

Distant Relations

Photographs by Lori Grinker

Text by Roy Richard Grinker

In 1960, my grandfather, Roy R. Grinker, wrote a simple letter with the salutation “Dear Grinkers,” to anyone he could find with our surname (a small number in those days before Google searching was invented). Were he alive today, he would find scores of Grinkers on Facebook. But the overflowing bounty of the Internet brings its own deficiencies, gaps, and questions. Finding Grinkers in Ukraine, South Africa and England is not the same thing as knowing how they built their lives, imagined their pasts and futures, or situated themselves in historical and social landscapes, as members of nations and families, and as Jews.

This exhibit is fundamentally about the places that the Grinkers have made and inhabit. Yet scholars have long sought to understand Jewish history more through time than place. In large part because European Jews were marginalized, and denied territory or political autonomy, the spiritual foundation of Judaism was built on family, education, sacred events, and ritual. This emphasis made Judaism all the more difficult to destroy. Jews could even go without religious practice or belief in God, seeing spirituality as a secondary accretion to the more primary heritage that unites Jews not in space but in culture and time.

Much has changed, of course. There is the Jewish state of Israel, all Jews belong to nations, and people can express and experience their Jewishness through various forms of religious and civic engagement. Still, many Jews continue to understand their Jewishness without any spatial or institutional connection to the religion. Thus Lori Grinker’s multi-sited ethnography of one family on four continents is a study of the everyday, of ordinary spaces that, despite being ordinary, have great meaning and power.

Lori Grinker focuses more on particular environments than people and practices. Paradoxically, however, the photographs, many without people or faces, challenge us to imagine. Who are the people who made these worlds? And how does someone experience a life through them? There is, in these captivating images, what might be called either a present absence or an absent presence. We are compelled to look beyond the shreds and patches that comprise our memories, like letters and photographs, to the unseen. These images, and the people and places they represent, are fragmentary, perhaps like the Jews themselves, but they cohere around their incompleteness and instability, characteristics that are the essence of diaspora.

Roy Richard Grinker, Ph.D.
Professor of Anthropology
The George Washington University