



WHEN GRANDMA DIED

by Judy A. Cooperberg

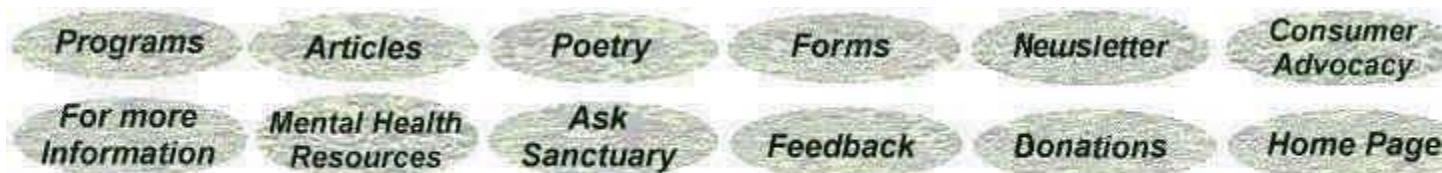
It was a very solemn occasion, the first time any of us had been to a reading of a will. My grandmother had died at the age of 89 and we gathered in her apartment - her two children, five grandchildren and two great grandchildren. I was the one to be disinherited. Shock was everyone's reaction, their sympathetic faces turned to me as I prayed to be anywhere else but in that room. My mind shut out everything around me but the knick-knacks, photos and smells reminding me of years gone by. Grandma was always my baby-sitter when my parents went on vacation or took my brothers camping. She proudly displayed me to her friends at the lavish fundraising luncheons for which she frequently volunteered. I helped her with her shopping and other tasks which required reading English. Although a fiercely independent woman, she never learned to read other than Yiddish. The simple task of reading her mail to her made me feel that I was giving back to her some of the support and love she had given me. I did anything and everything I could to please her. When I was away at college, I found someone who helped me write a letter to grandma in her native Yiddish. She was absolutely thrilled! In researching my family tree for a college course, I spent hours and hours with her, rummaging through old photos and listening to her historical reminiscences of our family in old Russia. I ached with her as she identified pictures of her sisters, brothers and their families, taken soon before they were murdered by Nazis. She was entrusting me with the gift of our heritage and I felt humbled.... So why did she hate me? How could a sweet little old lady - a grandma - hate her grandchild? I had struggled with those feelings for the past few years, as I had felt her growing contempt towards me and sadly puzzled over it. Finally, after three days of sobbing over the reality of her hatred, the tangible truth of her disdain for me, I asked my mother what I had ever done to Grandma? "She could never understand, and never forgive you for having been sick. She thought that you should never have been 'in one of those places'". Almost immediately, the boiling anger dwindled down to a palpable simmer. It made sense. The irony, I told my mother, was that in the mental health community, I am considered an "expert" in the area of stigma and attitudes. But I couldn't recognize it in my own family! I had suffered from depression most of my life, beginning in early childhood. At 17, I went into treatment and after my father died in 1978 my depressions grew worse. I was hospitalized at the age of 23 in February 1979. This began a series of 15 hospitalizations within three years. Suffering from major depression and a dissociative disorder I attempted suicide several times and led a wretched existence. My recovery in 1982 was dramatic and arduous. I was hired by the Mental Health Association in Los Angeles County that year, as a Regional Director. My dream of publishing my poetry came to fruition in two editions - *From the Pit* and *Beyond Twilight*. *Beyond Twilight* is used in treatment facilities around the country and by Dr. Arthur Lerner, the founder and director of the Poetry Therapy Institute. Newspaper articles, radio and television appearances have provided forums for my attempts at dispelling myths about mental illness and to share my personal experiences. In 1987, I received a master's degree in Education from Mount St. Mary's College in Los Angeles. My

private practice as a consultant and lecturer is very successful. But a little old lady who came from Eastern Europe to Ellis Island in 1921 didn't understand that her granddaughter didn't hold on to the shame that she ignorantly held on to. And the granddaughter, who lived through the hell of mental illness and rose to a heightened sense of self-esteem, of success and happiness, ignorantly assumed that those eight years of recovery erased the shame and confusion of her family. This has been a difficult period for me, but I can accept it as a poignant reminder. The legacy of mental illness is an uneasy inheritance.

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