

Dear Bassya

We have never met. Shortly after I met your grandson Stephen, you died. You died on the same night as his grandfather, his father's father. You were his mother's mother.

I don't know if we would have liked each other, but I like to think we would have. Your death made it impossible for me to get to know you. Except that it was me who found your letters to Philip, your second husband. And some of his letters to you.

Most of these letters are written in Hebrew and Yiddish, and I can read neither. But some of them are in English and I read them one afternoon in your house overlooking the San Francisco Bay, looking out at the Golden Gate Bridge and Alcatraz and the Marina Greens below. A house and home you had imagined in your letters long before it was built.

After Philip died, no one was very comfortable staying at the Marina Blvd house. Bennett, your oldest son, invited us to stay there when Stephen was attending a seminar in the area and we needed a place to sleep for the night. He also told us to take anything we fancy.

One of my first discoveries after Stephen left for his seminar were photo albums and the letters. For the rest of the day I was entranced in your life, enchanted by you. When Stephen returned I read the letters to him.

By then I had known some of your history. You married Sol young, an almost arranged marriage, not unusual for the times. Sol was away often on business trips. He sold wares to laborers in rural areas of California. In September of 1929 you had a daughter Lila with Sol. Lila is Stephen's mom.

While pregnant, you fell in love with Philip; you two met on the Yiddish stage in San Francisco. And you got divorced and ended up marrying Philip. Was it all puppy dogs and rainbows from there on out? You were granted a love that does not happen often, and I am sure it came with clouds here and there, but in the end your love survived all.

You were described to me as a Gypsy one day and dressing like a Japanese Geisha the next. You loved to entertain. You were a writer and self-published several books of poetry. You were eccentric. Perhaps even over the edge at times. But you and Philip took your grandson Stephen and his sister Lisa and his friend Paul to the Monterey Pop Festival in 1967.

It was good to know some of your history before reading these letters; it made for better understanding. At the same time these letters showed a woman no one had told me about. Perhaps no one knew this woman.

I had read your poetry books before and did not understand. But your letters made me understand. They were the annotations to your poetry.

I fell in love with you and am your fiercest defender now.