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Inspired by a crumpled photograph, which lay forgotten in a bottom drawer, this book begins as the fictionalized account of an exciting and dramatic journey that one of Hilary Rudick’s ancestors makes to a new life in South Africa. It seems to promise deep insights into turn-of-the-century Jewish responses to the devastating pogroms in Eastern Europe and Russia that changed the lives and geographical location of so many survivors.

The book is actually more, and also less, than its excellent beginning. Ms. Rudick herself is the owner of the publishing house for this text, which she established in the same year as *Linking the Threads* made its debut. The greatest stumbling block to full enjoyment of the story is poor editing. The book is full of grammatical, spelling and punctuation errors, particularly in the beginning but also in every chapter, a puzzling distraction, because it is so easy to remedy. The other glaring flaw is that the book does not cohere, because it really tells a number of loosely related stories in puzzling sequences. The use of more adroit transition and strategically placed explanations could have solved this problem, too. If there were to be another edition, these adjustments would certainly strengthen both the narrative threads and the book’s significance.

Aside from a puzzling use of pronouns, the first part of the narrative, entitled “Zagare, Lithuania 1905” is definitely the most interesting segment of the book’s three parts. Its nineteen chapters are invested with the reverence for Jewish life and ritual that characterized Orthodox communities at that time. They provide fascinating insights into the life and secret heart of Gitta, the author’s great grandmother. The use of Yiddish is adroit and often lightly comical. It is not difficult, intrusive or artificial, but an enrichment that may bring welcome memories for modern readers.

It would be interesting to know how the family that remained behind in Zagare managed to survive after their son Doniyel narrowly escaped conscription into the armed forces or worse by fleeing to South Africa. The story of how he and his friend established themselves with the help of jewels taken from his mother’s handmade *chuppah* is remarkable, as is the description of how his mother labored over this *chuppah* and how it reflects her role in the closely-knit society of her time. This portion of the book can be warmly recommended, since it vividly evokes the historical experience of many ‘women in Judaism.’ Gitta was also the wife of a rabbi and the product of an arranged marriage. We have her picture on the book’s back cover accompanied by an intimate sense of her thoughts, hopes, and iron determination, all of which are illuminated by her deep faith in God.

The second part of the book is entitled “Walking in the Wilderness with Wilfred.” It jumps ahead two generations and vaults over chronology to describe Hilary’s trip to Vilnius in search of the very people she has just brought to such vivid life. The text is now a first-person narrative quite different in tone and intention from the first part. The narrative quickly backtracks many decades to the author’s marriage, which absorbs the largest segment of the text. Hilary’s husband develops a cancerous brain tumor after they have been married for only a few years. The author is in her twenties with three small...
children, one a newborn. Her husband lives in seriously impaired condition for more than twenty years, receiving experimental treatments in England and South Africa that necessitate long separations from Hilary’s children. The book has a radical new direction. It abandons the stories of previous generations and the Jewish faith that had been so integral to the first part of the text. In fact, the author confesses more than once that she is not sure she believes in God, but fails to explore this important topic in any depth. She continues to observe some Jewish holidays, but quite differently from her ancestors. It would have been interesting to hear more about this contrast.

Although she is describing a time of transition in South Africa, there is little reference to the institution of apartheid, the lives of the Africans who surround and serve her family or interesting aspects of everyday life. Instead, the narrative concentrates on the author’s continuous exhausted despair and feelings of isolation as her husband becomes increasingly withdrawn.

The third part of the book concerns emigration to England after Wilfred’s death. It includes scant information about Hilary’s artistic endeavors, her struggle to earn money and attempts to achieve naturalization as an English citizen. Her children and second husband do not become fully realized characters.

She slowly becomes known for her modern chuppahs, a parallel with her early ancestor that contains the essence of the book’s symbolism and might well have been further explored. There could be more information about Hilary’s art, how it is marketed and how it returns to Lithuania, closing the circle of artistic kinship with her great grandmother. Instead we experience random emphases on personal feelings and not enough narrative continuity.

Linking the Threads consists of many stories. It is a fascinating exploration of one kind of Eastern European Jewish experience. It is also the very secular and self-pitying tale of the burdens a young woman endures because of her husband’s worsening illness. The similarity of his disease to Alzheimer’s is not remarked upon by the author but might serve as a sad commentary on this problem today. Finally it becomes a story loosely situated in Jewish tradition that describes a gifted and determined widow’s escape from unexplained turmoil in South Africa to make a new start for herself in England. The author is a talented storyteller whose narrative spans continents and generations. It contains many fascinating and painful vignettes but ultimately fails to adequately link the threads.