

## *The Last Address*

Henri Cartier-Bresson said that photographers deal in things which are continually vanishing, and which no contrivance on earth can bring back again. Not even photography can bring these things back, except in the memory of those who knew them, or in the imaginations of those who did not.

—John Szarkowski

*Looking at Photographs:*

100 Pictures from the Collection of The Museum of Modern Art

My maternal grandfather often joked with me that his sisters were doctors and lawyers in the Soviet Union, while he was a dry cleaner in America. I loved to fan their pictures across the dining room table and imagine their lives uplifted after the Russian Revolution. Boxed up in a dark closet, these indelible, photogenic impressions have survived the worst ravages of time and light. But the familial faces are almost all nameless.



*Rosa*

Rosa, I am your first cousin once removed. I have admired your portrait and calligraphy my whole life. I am the granddaughter of Frank Rosen, whom you knew more familiarly as Efrim, or Ephraim, Rosenblatt, your mother's brother. After Frank died, my grandmother Bertha gave me a beat-up box with a few mementos tucked inside, including a tattered envelope with a Kiev address on it. It was here that I discovered your inquisitive expression—frozen in time like the day the photographer made the exposure.

Unbeknownst to you, Rosa, you became my muse. I made a montage fusing your portrait with other family artifacts from that box and an antiquated fur muff my grandmother also passed down to me. To my astonishment, rolled inside that musty garment were vestiges of my grandfather's childhood in Kiev. There was his *tallit*, or prayer shawl, from his Bar Mitzvah, which he celebrated a few short years before he embarked on his voyage to Malden, Massachusetts, to become "Frank Rosen." There was also a set of *tefillin*, or phylacteries, those square black-leather boxes containing scrolls of parchment engraved by a *sofer* (scribe), with biblical passages. The leather was frayed on the edges, signaling daily usage, but I never knew my grandfather to be pious. His father—your grandfather—was very devout, I heard, always immersed in his prayer books and religious study.



*Rachel Rosenblatt, Frank Rosen's Mother  
Photograph by Sobol  
Backside of Cabinet Portrait  
Berdichev, Ukraine, circa Early Twentieth Century*

Also in that carton of memorabilia was a solo portrait of Rachel, your grandmother. She's the woman after whom my mother was named. When I flipped her picture over, I was breathless. On the back of the cardboard mount, there is an illustration of a whimsical painter holding a palette and paintbrush. In thirty years of studying old photographs, I have never encountered such an enchanting, but peculiar, logo for a photographer. The invention of photography allowed the humble masses to sit for camera likenesses; painters' portraits were priced for the Czar's family and the upper class Brahmins in my town. Photography became the proletarian art form. Maybe that's why the photographer chose this logo. Even his name, Sobol, is woven into the picturesque design. The studio address—across the street from the Jewish Hospital in Berdichev—is still visible. Is this the atelier where you went for your portrait, or did you frequent another studio in Kiev?

I am curious about the pose you struck. Did the photographer instruct you to rest your elbows on the podium and then to nestle your hands under your chin to brace yourself for the long exposure? Did you tilt your head sideways and gaze into the camera, wondering who would contemplate your expression in generations to come?

The finished montage I created hung in a museum in 2006, and strangers admired your dark beauty and soulful eyes. Now the montage hangs at my mother's house. She was born in 1930, during the Depression. I wish I knew when and where you were born.

My mother, Ruth—your first cousin—recalls that my grandparents mailed one hundred dollars every month to the Kiev address on that envelope I found in the box. But then one month they received a notice from the post office saying there was no one named Rosenblatt living at 110 Mariinsko-Blagoveschenskaia anymore. According to my mother, my grandfather was distraught when he received the notice. My mother was about fourteen then, the same age as my daughter, Tamar, is at this writing. So that would have been in the 1940s, during the war.

Then my family never heard from you again, or from anyone else in the Rosenblatt family. One day in the 1960's, a man recognized my grandfather on the streets of Miami and began yelling "Ephraim, Ephraim." That's when my grandparents first heard about what had transpired—that all the Jews in the old Kiev neighborhood had been rounded up and taken to a ravine outside the city and shot, presumably by the Nazis. I was speechless when my grandmother told me. My grandfather's grief was so visceral—his face turned ashen as his eyes shrouded with moisture—that I never broached the subject with my grandparents again.

Nevertheless, I prayed that you survived by running east before the Germans stormed into Kiev on September 19, 1941. Or that somehow you survived the massacre. I read the eyewitness accounts in Ilya Ehrenburg and Vasily Grossman's *The Black Book*, so I know that "a handful of Kiev's Jews survived Babi Yar."<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps your mother intentionally ceased writing before the war, and burnt all the correspondence with her family in the West, in fear of Stalin's regime.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, my brother Paul, a journalist living in Moscow, tried to locate your address, but the taxi driver told him that the street didn't exist anymore and that the neighborhood was one of the districts the Soviets had razed to build Chernobyl. But recently I discovered that the taxi driver was mistaken. A Russian historian told me that in 1937, the city changed the name of the street to Saksaganskogo. So that would explain why they couldn't locate you and, perhaps, why my grandparents' letter never reached you.

On many occasions throughout my childhood, I asked my grandfather Frank why he left Russia, and he alluded to the pogroms. In a hushed voice laced with melancholy, he would tell me when we were alone, face to face at the kitchen table, how he had been at his sister's apartment (perhaps it is the same apartment where you were born) when Cossacks stormed in and incarcerated him for a few terrifying hours. On that day, he vowed to leave the country as soon as he was of age. And he did depart, as you know, never to return.

According to my mother, "His parents had enough money to send their two sons to America to avoid the draft." My grandfather never divulged much about his past; to the contrary, he told me ardently that all he wanted to be was an American.

English was the only language I ever heard my grandfather speak except for a *bisel* (little) Yiddish. But I noticed you wrote to him in Russian on the backside of your picture postcard. That's where I first saw your enchanting script. I even studied Russian to decipher your penmanship, which is like a work of art.

Regrettably, Rosa, you didn't date your picture, or pen an address on the postcard, but I presume your portrait didn't arrive in the torn envelope that was posted 1916. I scanned the postmark in my computer and magnified it four hundred times to verify the date.

So I am really confounded. The story and the dates don't match up. All I can tell you with certainty is that my grandmother, a year before she died, entrusted me with the family photographs from Kiev and the envelope, which she referred to regretfully as "the last address." She implored me never to throw the address out, because it is the only contact we have for you. And now you are lost, but your portrait is among my cherished possessions.

You know, Rosa, your countenance mirrors my daughter's. •

<sup>1</sup> Ilya Ehrenburg and Vasily Grossman, *The Black Book: The Ruthless Murder of Jews by German-Fascist Invaders Throughout the Temporarily-Occupied Regions of The Soviet Union and in the Death Camps of Poland During the War of 1941-1945* (Jerusalem: Yad Va Shem and Israel Research Institute of Contemporary Society, 1980, English Translation by Holocaust Publications, Inc., 1981), 11.



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