

Rescuing Shipwrecked Ancestors

A story in three generations



Sadia Shepard

It started with a promise to rescue a memory. Nana's voice and the story replay again and again, "A very long time ago, your ancestors left Israel in a ship – a big, wide wooden ship – and they were shipwrecked in India. They were Jews, but they settled in India. In the shipwreck they lost their Torahs, and they forgot their religion."

When Sadia Shepard made the promise to her grandmother, Nana, to go to Nana's birthplace, she had no idea where the journey would take her. Nana died just after Sadia made that promise. Nana had Jewish last rites and an unveiling ceremony, as is customary in the Jewish faith, but the fact that she did is quite extraordinary given that she lived the majority of her life (ages 16-82) as a Muslim. For Sadia Shepard, her grandmother's connection to Judaism was the starting point for her journey to rescue the memory of shipwrecked ancestors from oblivion. The end result is a story in three media (photo essay, film and memoir) that span across three faiths and three generations.

Shepard resolved to make a film "to represent Nana and the community (the Indian Jewish community) that Nana left behind. I hope that I have saved her Jewish life from becoming a mere footnote in our family history... that the path she walked would not die with her." She wanted to search out the Bene Israel community of today for her

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by Erica Lyons

grandmother, fearing that one day it would be no more. With reports of mass emigration to Israel and intermarriage, it seemed the community was possibly at risk of becoming not only a footnote in Shepard's family heritage but in Jewish history as well.

Shepard was India-bound on a Fulbright scholarship to make the film, *In Search of the Bene Israel*, when the photo essay and the book, *Girl from Foreign*, grew out of the same creative process, delving into different aspects of the same story. Shepard explains that *Girl from Foreign*, in a narrative format, was less linear and gave her the ability to express a much more personal side to the story.

Her grandmother's story began in India, where she was born into a Bene Israel family. She was known as Rachel Jacobs, a part of her life locked away. Sadia Shepard knew her as Nana, others by the name Rahat Siddiqi. When she secretly married a Muslim man who was both a friend to the family and her father's business partner, at the age of 16, she left her family, her faith and her name behind. Soon, just prior to the partition, she was to leave her country behind as well. To modern sensibilities it may seem impossible to imagine marriage completely divorcing a person from her prior life. Shepard explains that this needs to be understood within the historical context, a woman in her grandmother's time and culture and in native India often left her own family to join that of her husband.

To Shepard this was a great love story unlikely to occur today because of many factors including the political climate in India/Pakistan and the growing tension between Muslims and Jews. Likewise she also indicated that due to the decline in the Jewish population in India, the community is placing a greater importance on marrying within the faith.



Nana and Sadia in Denver, 1975

She explains that in her grandmother's world, Muslims and Jews were friends, neighbors and business partners. It was a moment of great social mixing.

When Nana married she agreed to raise her family as Muslim but her husband promised her a Jewish burial. In her final years, Shepard says, "Nana worried endlessly about the decision she had made to marry outside her faith...about whether life as a Muslim meant she could not die as a Jew as her husband had promised." She began to reconnect with the American Jewish community and attend synagogue services in her adopted home in Florida.

The title of the book, *Girl from Foreign*, rings throughout the narrative. As Shepard explains, 'from foreign' is a common phrase used in India to describe outsiders. Nana, returning to Judaism in her final years, a woman originally from India's ancient Jewish community that had migrated to raise her Muslim family in Pakistan and

then emigrated to the United States to be near her Muslim daughter with a Christian husband and mixed children, would have been quite foreign sitting in her southern Florida synagogue.

As is clear, Nana would have been that 'girl from foreign' several times throughout her life, including in the Boston suburb where she helped raise Sadia Shepard and her brother and in Pakistan where she was a Jewish Indian member of a large Muslim household. Shepard herself, the product of a mixed race marriage and mixed faiths, was perhaps 'that girl' in Boston and certainly was 'that girl' as she wandered around India in search of her grandmother's Bene Israel roots. As she says of the experience in India, "I can be pegged for an outsider right away...I am invisible." This is a sentiment that could have been shared by her grandmother as well.

The concept of 'from foreign' on so many layers, Shepard explains, "is a reference to myself, my grandmother, my mother,



Sadia & Nana in Newton, 1977

our cultural confusion – being lost in translation.” Shepard’s own mother, a Pakistani, Muslim exchange student was ‘that girl’ in the 1970s in the United States. That being said, Shepard’s mother and father, in a very 70s manner, were able to fashion their wedding by choosing parts from both of their faiths. She was not a product of her own mother’s, Nana’s, generation forced to leave her girlhood self behind. Their marriage was a great blend of both cultures.

When Shepard first discovered that her grandmother was Jewish, she remembers, “being fascinated by this idea.” The fascination was perhaps more with the discovery that someone you love had an entire identity that you know nothing about. This new layer of identity led Shepard to ask how alike and how different the three religions were. She often refers to her grandmother, who helped raise her, as her third parent and speaks fondly of interfaith discussions at her kitchen table with three parents representing

three faiths. She remarks that it was the America of the 1970s where people were embracing multiculturalism that made this type of dialogue and blended family possible.

Shepard acknowledges that she asked herself at one stage, “Can I choose between these faiths and traditions? Did I need to? Did I have a choice?” She grew to appreciate the “blessing of being accepted by multiple traditions.” Today she asserts, “I no longer feel the need to define myself as one thing. I am equally tied to multiple traditions.”

Reflecting on arriving in modern Mumbai, Shepard now proudly states, “Bombay has become a home to me. I can feel Nana’s presence. Her house is still there. It is part of the iconic architecture. Bombay is a reminder that these aren’t just stories.” She remarks on the fortune of having had the opportunity to take the journey. She acknowledges that even though time, culture and place defined the course of her grandmother’s life, Shepard herself

was not bound by such restrictions. Modern time, place and culture allowed her to travel throughout India to make her film, freedoms that would never have been possible for her grandmother and likely not her mother either.

Jewish Mumbai is now very different from the thriving Jewish Bombay Nana left behind when she was young. In the film, Shepard states there are only an estimated 3,500 Bene Israel left in Mumbai (approximately 5,000 in all of India). To put this number in perspective she says, “5,000 Jews within a population of one billion could easily fit in just one apartment block in Mumbai.” She says she came with the assumption that the community was in decline but suggests that the story is perhaps more complicated than that and is also perhaps changing. She is careful to not suggest a surge or great renaissance but she sees the community in a difference light and applauds “the tremendous community infrastructure and organizations that maintain and strengthen ties.” She sees the work of both AJJDC (American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee) and ORT (a world-wide Jewish charity with a focus on education and training) as instrumental in fostering connections.

Shepard explains that although the community initially left in mass for Israel without looking back, she sees the current community as much more fluid, able to travel back and forth between India and Israel. She suggests that India as a rising economic power will make this type of back and forth migration increasingly more feasible. She tempers her optimism though by saying, “I am not suggesting anything radical, just that the story does change slowly over time.”

Shepard herself has since made many trips to India and now feels very much at home there. She is able to feel her

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Nana at eighteen

Nana's presence and finds comfort in walking along the paths Nana traveled in her girlhood. With the same ease, she is also now able to move between her own other traditions. She visits Muslim cousins in Pakistan and was warmly received at the Karachi Literary Festival where she discussed her book and her multicultural heritage founded on three faiths. Festival aside, she expresses concern that "diversity in Pakistan today is now under attack. It is a place in crisis." This was quite different from the cosmopolitan Karachi that her grandmother lived in long ago.

Shepard has traveled between the United States and Pakistan to visit her

extended family since she was a child. With that same level of comfort, she now also visits cousins from her Jewish side in Israel. To many, this movement between Pakistan and Israel, Islam and Judaism is seemingly impossible. To Shepard, it is merely parts of the whole – finely woven pieces of her own tapestry of heritage and history. So, where is home to Shepard? "New York," she exclaims. "It is a city that takes you in and immediately becomes part of you."

If Nana could see film, Shepard knows that she would be delighted. It was a search through the history and future of the Bene Israel community. Shepard expresses deep satisfaction

in the knowledge that she was able to "reconstruct Nana's life pre-partition. I was able to go to many of the places she would have visited as a child, attend a service in a synagogue that she might have prayed in." Shepard says it was more than a mere curiosity to see what the places looked like. It was more of a quest to try to see the world through her grandmother's eyes.

Shepard has grown to appreciate the freedom not to choose between her multitude of faiths and traditions. She says she is "happy within multiple traditions in multiple layers of identity. While it is a blessing, it can also be a challenge," but Shepard has found a comfortable place in the middle with mastery of the "rare ability to go between cultures."

Recently married, Shepard was inspired by her own parents' wedding in 1973 and "the way they integrated the elements most important to them, creating something entirely new." Like her parents, she and her husband, a Scientist, chose to blend Scientology, Islam and Judaism. Like her parents, they "crafted a service to blend all their traditions and cultures and were able to draw on different elements of all of them. The ceremony incorporated and referenced each of these multiple traditions." They broke a glass and included carefully chosen readings from each of the different faiths. One of the last remaining Bene Israel cousins from Mumbai's Jewish community was in attendance and read a passage taken from the Talmud. In an almost literary crafted ending, this cousin is also named Rachel, after her grandmother.

"Mazel tov was shouted spontaneously," Shepard laughs, "Also quite unexpectedly, a surprise to even me, we danced the hora." For Rachel Jacobs, this would certainly be something to smile at. ✧