

# Finding the Grave of my Great-Grandfather Baruch Felsen

by

Jeanette Shelburne

It is hot as we drive down the dusty, bumpy road through the endless overgrown sections of the Kozma Jewish cemetery in Budapest. Opened in 1891, it is the final resting place for 300,000 souls, and now we are navigating through one of the oldest sections. Karesz Vandor, our Hungarian guide, has been here a few times to figure out the maze of tiny lanes leading to the area where my great-grandfather, Baruch Felsen, was buried in 1918. Karesz had located the row and sent me pictures, but the jungle-like forest prevented him from finding the grave. We are on a quest to find it today, but beneath the surface of my genealogist mind is a quiet fear that we will become lost in this faraway labyrinth and buried by the trees, vines, and weeds, that are the clear winners of this competition for ownership of this land.

With me on this hot day in August, 2012, are my husband Jim and Israeli cousin, Miriam. Jim, at heart a small-town man from Arizona, has allowed himself to be drawn into this very different European Jewish world with a historian's fascination and a willingness to go anywhere with me. Miriam is her family's connector, traveling far and wide to keep track of all the cousins. Miriam's mother, Pnina was the niece of my great-grandmother Fani Braun. Fani married Baruch Felsen, a cantor, renowned for his musical talent and beautiful voice. Today, as our guide Karesz says, "We must find his grave."

A few years ago, I found a letter written by Baruch's daughter, my grandmother Mary, while she was on a trip to Budapest in 1938. She wrote, "We visited my father's grave. I wept many tears, for he died at 54 without really having had any life at all."

This statement struck an emotional chord in me, as I remembered my mother telling me about how Baruch had a hysterical reaction after moving to America and lost his singing voice. The members of the synagogue took pity on him and offered him a job as a groundskeeper, but he felt that was beneath him and wanted to return to Hungary. Fani refused to go, saying she wanted to stay in America. So Baruch returned by himself, leaving his wife and five children to fend for themselves. Fani supported her children by working in sweatshops, a difficult and desperate life. Thus, I had grown up thinking of Baruch as the "bad guy," but in the last few years my genealogy research and my grandmother's letter have given me a different perspective.

When you set out on a genealogy treasure hunt, a smattering of documents will emerge, clues you try to piece together to understand your family's history. Many times you will find out things that had been forgotten, or buried to protect the family honor. I have often wondered if the pain surrounding these secrets gets passed down to future generations in some way—repressed anger, a closed heart, deep longing, sadness, fear, something that is felt but has no words to accompany it. When I have uncovered secrets it often feels like the unraveling of a psychic knot that I had not realized was there, something I had sensed from my parents and grandparents.

The secret I uncovered in my great-grandparents' story were Ellis Island records revealing that Fani left Hungary with the three oldest children in 1905 and Baruch followed with the two youngest in 1910. This seemed strange to me, as it was usually the man who would leave first, get established and then send for the wife and children. Then I remembered Baruch's son Max saying, "Baruch was an artist, not of this world." Now a deeper picture emerged, of

Fani taking the lead and Baruch following, probably reluctantly. Might there have been marital difficulties, perhaps financial pressures, or disagreements about whether to immigrate? There is no way to really know now.

Then another treasure was uncovered—the marriage certificate of Fani and Baruch in 1894 in Eperjes (now Presov, Slovakia). At that time my family's ancestral lands in present-day Hungary, Romania, Slovakia and Poland all were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. According to the marriage certificate, Fani was 19, born in Tirnaveni, Romania; Baruch was 30, born in Lesko, Poland. Baruch's parents were given as Josef and Malka Felsen, and I was excited to learn the names of these great-great-grandparents. Because of his early death, information about his family had never been passed down. Fani's parents, Ferenc and Rosa Braun, were listed as being in attendance at the wedding. I also learned Rosa's maiden name from this marriage certificate, Mandelstock, thus providing another path for family history research. The certificate included one more intriguing piece of information—the officiating Rabbi was Mayer Mandelstock. I thought this must be a relative of Rosa, perhaps a brother. What further underlined my hunch was description of Rosa in my Aunt Pnina's (Miriam's mother) memoirs: "Grandmother Rachel (Rosa) was a very pious woman. She knew how to read and write, and had a following of women that she had taught to read, and together they studied the *Tzenah Urena*, which is the Yiddish translation of the five books of Moses."

Following this clue, research unearthed the marriage certificate of Rosa and Ferenc in Tirgu Mures, Romania. The certificate showed that Rosa's father, Elias Mandelstock, was a cantor in Tirgu Mures. This was another indication of the religious dedication of the family. Rosa and Ferenc's marriage certificate also stated that Rosa had been born in 1849 in Abaujszanto, Hungary so we now looked for records of the family in that location.

A search of the Abaujszanto records showed that Rosa had two brothers, Mayer born in 1852 and Moses born in 1866 to parents Elias Mandelstock and Lea Klein. Here was the link showing that Rabbi Mayer Mandelstock was Rosa's brother. I had heard Fani and Baruch's marriage was an arranged one and now this made perfect sense. Her father was a cantor and her brother was a rabbi. Probably they had heard of Baruch's talent as a cantor and decided this was a good match.

Another interesting piece of the story makes sense in this light. After the wedding in 1894, Fani and Baruch moved to Miskolc, Hungary, where he served as cantor in a large synagogue. Miskolc is relatively close to Abaujszanto and I surmised that there had been a family connection at work here arranging both the marriage and Baruch's employment in Miskolc.

In Miskolc, Fani and Baruch had five children within six years. Then Fani left for America when her youngest child was only one year old. She took the three oldest with her and left the two youngest with Baruch. The ship's manifest records that she was sponsored by her brother Emil Braun, who had immigrated earlier. According to the ship's manifest in both 1905 (when Fani emigrated with her three oldest children) and 1910 (when Baruch emigrated with the two youngest children) they were living in Cluj, Romania, before Fani, and then Baruch left for America. This is the town that Fani's parents had now moved to. Records show that most of Fani's parents and extended Braun family moved from the smaller town of Tirnaveni to the larger city of Cluj by the early 1900s. Although data on ship's manifests is not always completely accurate, it did point to the possibility that they had moved back to her parents' town. This also is a possible indication that they had marital or financial difficulties in Miskolc, where they had lived during the first six years of their marriage. But this is only conjecture.

As I thought about all this information, again, the words in my grandmother Mary's letter struck my heart. "We visited my father's grave. I wept many tears, for he died at 54 without really having had any life at all." Mary obviously loved her father. Contemplating the Ellis Island documents, I realized she had left with her mother for America in 1905 when she was eight, so she had been old enough to know her father well. Then she had been separated from him for five years. When he joined them in America, he had a nervous breakdown and then left again. He died in 1918, far away in Budapest. How very painful that must have been. I also know she shared his delicate, artistic temperament. She too was a singer with a beautiful voice. I remember her as a delicate, sweet ladylike "butterfly" of a woman. But my mother told me that Mary also had a nervous, critical side and was unhappy and unwell much of the time. In a strange way, my mother, sisters and I identify with Baruch, feeling we have that temperament with its capacity for artistic sensitivity, which can dance close to the edge of mental instability if we are not careful. "It's the crazy cantor gene," we joke.

This past year I've tried to re-envision Baruch. I imagine him singing in the synagogue, maybe practicing a new piece, joyfully lost in the world of beauty and artistry, the world he where he truly lives. I know in his time, men with talent in religious study were supported, even coddled by the Jewish community, encouraged to leave behind matters of the world to focus completely on their vocation for the benefit of all. Their wives were expected to be the down-to-earth ones, to run the family business and take care of the children, freeing their husbands of these concerns. I can imagine it was hard for Fani to bear five children and be the wife of an other-worldly religious man, a product of his time. The truth is lost in time, but I've taken a deeper look into the story. There are always many sides to a story and I am sad we lost contact with his family and his history. In today's world Baruch could have gotten help, but then he lost his way.

Lost in my thoughts, I am brought into the present by our guide, "Okay, we're here," announces Karesz. "But we'll have to park the car and walk in for a way." There seems to be no other living soul around for miles in this old and forgotten part of the huge cemetery, again I experience the ominous misgiving of being swallowed up in this thick labyrinth. We pass a rotting dog's carcass on our way to the tiny overgrown rows, another indication of the cemetery's neglect. This was not going to be easy but luckily my grandmother, Mary had included important information at the bottom of her 1938 letter:

"Dad's grave:  
Rakosi Jsidó Temető 43 Szaksy-54 sor  
Bernat Felsner"

Without this, we would have never gotten this far, as he was buried under the Hungarian version of his name.

Karesz counts the rows as we walk, they were so densely covered, I wonder how he is sure of the numbers. Finally we reach number 43. We trudge through the row in the heat, using clippers to clear the way. Karesz sprays stones with a white foam and then scrapes them, enabling us to read the lettering on the gravestones. We search for a long time, but are unable to find Baruch. We had planned to pinpoint it using the GPS on my cell phone, which Karesz could tie into a computer database of the cemetery, but we have no cell phone reception. At one point we drive back to the cemetery office, hoping we can use the office database, but the office is closed. Back again, past the rotting dog.... As we walk deeper into the brambles, it is hard to discern which is row 43, but Karesz keeps track. "We must find it," he says, but it seems impossible.

Many times, in my research, I have felt that Baruch didn't want to be found. Other than the marriage certificate, nothing has come easily. Now, in this sweltering, jungle of a graveyard, I focus on him, and tell his spirit that I love him, and to please show himself. Miriam usually is fastidious, but now she becomes absolutely dedicated to finding the stone, digging in the dirt, cutting branches, not giving up. I can see her kibbutz spirit, from her mother Pnina, a pioneer to Israel who founded Kibbutz Dan by clearing the malarial swamps in the 1930s. Just when I am about to give up, Miriam bends down to a hidden stone, scratches away the dirt and Karesz shouts out, "Bernat Felsner!" We are all overjoyed.

Karesz says that the inscription on his grave states that Baruch is missed by his wife and children. How sad that Baruch died here without the comfort of his family, suffering from mental instability, perhaps overcome with loneliness, loss and shame. Alongside Baruch's grave, many stones also have the burial date of 1918. Karesz tells us this was the year of the Spanish Influenza epidemic, so perhaps Baruch was swept away in that horrific tragedy. World War I had been raging for four years, so communication and travel between Europe and America probably would have been impossible. Eventually, however, the family managed to have a tombstone erected with the words, "He is missed by his wife and children." Karesz also shows us that there had been many stones left for Baruch, now buried beneath the vines and dirt by his headstones. So it appears his grave was visited, I wonder when and by whom?

We say Kaddish for Baruch, a prayer of praise to G-d in honor of the deceased who are no longer able to say it themselves. Then I speak to Jim, Miriam and Karesz about Baruch, about his gifts and his tragedy. I feel my mother's family has incorporated the pain of his leaving, carried down through the generations. I "tell" Baruch he is forgiven and that he has many children, grandchildren, great and great-great grandchildren and we are grateful to him for giving us life and for his heritage that lives on in us.

Again, I imagine myself speaking to the spirit of my great-grandfather, which had seemed to resist our efforts to find his grave, and then finally answered my prayer just as we were about to give up. "You were loved, Baruch and still are. Although the journey through this knotted, weed-choked cemetery seemed to mirror the shame and sadness you must have felt in your last days, thank you, Baruch for opening up your wounded heart and letting us find your grave."