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A Bicycle Lesson

Paul Zakrzewski - Special To The Jewish Week



When my father called last winter to tell me that he and his second wife, Janina, had rented out their house in the Dominican Republic and were bound for Miami, I was caught off guard. He'd been promising to move for years, and privately I'd arrived at the obvious conclusion long before: Dad and Janina were ambivalent about leaving a country that kept them far away from the competitive, materialistic culture of North America both found alienating.

But the sudden change wasn't a complete surprise. My dad's life was nothing if not filled with fresh starts and second chances. Years ago, as a poor, struggling 25-year-old student, he'd left Brazil for Canada to be retrained as an engineer. It was there that he met my mother. Together they moved to half a dozen places — Cleveland, Caracas, Mexico City and Oakville, Ontario — each time having to rebuild a life left behind.

Sometimes he shed previous lives from necessity. In late 1942, as a 7-year-old boy, he was spirited across to the Aryan side of the Warsaw ghetto — spending a night hidden amid bloody and lice-infested bushels of Nazi uniforms in a ghetto “shop” — to live under an assumed identity with his courageous Polish nanny. Though their parents were killed, he and his older cousin, my aunt Bianka, avoided the fate of a million and a half Jewish children.

Decades and several fresh starts later, this time in the mid-1980s, my father found himself at a painful crossroads, unhappy with the choices he and my mother had made. My parents split up and he created another life, this time in the Dominican Republic, far away from many of those who loved him.

A month ago, Janina called to report that Dad had suffered a heart attack. It took awhile for her words to sink in. Certainly the move to Miami had been much more stressful than he'd anticipated but, I told myself after the initial shock, he would pull through. After all, here was a life was built on second chances. As it turned out, I was wrong. My dad died from a blood clot on Aug. 27, two weeks after quintuple bypass surgery.

Fresh beginnings, second chances. During the period of the High Holy Days, I am reminded that these are opportunities to change old ways, repair mistakes, and realign our way under the star of a renewed self-understanding. But a life of change hints at something else, too. People who, like my father, remake their lives at several junctures — as he did countless times in his nearly 69 years — display a special kind of courage, a possibly naïve but nevertheless bedrock faith that if you set on a new course you won't get too lost, and if you do, there won't be too many rocks to run you aground.

Courage is not a word I've normally associated with my dad, a man who kept moving and stayed hidden in many ways through out his life. But writing this now I see he was very courageous indeed.

One of the few memories I have of him from early childhood involves the period when he was teaching me to ride a bicycle. These lessons occurred in a crowded park in Mexico City, where we lived during the early 1970s. While these occasions sometimes ended badly, with me in tears, entangled in a bush at the end of a long, busy lane, they always began with promise. As we'd set off, I'd grasp the wobbly handlebars and pedal furiously, with my dad running alongside me, gripping the bar that looped at the

back of my seat. At some point he'd let go, stop running, and I would glide along blissfully unaware that he had disappeared.

My dad appeared and disappeared from my life a number of times since my parents divorced, though our estrangement wasn't always his doing. But I find myself wondering now, at 36 — nearly the same age as my dad at the time — if these early bike lessons didn't offer me some insight into how he saw his own life. After all, he had to learn to steer well, and pedal furiously — and on his own — from the time he was little, so imagining that guiding hand on his back must've been a force he could summon in himself from very early on.

I don't know how he did it, just as I don't know how he remade his life so many times. Maybe he felt as if he didn't have a choice, and acted the only way he knew how. Or maybe he always maintained that private equilibrium that I could only feel in the seconds when I thought he was still holding on to my bicycle. I don't know, and now this question, along with a million others, are part of his legacy to me. I do know that I love my father, and already miss him very much. n

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