

Esther Cohen's Personal Story



My mother's mother, my favorite grandmother, was an immigrant who as a girl lived in a middle-sized town in Rumania, called Bacau, and then moved, a married teenager, to Grand Forks, North Dakota with her husband, older than she was, a Rumanian man named Shmuel Markovitz.

He died when she was still in her thirties, leaving her with a house, four children, and a meat market. What I know about her life is just a sparse outline. I've always wished I knew more. And a thousand times I've had the thought that I wished she'd written it all down.

In a path that was not so rational and not so clear, she moved to New Haven, Connecticut, and then to Beverly Hills, where she lived in a small apartment with her only son Alex, next door to Rosemary Clooney's mother (and George Clooney's grandmother!). Eventually Alex married Bea, a widow from Los Angeles and my grandmother continued living in California for nearly twenty years.

Although she was a letter writer — she wrote to her children every single week always on thin sheets of onionskin paper, always with a blue ballpoint pen — her letters were more or less identical: she'd begin with the weather. Because she lived in Los Angeles the weather was always fine. She didn't tell us much about the inside of her life, about what she felt and what she feared. She loved us all, but we didn't know much more than that. What she'd recount were social details: she played cards with her girlfriends and ate different flavors of ice cream she tried at Baskin Robbins on her block.

My grandmother never learned to drive. She'd walk wherever she had to go or take a bus. She did tell us about Baskin Robbins though. Because she loved their ice cream.

Baskin-Robbins was founded in 1945 in Glendale, California by Burton Baskin and Irvine Robbins, ice cream enthusiasts and brothers-in-law, whose passion inspired what is now the world's largest chain of ice cream specialty shops. (What was once a selection of 31 flavors, a different ice cream flavor for each day of the month, has grown to more than 1,400 in its flavor library now with 80,000 stores.)

All these years later, I wish I knew more.

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Photograph by Matthew Septimus

