

Molly's Diploma

By Samuel Greengus

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It was a spring day, late in the afternoon, and Gideon Maniker was sitting at his desk in front of a computer. Gideon wanted to write a letter to his granddaughters. He thought hard about how to write his letter; there was something important he wanted to tell them about the past but he wondered how they would receive it? Would the girls dismiss his letter as an exercise in nostalgia, faded reminiscences by a now elderly man? Or could he succeed in helping them understand that he wanted to impart a gift of perspective that he himself had only achieved after the passage of many years?

Gideon Maniker's granddaughters were young but no longer really girls. They were actually young women. The granddaughters were now all in College and one had just graduated. It was in fact this first graduation that set Gideon to thinking about writing this letter. Gideon was enormously proud of his granddaughters, of their grace and intelligence. Gideon did not want to burden them with the past. But he could not escape his deep desire to bring them into contact with the past that still lived on in his memory. When he was gone, who would remember to tell the story?

So Gideon sat down at his computer and began to collect his thoughts.

"My Dear Granddaughters,

I want you to know how proud and happy I feel about all you have accomplished. You have clearly benefited from the many opportunities now available to women for education and career. As you know, education of women for career is by no means a new thing for progressive groups living in the liberated societies of America and Western Europe. But you should remember that higher education was a new opportunity for my parents' generation, who emigrated from Tsarist Russia. I was lucky to be born in the

USA and had received all forms of education, both religious and secular but my mother, your great grandmother Mahlah, or Molly as she was called in the New World, did not get to benefit from this opportunity. As you approach or celebrate your own graduation, I feel the need to write this letter because of the link I see between you and the great-grandmother you never knew. I want you to know her story because I feel it is important for you to appreciate the privileges and opportunities that you enjoy today. You should not take your education for granted, as it has not always been that way for the women in the Maniker family.

My mother Molly was the middle child in a line of ten children—four boys and six girls. Her family supported education both for males and females; but there were different standards and expectations for boys and for girls. In the Old Country, before the Russian Revolution, girls were taught at home: memorizing their prayers and some to read Hebrew. This was all that there was for girls. The boys, on the other hand, were sent off to *heders* or “Hebrew Schools” to learn to read Hebrew, the prayer book, and rudiments of Bible. If they had scholastic interest, they might then also be sent to a *yeshiva* or a preparatory rabbinical academy, where they would learn Talmud, along with basic mathematics and, sometimes, to read and write Russian. Some of the boys might eventually become rabbinical scholars; but more often, they would grow restless after one or two years; and so they would go out into the world in search of a living and, later, a wife. Some boys, in search of secular learning, might apply for admission to a Russian gymnasium or high school; some might even eventually go to the university. But there were strict quotas on admission for Jewish students, as well as the need for a family to pay tuition, which many families might not easily afford. As for boys who lacked scholastic interest—and there were many who did not—for those boys, after a year or so in “Hebrew School,” they would be sent out into the world of work, apprenticing to craftsmen or other small business enterprises. And so it was for the older boys in Molly’s family: the eldest two brothers went to work early: one as a leather worker and the other became a baker. They had no further schooling. However, it was different for Molly’s younger two brothers. After the family immigrated to America, because of their young ages, the younger brothers were required to attend public school. This happened when the

family arrived in the USA and settled in Milwaukee. One of her younger brothers eventually went on to study at the university, as well as continuing his *yeshiva* studies. He eventually became a rabbi. But her other younger brother left public school as soon as he could legally do so; he worked as a salesman for a candy company.

I think it might be interesting for you to know that Molly and her sisters, as a group, were more seriously interested in learning than their brothers. After the Russian revolution, there came a “brighter day” for Jews in Russia at least for a time. Under Lenin, the new Communist government supported education for all children. Molly and her three older sisters went to one of the new schools, which had a “modern curriculum.” It was a time of optimism and hope for all who had known oppression under the Tsars. It was possible in those times to dream about a new Russia. At these new schools, the girls learned to read and write Hebrew but also to read and write Russian. The curriculum for the girls was actually broader than what the boys learned in the traditional Hebrew Schools and *yeshivas*. Your great grandmother Molly often told me how much she had enjoyed attending her school in Russia. Even many years later, when she was telling me about her Russian school, she would stand up straight and could still recite parts of a long Hebrew poem, telling the story of how Hannah and her seven sons stood up against the ancient oppressor, Antiochus Epiphanes. This tale, originally told in the 2nd Book of Maccabees chapter 7, was later recast into Hebrew verse. Likewise from her Russian studies, my mother could recite stirring passages from Lermontov’s epic poem about the Battle of Borodino, where the Russian army bravely stood up against Napoleon in order to defend Moscow from the French advance. Her eyes would shine as she recited these poems. And then she would laugh, realizing that I did not understand the Russian verses. But even now, it still makes me smile when I remember her expressions of girlish excitement and pride, as she revisited the happy schooldays of her youth. Molly resonated to drama and romance.

Molly was a teenager when her family immigrated to America. Russia became wracked by civil wars after the end of World War I and Molly’s father, who had come to the USA before the war, had taken a job and was established in Milwaukee. So it seemed best for

Molly, her mother, and her siblings to join him in the New World. When Molly arrived, her father asked all of the older children to get jobs in order to support the family; after all, there were so many mouths to feed; and his own salary was modest. So Molly and the older children went to work; but the four younger children, who were still under sixteen years of age, were required to attend public school. Molly still wanted to continue her education and so she enrolled in night school, which she attended in the evenings, after work. But Molly's father, your great-great grandfather, thought differently. Molly's father ruled over his family in an autocratic and inflexible manner. Even though he had spent so many years apart from his family, his position as patriarch was intact and his authority was in fact fully revived when the family immigrated to Milwaukee after those years of separation. Even Molly's mother, who had taken good care of their children on her own during her husband's long absence, now acquiesced to her husband's iron rule.

Molly's father's attitude was decidedly not progressive. He left Russia before World War I. He therefore had missed the Revolution and did not get to inhale the heady fumes of liberty and social change. What's more, Molly's father actually forbade Molly to go to night school because he was afraid that she would educate herself "out of the marriage market." He wanted his daughters to find husbands within their own immigrant circle; and most of these men were not deeply schooled. He feared that an "over-educated" girl would turn up her nose at a match with an ordinary "Abe, Ike, or Jake." And an ordinary "Abe, Ike and Jake" might resent having a wife with an education superior to his own. At first, Molly tried to go to school in secret; but over time, she was unable to sustain her deception. So she reluctantly followed her father's harsh command and discontinued her studies. No one in the family would dare to contest his iron rule; and there could be no secrets in the small and intimate immigrant community in which they lived. He ruled as paterfamilias—right or wrong.

Now thinking back, I realize that in a strange way, Molly's father's fears turned out to be prophetic, for his two youngest daughters, who did not work and who attended public school, then went on to high school and university. These daughters later had successful professional careers in education and social work. They were attractive and dated many

men; but in the end they opted to remain single. Maybe their autocratic father made them wary of male domination. The sisters never broke with the family traditions; but, at the same time, they certainly enjoyed their financial independence; they had automobiles, they traveled, and invested in real estate. Whatever impulses they may have had for having children of their own were sublimated by their being attentive to their numerous nieces and nephews, children of their brothers and sisters, who had all married and had children.

Molly herself did not rush into marriage; but when she was nearly thirty, she met Leo Maniker, my father and your great grandfather, whom she eventually married. My brother, your great uncle Aaron, and I were born a few years later. My father, Leo, was an honest, hardworking, and dutiful husband. He was also a recent immigrant. He had been born in a small rural village in Russia, about one hundred miles away from where Molly grew up. Their backgrounds were similar and they both spoke the same regional dialect of Yiddish. Leo was sent to “Hebrew School” in Russia; but the nearest school was far from his rural home and he became homesick. Leo’s father was quite learned in both Hebrew and in Russian so he taught Leo at home. But Leo’s father also traveled a great deal in his work as a timber merchant. Leo’s father later sent him to a *yeshiva*; but Leo left school forever when World War I broke out. Leo greatly respected book learning; but he himself was not a scholar; he loved working with his hands and being involved in making and fixing things. Leo could read, write, and reckon; but you never saw him sitting and reading a book.

In the old country he was good with the horses and also worked in the cigarette business that the family started during World War I. Leo’s family imported tobacco from Turkey and purchased a cigarette-rolling machine. Leo as a boy ran between the Russian and German trenches to sell cigarettes to the soldiers during the long lulls in battle in this theater of the war that was being fought with little enthusiasm by both sides. However, an unexpected exploding shell came down near Leo during one of his forays between the lines and damaged one of his eardrums. Leo was lucky to escape being killed; but he remained nearly deaf in one ear.

When Leo arrived in the USA, he worked during the day and went to night classes for immigrants for a number of months. He learned quickly and mastered English in short order; he had a good ear for language and had already learned Spanish during several years sojourn in Argentina before coming to the USA. Leo had also learned the rudiments of accounting and bookkeeping. But Leo did not share Molly's yearning to explore fiction and poetry. Leo focused only on what could be seen, measured, fixed, or improved.

In the US, he worked in construction, doing brick laying and carpentry. For relaxation, he liked to rent rowboats and play tennis in the city parks. And of course, after marriage and owning a house, there were projects: Leo plastered, painted, restored woodwork, built cabinets, planted gardens, built his own storm-windows, fixed pipes and plumbing, did electrical work. If he was not working at home, he would cheerfully go to assist his brothers and sisters-in-law in their homes. He was happiest when he had a project that needed attention.

Molly also worked hard at home. She cooked, baked, canned preserves, washed, ironed, and cleaned. Leo and Molly had married during the Depression; and the Depression years were hard. But Leo and Molly lived frugally, saved money, and eventually accumulated enough money to buy a much larger dwelling. It was a six-bedroom house near the University. To help pay the mortgage, my parents rented out four of the six bedrooms to university students. My parents had a bedroom and my brother and I shared another of the bedrooms. The house had only one bathroom so my father, working on weekends, installed a second bathroom in the basement for the family to use. My dad did all maintenance while my mother was the chambermaid for the rented rooms. Leo sought out the newest appliances to help. When World War II started, there was increasing scarcity; but Leo worked for a large department store chain and was able to find new electric appliances, which were beginning to become scarce due to the diversion of production to military purposes. He sought out the "scratched and dented" merchandise that was difficult to sell. A refrigerator with freezer replaced the old icebox; then a new gas range

and electric mixer. Molly was the first in her family to own an electric sweeper and an electric washing machine. But frugality was by no means absent; the family had its own telephone but it was coin-operated and could also be used by the students. Leo did not own a car but traveled to his job by streetcar and train, which also served his family. My brother Aaron and I wore hand-me-downs; and our family did not take out-of-town vacations. Our family listened to the radio and went to the nearby beaches of Lake Michigan.

Molly, as one can imagine, was often tired. I remember how she would lie down to rest on the sofa in the late afternoon and directly fall asleep. But as my brother and I grew older, her duties at home became easier. The nearby public school was offering evening classes for adults. These classes were designed to enable working adults to earn their diplomas. My mother now began to think about her own interrupted studies and her unfulfilled ambitions. Molly could read and write English but she was not satisfied with her level of basic skills. She especially deplored her penmanship. So when my brother and I brought home documents from school that needed a parent's signature, my mother would ask me to sign for her. I always found this amusing. I could easily have avoided showing my mother all such school "take-homes," but I never did. Besides, I got a kick out of forging my mother's signature and the school not ever knowing the difference. Molly, however, was not oblivious to her children's studies and academic progress. Once, Aaron was doing poorly at school and my mother was summoned for a conference with his teacher. Molly dutifully went and met with the teacher; and I remember how my mother continued to berate Aaron for this failure long after the event. It was like he had committed a grave and unpardonable offense, not to take full advantage of the privileged opportunity to study. My father never asked us about school; but my mother paid scrupulous attention to our report cards. Because she wanted more for us. Every two weeks she walked with me and Aaron to the public library. It was a family ritual; everyone had to take out books to read at home. I still remember how I would take out the same picture book on fire engines, week after week, even though I could not yet read the story. But I was nevertheless taken to the library along with Aaron, who was older

and could read. It was a kind of pilgrimage to a holy shrine of learning and enlightenment to which I could one day belong.

So it was no surprise when your great-grandmother Molly herself registered for evening classes for adults at the nearby public school. I recall how she came home with a small pile of textbooks. There were readers and notebooks for written exercises. Since this was a program for adults, the students were expected to spend more time working at home than at school. In the evening, after serving dinner and washing the dishes, my mother would sit down at the dining room table and spread out her homework. I do not recall whether Molly had been given a placement exam but she ended up assigned to the eighth grade. I was only in seventh grade at the time but I was a precocious student and so my mother would ask me to help her with her lessons. I did not find Molly's homework assignments too difficult; and so I would sit with her at the table while she read her assignments and wrote out her answers. Molly, as already mentioned, had difficulty with penmanship; but she also had problems with her spelling. She thus frequently looked into the dictionary as well as asked me to help her find the correct entries.

This is how Molly worked for many, many weeks, during the quiet evenings at home in the winter and spring. My father had to work late at the store, which also maintained evening hours several nights a week. The company that Leo worked for had opened a new and larger store in Waukegan; Leo had been assigned to this new store; and so Leo traveled there by train and came home late. Molly did her best to keep up with her lessons, despite her long days of chores and rising early in the mornings to attend to her household. If Molly could maintain her pace of studies, she would be eligible to graduate from the eighth grade in June. This was her cherished goal; and she labored to reach it—her eighth grade diploma!

I remember one night my father Leo had come home early and my mother was still working at the dining room table. They were talking and Molly expressed her frustration with her own progress and her worry as to whether she could make the deadline for graduation in June. But instead of encouraging Molly, I was disappointed—actually

shocked— to hear Leo, my father tell my mother not to push herself towards her cherished goal. It was not worth it, Leo said. After all, he, too, had not been able to finish school. It was not a tragedy. Aaron and I were studying and advancing through school. Surely the children's progress should be sufficient to make both him and Molly happy and content. I remember how my mother looked at Leo. Her face did not reflect anger but rather a kind of understanding, tinged with sympathy and resignation. Maybe Molly had heard an echo of her own father's voice, reminding her that a wife should not surpass her husband in academic achievement. Maybe Leo here was also expressing a bit of shame that he himself had not finished his own studies. And so my mother folded up her textbooks and put them away. I never saw or heard anything about them again. So Molly did not get her diploma.

You might wonder why I tell you this story about Molly and her diploma as I contemplate your progress towards your graduation from College. My own daughters, your mothers, are well educated; they have all gone to university and graduate schools. Molly knew her granddaughters and felt pride in their academic accomplishments. And your mothers could intuit Molly's pride, even though she died while they were all still in high school. They remember stories of immigrant life and struggles; they might still have some sense of the great and important opportunities that they had been given. But what about you, my darling granddaughters? You never knew great-grandma Molly or how even her modest educational aspirations were thwarted.

I tell you this story about Molly and her studies because as I now look back after so many years, I realize that her story stayed with me and helped change my thinking about women's education. Even when I was growing up, not all women went to College; and even those who did go were expected to find a husband and quit working after marriage and children. You probably don't know about the "Women's Liberation Movement" that began during the 1960s. This movement evokes humor as we now look back to women publicly burning their bras or removing the letter "e" when they wrote the word "women." But it was a real social struggle. These women were not only opposed by men, but also by other women, who believed that "a woman's place is at home." I was not an active participant in that movement. But I developed sympathy to it, when I recalled how

my own mother's educational aspirations were thwarted, even by those who were closest to her and loved her. I also remembered that her younger sisters, who did attend public school, were able to enjoy interesting and productive careers. But they, as I told you, could not bring marriage and career together in their lives. And, of course, I also had daughters of my own—your own mothers— and I had to think about what opportunities would and should lie ahead for them as they grew up.

Therefore, I pray that you do not ever take your education for granted. That you recognize that you have come to occupy the high rungs of the academic ladder because of the foundational “heavy lifting” accomplished by those who blazed the trail before you. I do not want you to forget those who came before you. And most importantly, I wanted you to know that when you walk up to receive your diploma, you are also getting a diploma for Molly.

With deep love and affection,

Your loving grandfather,

Gideon Maniker