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## "Why Doesn't Mama Love Me?"

It was a busy week, like any other week: running the preschool, preparing kosher meals for the public, making time for family... the usual. But that week, my husband was away for Shabbos, and one question kept creeping into my mind: What can I do to make my home Shabbosdik and exciting?

Did you ever invite someone for a Shabbos meal and have them cancel at the last minute? What a disappointment! What's more disappointing is when the guests confirm that they are coming and then don't show up. Unfortunately, here in Ulyanovsk it happens to us almost every week. (The food is actually delicious – ask anyone who did show up.) This week, I decided, I'll invite women for the Shabbos meal who I know will show up on Friday night.

Natasha, the woman who helps us around the house (who isn't Jewish) has two Jewish friends and another non-Jewish friend. These four women spend lots of time together. If I invite them, they will look forward to it, they will plan it, and most importantly, they will actually show up. I will be able to count on having at least two Jewish women at the Shabbos table.

An hour and a half before Shabbos, Natasha and her friends arrived at my door. I showed them to my living room, brought them some tea, and joined them in their conversation. The atmosphere was pleasant; the women were very happy to be there. Yet Rima, one of the non-Jewish women, displayed unusual behavior. She stared at me



constantly with wide-open eyes, as if inspecting me.

After twenty minutes of her being in a daze, just staring at me and not participating in the conversation, she cleared her throat and said in a shaky voice, "You know something?"

We turned to her expectantly.

"My mother was Jewish," she said.

We were all stunned.

"Your mother was Jewish?"

She took a deep breath and told us the story in a voice filled with tears.

Rima was born in 1935 in Odessa, Ukraine, and was raised together with her four younger siblings. From a very young age, Rima noticed that her mother treated her differently than the rest of her siblings, giving her less attention and care. Rima was always served last, which meant that she got the leftovers. When there was an opportunity for education or a trip to the grandparents, Rima was always the last choice. Eventually, Rima realized that this behavior was intentional. Her mother clearly loved all the younger children and didn't show the same love to Rima.

Rima's mother made her take care of her younger siblings; she was responsible to cook food, to clean up, wash the laundry and babysit. But for some reason, no matter how much she helped and worked, her mother did not love her – of this Rima was certain.

When Rima became old enough to verbalize her feelings,

she began asking her father, "Why can Mama be a good mother for everyone and not for me?"

Rima asked this question many times, and at many different opportunities. Her father would answer her, "You're the oldest in the family; you can tolerate more work."

Even as a child, Rima understood that such answers were just a cover-up for something her parents did not want to reveal to her.

In 1977, when Rima was 42 years old and married with two children, her father was diagnosed with a severe case of tuberculosis. The doctors could do nothing for him, so they sent him home to spend whatever time he had left with family. For the next two months he lay in bed, surrounded by immediate family and close friends. Everyone knew that he was about to leave forever. He, too, knew exactly what was going on and prepared for his death.

One day, Rima was sitting with her father. It was just the two of them, alone in his room. "Please lock the door," he requested. "I'm about to die and I want you to know who you really are. I want to answer your question that I never answered truthfully.

"In 1933, when I was a young man, I married a beautiful Jewish girl. We were very happily married. After about a year, she became pregnant. Her parents both worked in the

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main theater of Odessa and I worked for the NKVD. Those years weren't easy for Jews. One day, my wife heard that they were rounding up Jews. My wife, late in her pregnancy, ran quickly to the theater to check up on her parents. Unfortunately, when she got there she found out that it was too late; both her parents had been taken away. Out of shock from the devastating blow, she went into labor and gave birth to a sweet baby girl right there in the theater. That adorable baby girl was you, Rima. I received word from the theater that my wife had given birth and then fled. The baby was there, waiting for me to come pick her up.

"I went to fetch you. As an inexperienced father without a wife, I felt that I did not have the ability to take care of you. I tried to find out what happened to your mother, but I never saw or heard from her again. I assume she was murdered by the Nazis, like her parents.

"I set you up in an orphanage on the condition that when



*Rabbi Yossi and Mrs. Suri Marozov*



*The Marozov children of Ulyanovsk, Russia. From R to L: Shlomie (5), Dovi (3) and Choni (1.5).*



*From L to R: Suri Marozov, Natasha and Rima*

I would marry again, I would come and take you back home with me. And so I did. I asked my second wife to adopt you and treat you like her own. I thought that if we didn't tell you she wasn't your real mother, it would work out better for you ... but it didn't..."

Shortly thereafter, Rima's father passed away.

At the next available opportunity, Rima traveled to Odessa, Ukraine, to see for herself the theater she was born in. When she got there, she was amazed to see the exact theater still in existence, exactly the way her father had described it. Inside, Rima found a bench and sat down. From the emotion that had built up inside, Rima dropped her face into her hands and burst into sobs. She cried bitter tears for the mother she had never known; for the void she had always felt, and for the truth that she finally now knew.

From a distance, an elderly woman, the keeper of the theater, had been watching Rima. When she saw that Rima was unable to calm down she went over to her to ask if she could be of any assistance. Rima's tears kept rolling down her cheeks. Finally she told the keeper the reason for her visit. The keeper looked at Rima for a long moment, then said, "What – it's really you?! I was there when your mother found out that her parents were taken away. I was the one who helped your mother through her emergency delivery here in the theater. I was there when your mother fled and I took care of you until your father came to get you." The two women embraced with great emotion. The theater keeper

held Rima tight, just as she had 42 years earlier, until Rima was able to compose herself.

Thirty years passed. During that time, Rima knew only that her mother had been Jewish. She knew nothing else about Judaism, nor did she admit her Jewish identity to anyone else.

After hearing Rima's story, we all sat in our chairs,



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unable to speak. I finally broke the silence. "Rima, it's time for us to light the Shabbos candles. Would you please join us?"

At age 76, Rima lit the Shabbos candles for the first time in her life.

The next week I presented her with some gifts: candlestick holders, a hundred tea lights, a Friday Lights kit and our Chabad calendar, so she has the candle-lighting times for Ulyanovsk. ■

*I'd like to thank my brother-in-law, Chaim Pape, for editing this story. To read more about our activities in Ulyanovsk, check out [www.jewishul.com](http://www.jewishul.com).*



*Rima shows us a picture of her father, her stepmother and the siblings she grew up with.*