and that my mother didn't have to know about it. I know that because it was *my mother* who told me this story.

According to my mother, Bubbeh could not be counted on to be a baby sitter. If the Khotiner Branch of the Workmen's Circle or any other organization connected with the *landsleit* of Khotin was having a ball or banquet or other social gathering, Bubbeh was not about to baby sit some of her grandchildren while her children went to the affair. Bubbeh insisted on going to the party herself and be properly greeted by the *landsleit* from the old country who knew her personally or as the widow of *Yokhanan Der Malamed*, from which relationship she acquired the sobriquet *Di Yokhante*.

Bubbeh was apt, at any moment, to decide to go to Philadelphia from the Bronx, or vice versa. Sometimes, she would first stop off in Brooklyn to visit us or in Elizabeth, New Jersey, to visit her son, Harry, and his family. Keep in mind that but for some key words such as "Brooklyn," "West End Line," "New Jersey ferry," "the Bronx," and "Philadelphia," Bubbeh was a stranger to the English language. Yet she almost always traveled alone and invariably ended up at her intended destination.

She could start out in the morning at the elevated station of the IRT at Dayton Street in the Bronx and travel to our house in Bensonhurst, changing at Times Square for the BMT's West End Express. Bubbeh was never concerned about getting a seat on the subway. If there was no vacant seat readily available when she entered a subway car, she looked around for a young man seated and walked over

to him. She would tap him on the shoulder if necessary to get his attention and motion for him to relinquish his seat to her. In those days (the 1920's and 30's), it always worked. In today's times, I hate to think of what could happen.

After spending a few hours with us in Bensonhurst, Bubbeh would get on the West End Line to the 34th Street Station in Manhattan. She would then walk the long block from Herald Square to Penn Station where she would find a porter or any other uniformed individual, grab his elbow, and ask, "You Philadelphia?" Invariably, she would be led to the gate from which the train to Philadelphia was departing. On the train, she would repeat the "You Philadelphia?" routine with the conductor. Usually, that would assure that the conductor would see to it that Bubbeh detrained at Philadelphia's Broad Street station. But there were a few times when Bubbeh ended up in Wilmington or Baltimore and had to be put on a train going the other way to get her back to Philadelphia.

Sometimes, after leaving our house in Brooklyn, Bubbeh would head for Elizabeth, New Jersey. She managed to change trains properly to the Bay Ridge Local and get to the Cortlandt Street Station in Lower Manhattan whence she would find her way to the Hudson Terminal and the Central Railroad of New Jersey ferry. After leaving the ferry on the Jersey side, she would board the train to Elizabeth Port and visit her son Harry's family. That evening, she might still catch a train on the Pennsylvania Railroad from Elizabeth to Philadelphia.

It was always amazing to me how fearless Bubbeh seemed to be whereas her two daughters, Frima and Bessie, whose command of the English language,

while very limited, was far superior to Bubbeh's, were so timid. Neither of them would have dared to venture out on her own the way Bubbeh did.

A recurring theme in the anecdotes told by my cousins about Bubbeh Fayga is her attempt to ameliorate the immediate troubles of various members of the family, usually at the expense of other members of the family.

Bennie, Bubbeh's youngest child, rarely held a job very long and didn't try too hard to get another one when he lost one. Fanny, his wife, had to work very hard as a seamstress to scratch out a living for the family. My cousin Sylvia, Bennie's oldest child, has told this story many times:

On a Friday afternoon, Bubbeh would walk the few blocks from where she lived with her daughter Frima's family to where Bennie and his family lived. From the street, Bubbeh would call up to Sylvia and ask if there was enough food for the Sabbath. This public announcement that Bennie's family might not have enough food embarrassed my cousin Sylvia no end. She would rush to the window and call down to Grandma that there was plenty to eat, even if that was not true. But Bubbeh had her own suspicions. So, without bothering to ask Sylvia if there was enough to eat, she would sometimes just take the pot off Frima's stove and carry it over to Bennie's apartment. That that might leave my Tante Frima scrambling late Friday afternoon to put together a meal for that evening apparently didn't enter into Bubbeh's calculations.

My cousin Edythe, Aunt Frima's daughter, and thus a denizen of Bubbeh's Bronx base, recalls that when she was graduated from high school, her father (Uncle

'Srool) bought her a new coat with a fur collar. One of Bubbeh's six female grandchildren in Philadelphia needed a coat (or at least Bubbeh thought so). So Bubbeh, without telling anyone about it, just took Edythe's new coat with her when she went to Philadelphia. As soon as Edythe found out what had happened, she called her cousin in Philadelphia and had the coat sent back. But, according to other cousins, Bubbeh was guilty many times of transporting clothes between cousins whenever she thought the need existed, never consulting the parties involved about the propriety (or the need) of her actions.

Of course, I am sure that Bubbeh always felt that she was doing the right thing - a sort of a Robin Hood, trying to level out the differences between the haves and the have-nots, according to her perceptions.

My cousin Joe has told me of another way in which Bubbeh tried help improve the economic lot of the family. In this case, she relied on her experiences as a major economic provider for her family when they lived in Europe. As a *melamed*, my grandfather did not earn very much. Not all the children attending his *kheder* (the school where little boys were taught by rote their Hebrew ABC's and first prayers), paid full, or even partial, tuition. A *melamed* could not turn away a child whose parents couldn't afford to pay. So, Bubbeh Fayga raised chickens and also had a cow. Several times a week, she would go to the *yarid*, the marketplace, to sell chickens and milk. Many people couldn't afford to buy a whole chicken, so Bubbeh cut up the chickens and sold parts (long before Frank Perdue thought of it).

In the United States, during a major depression in the 1920's, Bubbeh got Uncle 'Srool (who was a cabinet maker) to build a stand for her and she (with the

help of my mother), bought whole chickens, cut them up and sold chicken parts from her stand in the lower East side, where they lived at that time. While the venture didn't last very long, it was successful while it lasted.

When Bubbeh Fayga died, she was about 93 years old. After Bubbeh's death, the cousins, whenever they get together (to this day), exchange anecdotes about Bubbeh. She was a memorable personage.

There is a Yiddish song, *Skrip Klezmer! Skripe*, about a wedding celebration. I own a recording by Aaron Lebedeff, the famous musical comedy star of the Yiddish Theater during the height of its popularity, singing it. Three lines near the end of the song are:

Uhn die mimah Masha

Luzt nisht schpeyin in kasha

Uhn shtipt zikh oyven ahn

which translates literally to, "And Aunt Masha doesn't let anyone spit in her kasha [groats], and pushes herself to the forefront." You can easily grasp the idiomatic meaning. Somehow, those lines remind me of Bubbeh Fayga.