

UNVEILING FOR OUR BELOVED PARENTS
GEORGE SASSOWER & DORIS LIPSON SASSOWER – SUNDAY, MAY 1, 2022

B'ruchim Ha'Ba'em. Welcome.

I want to thank everyone for joining us today – both those who are here, in person, and those who are with us, virtually, through the wonders of modern technology, *via* zoom.

We are here to unveil the headstones of our beloved parents, George Sassower and Doris Lipson Sassower. I am Elena Ruth Sassower, the first born. I am Carey Adina Karmel, the second born, and I am Beth Avery, the third born.

Our father's mother – our Grandmother Helen Akner Sassower – recorded a tape with a little family history about their life in Europe, which the son of our father's only sibling, Frances Ness, recently found, digitalized and sent us. In it our Grandma Helen recounted that it was customary for sons, when they married, to move to where their wives were from – and this is pretty much the situation here, where our father is buried not with his own family but with our mother's.

Here buried, in addition to our mother, are eight members of her family. Her parents, three of her four siblings, her father's youngest brother and his wife – and, just a couple of rows away, her father's parents.

Our mother dearly loved her family buried here – and it would be her wish for us to pay tribute to them, at their graves, while we are here – and that is what we will be doing, after we conclude the unveiling of our parents' headstones and our tributes to them. Those who would like to remain for those further tributes are most welcome.

Before unveiling our parents' headstones – and explaining each – you will notice that they are not buried side-by-side, as you might have expected – and as, in fact, we had expected. Somehow, years ago, when the cemetery map was drawn with the names of where everyone would be, two of my mother's siblings were marked for placement in graves between them. From our conversations with our mother, that had not been the intent, though after our parents divorced after more than 30 years of marriage, it seemed perhaps appropriate.

Dad died, with me beside him, at White Plains Hospital, at 3:20 a.m. It was Thursday, January 31, 2019 and he was buried on Sunday, February 3, 2019. A defining part of Dad's life was his enlisting and serving in the army during World War II and it was our thought to have an unveiling of his headstone for the Sunday closest to Veteran's Day in November 2019. Beginning in June of 2019, we circulated ideas amongst ourselves, and it took us a while to agree on the wording which, by early September, we had. With that done, Jeff Solomon, whose grandfather had founded Sprung Monuments – the company with an office that can be literally seen from these graves – began a computer rendering of dad's headstone and, by the beginning of October, it was done. I showed it to mom and asked her what she thought and I recollect her saying that she didn't think it could be improved. By then, she was less than three weeks from her own death. She had been diagnosed with cancer about two months after dad died – and initially and following surgery and radiation, we were hopeful that the cancer was eradicated. But alas, by the end of August, the cancer came back and within a few days after her birthday on September 25, 2019, it was her decision that she did not

want further treatment. At that point, with mom's death imminent, we decided to hold off on ordering dad's headstone – and with that decision came to me an idea that was immediately consoling about our mom's dying at this time – making me feel that her dying then was part of the divine order meant to enable what would otherwise have not been possible, namely that her headstone would be cut from the same slab as dad's, so that the stone that had been one in nature, would be their two separate headstones, reflecting that, for all their differences, they were, in nature, profoundly and in their most essential ways, remarkably the same.

That is why, one side of each stone – the side from which their two separate headstones are cut – is smooth, unlike the other side which is rough-hewn as were both sides of the two headstones of our grandparents Abraham and Rose Lipson – and it was our grandparents' headstones that were, from the outset, the template for the size and initial elements of our parents' headstones.

Mom died at White Plains Hospital, shortly before 11 a.m. on Monday, October 21, 2019. I had stepped out of the room to speak with Beth, by phone – and when I returned, mom had died so peacefully with Carey beside her, that Carey had not even realized she had passed.

Two years later, in October 2021, I would make the last decision on the headstones – and it was I who, ultimately, was the decider of everything to be decided about the headstones, after giving fair hearing to all opinions and objections, being the first-born and for other reasons. That last decision was to inscribe the smooth side of the headstones – so that those seeing the obvious correspondence between the headstones would not have to guess about their identical asymmetry of a rough side and a smooth side. The inscription, in a suitable typeface that I would search to find, reads, on the smooth right side of our father's headstone: "One. Here cut from the same stone as Doris' headstone." On the smooth left side of our mother's headstone, it reads: "One. Here cut from the same stone as George's headstone."

We are now ready to fully unveil the headstones – which we do simultaneously rather than consecutively, inasmuch as our mom's headstone was designed to correspond to our dad's headstone, such that all the design and wording adjustments made to dad's headstone subsequent to mom's death would be replicated on her headstone. That being said, when I showed mom the print-out of dad's headstone, at the beginning of October 2019, she responded to my question as to what she wanted on her own headstone by saying she only wanted it to read: "Beloved wife of George Sassower". I told her it surely would, but that was not enough. It would say more, just as dad's.

Veiling the headstones are two tableclothes that were THE tablecloths that dressed our dining room table for every holiday, religious and secular – matching the pink of our parents' wedding china which was always brought out for those occasions. The embroidered tablecloth was especially precious to us as it was embroidered by our beloved Mary Koptiuch, a friend of our Grandma Rose, who helped take care of our mother and then took care of us – and I can still see, standing here, in this cemetery, in February 1969, when we buried Grandma Rose, who died at 75. Mary would die in August 1974, at the age of 80.

Carey & Beth unveil the headstones --

We now lovingly dedicate these headstones to the blessed memory of
George Sassower and Doris Lipson Sassower whose remains lie not only in this plot of ground,
but in every heart their lives touched.

So, the first thing that you notice – and undoubtedly it made you smile – is the superman insignia on the top of our father’s headstone. Other than the fact that dad had seemingly superhuman intelligence, decency, good-natured-ness, and was incredibly funny, we don’t remember exactly the origin of his being superman. Maybe because his name was George – and George Reeves was the original superman on TV when we were growing up – unbeknownst to us, in reruns from their airing from 1952-1958. I think possibly he himself may have originated his incarnation of superman as part of his playful joking with our cousins Laurie, Jeff, and Jill, the children of our mom’s sister Judy, as I recall him laughingly recounting how he had told them that his superman outfit was at the cleaners.

During dad’s shiva, Carey worked on an obituary for him, to be published in the New York Times – and that obituary gave me the idea that his headstone should be topped with the superman logo and include what she had said in the obituary pertaining to superman. She’ll read you the obituary:

“George Sassower – near 95, New York, Legion of Honor award Normandy, Liberation of Paris, Battle of Ardennes. U.S. Army 262 Signal Co. Courageous attorney, devoted husband to Doris, Cherished dad of Elena, Carey, Beth. Proud grandma of Jeremy, Aliza and Caleb. Strong, fun, Superman.”

As you see, we featured, in its own box on the headstone, in italics script, “Our Beloved Superman”.

Carey did not want to use the “S” superman logo for our mom’s headstone – notwithstanding she felt – as did we – that mom was a “superwoman”. Carey felt that more fitting would be the equally balanced scales of justice, which mom had always associated with, especially as her astrological sign was the scales, as she was a libra.

Now, about the books on both their headstones. These came about because, in one of my many phone conversations with Carey on the subject of the headstones, I was trying to describe to her where I was meaning and said it was by the flutes, and then amplified the meaning as the columns that were also on our Grandparents’ headstones, that maybe were like spines of books. To this Carey responded, Oh, yes, books, there have got to be books on the stones because that would symbolize mom and dad’s love of learning and respect for scholarship. Out of exhaustion – and because, by then, it was late July and time was short, as we were hoping for an unveiling for Sunday, September 26, 2021, the day after what would have been mom’s 89th birthday, I initially rejected the idea and approved the headstones, without the books. But when, a few days later, Jeff called me back because he needed to adjust his computer design of the headstones, I told him it was bashert, as that maybe I had begun to rethink the book idea.

Jeff did an initial inclusion of books, but I felt the look was cluttered and distracting. I called up our cousin Jill to get her thoughts. She endorsed the book idea, pointing out, further, what I had not realized, namely, that her mom’s headstone had three books, one for each of her three children with their initials on it – and that there was also a book on the headstone of our Uncle Dave. She kindly offered to photo-shop Jeff’s books, which she did, but still, I felt it was not quite right – and I felt very bad about this because I wanted to respect her opinion favoring the books and because I felt that her mom and our mom were, by her opinion, trying to communicate on the subject.

Eventually, after approving the headstones a second time without the books, Jeff called me back to tell me that because of COVID – and supply chain issues – there was no way that the headstones would be ready until December. This then gave me a chance to tell him to hold the order, as I would

try to develop the book idea further, which, eventually, upon my searching the internet, led me to a beautiful headstone with carved books. I sent it to Jeff, asking if we could do something like this – carved books – and, yes, it could be done! Everyone liked the idea – and so now we had agreement on that. Then there was the question I raised as to whether we wanted to have titles on the books, but ultimately we decided against that. I had the idea though that the sides of the books could accommodate, for dad, a World War II army service medallion, whose placement on the front of the stone Carey felt was too cluttered. For mom, I had the idea to put scrabble pieces to reflect one of the joys that mom had in last few years of her life, which Carey taught her – and which was a legacy of our beloved Grandma Helen, playing scrabble. Carey had the idea to have the three scrabble pieces – one for each of mom’s three daughters – spell out the word “MOM”.

So – and still at the top of dad’s headstone –is his name in yiddishized Hebrew: Yosef Ezra ben Eliezer Lieber Ha-Cohen v-Henya. The translation of this is Joseph Ezra, son of Eliezer Lieber, a cohain – and Henya. Our father’s real name was Joseph Ezra – which was the name of his great-grandfather Joseph Ezra Sassower. From this last name, you would think that Joseph Ezra Sassower was our dad’s paternal great-grandfather. In fact, Joseph Ezra Sassower was ALSO our dad’s maternal great-grandfather.

A bit of history about this Joseph Ezra Sassower, who never came to this county and lived in Galicia, then part of the Austria-Hungarian Empire, and now Ukraine – which, apparently, is where ALL four of our grandparents were from, not just our beloved Mary, who always told us that she was Ukrainian.

Getting back to Joseph Ezra Sassower, he was a great scholar of Jewish law and married Henya Finkel, who would die at age 26, only three weeks after giving birth to a daughter Tzena, or Celia. Thereafter, the widowed Joseph Ezra Sassower would marry a daughter of one of Henya’s four older sisters – and with this second wife, who was the niece of his first wife, would have other children, one of whom was Shraga Feivish.

So Celia Sassower – the first child of Joseph Ezra Sassower – and Shraga Feivish Sassower a subsequent child of Joseph Ezra Sassower – were half siblings. They had the same father, Joseph Ezra Sassower, but different mothers.

Celia Sassower would grow up to marry Yechiel Akner – through a shidduch. And the story goes like this. Yehiel Ackner was the grandson of the great Belzer’s rebbe’s nephew and his father, Moshe Akner was travelling to the Belzer rebbe and stopped at a synagogue along the way. It was the middle of the night and there studying in the synagogue was Joseph Ezra Sassower. Moshe Akner was so impressed by how engrossed Joseph Ezra was in his studies that he uttered the wish that he should be able to find a shidduch for his son from a family having such scholars. He then was told that Joseph Ezra had a marriageable daughter – Celia Sassower.

Celia and Yehiel Akner would have two children, our father’s mother – Henya – whose name is on the headstone and who we would know as Helen – and her cherished brother, Moshe, named for his Grandfather, Moshe Akner – and who would be called Mo.

Shraga Feivish Sassower – the half-brother of Celia – would also marry and have children – and his first child, a son, was Eliezer Lieber, whose name is on the headstone because he would marry Henya. They were first cousins, though not full first cousins because, although they shared a common grandfather, they had different grandmothers. They would have two children – our father,

whose real name was not George, but Joseph Ezra, named for his great-grandfather on both his mother and father's sides, and his sister, Frances, named for his father's mother, Freyda.

Dad was born, on the lower East Side, at home, on April 3, 1924 – the date we have inscribed on the headstone, along with his date of death, January 31, 2019. He was just shy of 95 – and had been working at his desk for hours and hours a day, every day, up to the day, nearly two weeks earlier that I had insisted on taking him to the hospital.

It was a few hours after dad's death that I called a dear friend, an observant Jew, to tell him the sad news and that, as he had instructed me, we had made the proper arrangements for the preparation of dad's body for burial, including shmerah – the watching and prayers over his body – and that the funeral home had picked dad up, from the hospital room, where he died, so that he had never had to go into the morgue. I did not realize what the portion, or parasha, was for that shabbat – and when, upon my asking him, he told me it was Mishpatim – Judgments, discussing ethics and legal precepts – I immediately responded, telling him that of all parshiot fitting for our dad, this was unquestionably the most so.

A short time afterward, when the funeral director called me to get from me the necessary paperwork for our father's burial that Sunday, I told him how meaningful it was to have discovered that our dad had died at Shabbat Mishpatim because of our dad's reverence for the law – and struggles to expose the abuses of corrupt and dishonest judges and lawyers. He told me what I then mentioned in the funeral eulogy I gave for our dad and which is embodied on this gravestone, namely, that by his death at such a parasha, G-d had recognized our father's merit.

As I stated at dad's funeral

“Dad was not a religious man, in terms of ritual observance. But he lived and fought for the realization of some of Judaism's most fundamental precepts – as, for example, as directed by parshat Mishpatim:

‘Do not accept a false report, do not extend your hand with the wicked to be a venal witness. Do not be a follower of the majority for evil; and do not respond to a grievance by yielding to the majority to pervert the law.’

Dad would never align himself with falsehood – and stood courageously alone, against wicked, law-perverting majorities. He was an amazing, heroic man – with a brilliant mind that he used, to the fullest, in trying to creatively rectify the abuses of the legal system. And it was not just in big ways that he was exceptional, but in the mundane. In the recollection of all three of his daughters, dad never was unkind, surly, impatient, rude, sarcastic to any stranger – maybe subliminally actualizing another key precept articulated in parshat Mishpatim: ‘You shall not taunt or oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt...’”

Dad's commitment and love of the law – as likewise mom's – is further reflected, on both their headstones, by the “ESQ” that follows their names – and I especially insisted to my sisters that this had to be on their headstones not only for that reason, but because, as a result of their courageous, civic-minded whistleblowing against the corruption in the judiciary and among lawyers, they had been viciously retaliated against and stripped of that “ESQ” title by the court-controlled attorney

disciplinary system. As my life's work is to secure for them – now posthumously – what they had been unable to achieve in life – judicial accountability and rectification of attorney discipline so that it is not politicized – and, to that end, have been working to build the non-partisan, non-profit citizens' organization Center for Judicial Accountability as their legacy, that is yet another reason why the ultimate decisions on their headstones were mine.

The words from April 1944 on our father's headstone are his own – and give me a welcome opportunity to pay tribute to his sister Frances, who we dearly loved and who, unbeknownst to us, kept some of the letters dad had written as a soldier during WWII. We knew nothing about these letters – until some months after he died, which was a couple of years after she had died. It was then that I got a call from our Aunt Frances' daughter-in-law saying that she and her husband – our dear Cousin Larry – had found letters that our dad had written as a soldier from abroad. She priority mailed them to me – and, as it was too difficult for me to then read them, I scanned them to send to my sisters – labelling them by the date of each. In so doing, I often was reading the beginnings of the letters – and as soon as I read the opening words from one dated April 19, 1944: “Another day, day nearer the day of victory”, I felt it encapsulated our dad's optimistic outlook that slow as it might be, good and right would prevail. As I pull myself from bed, each morning, steeling myself for another day “in the trenches” as the one-woman army of the Center for Judicial Accountability, it is this – and the memory of both my parents – that empower me for the task.

Before giving the presentation over to Carey, who will start with the five Hebrew letters at the bottom of both headstones, and then, in explaining mom's headstone, speak about mom, I want to comment on how profoundly consoling it was for me that just as dad had died at Parshat Mishpatim, so, too had mom died at a point in the Torah that is enormously significant. She died on Shemini Atzeret, the holiday that concludes the Jewish high holidays, which celebrates the Torah cycle – finishing the yearly reading and then immediately beginning it again. In that last parasha of the Torah, Zot HaBracha, “This is the Blessing”, Moses blesses the Tribes of Israel and then he goes up to the mountain where G-d shows him the land of Israel, which he will not enter, but which he sees. He dies and G-d buries him – and no one knows where precisely. The children of Israel mourn him, but then continue on, by his successor, Joshua, who will take them into the land, though he is not as great as Moses – and, indeed, the Torah says: “And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel, like Moses, who G-d knew face to face”.

As mom was dying, I told her how significant it was that she would be dying at this time – with this parasha. She – like dad – had seen the promised land of judicial accountability, which she, no less than he, had struggled and sacrificed to achieve, but had not achieved. I wanted her to know – and as I also told dad – it would be achieved, and in their names.