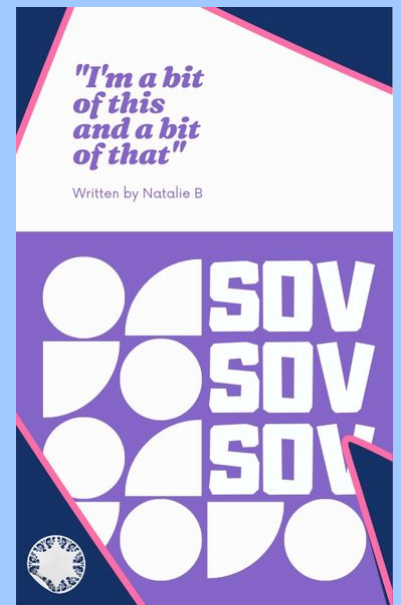




KALEIDOSCOPE

Sov, sov, sov



Name: **Natalie B**

Gender: **Female**

Country of residence: **United Kingdom**

Writing language: **English**

The answer is: 'Yes, Grand Maman, I feel Jewish. I am a Jewish atheist, a musical Christian and a cosmopolitan Brit. I am part of the diaspora and I am English. I am as my name dictates: a bit of this and a bit of that.'



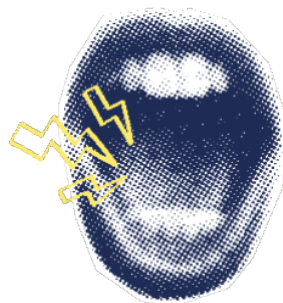
'Do you feel Jewish?' My Grand Maman asked me many years ago, back when I was still too young to understand the significance of her question.

She was a small French woman – just under five feet tall - with a loud voice and an indomitable personality. When I was a child, I remember being fascinated by her bright red lipstick and deep crimson nail varnish. The varnish was applied by my Saba (grand father in Hebrew), her artist husband, and was always incredibly neat. It was this look, paired with her large 'bijoux' and her rather forceful brand of contrarianism, that made her impossible to ignore.

My Grand Maman, the fierce Jewish matriarch, was an orphaned Holocaust survivor with both a great deal of strength and a mountain of unresolved trauma. It was from her that I learnt my first bit of French, though I'm not sure that she knew. 'C'est pas possible!' she used to cry out in heated debates, red lips quivering. It was a catchphrase of sorts – majestic, assertive, thunderous, and therefore memorable.

I recall feeling quite alarmed at the dinner table. Evenings were reserved for food and arguments. When my Grand Maman was around, there was a lot of shouting about the war, antisemitism and 'les Arabes'. At one point, I was convinced that the world was about to end. My family were the ones finalising humanity's position on all the important issues, and they had one night to decide what they thought about everything. Debates were pregnant with a sense of urgency borrowed from an earlier time – a terrible time in history.

Domestic dramas of this kind were punctuated by more light-hearted rituals. Whenever my Saba and Grand Maman came over to Britain on the Eurostar, they would arrive with a suitcase full of little presents – plastic toys, unusual coins and packets of French biscuits. My Saba, a joyful soul, used to play with me for hours on end and my Grand Maman made me trays of madeleines with squares of Lindt chocolate on top. They taught me songs in Hebrew and tucked me into bed with a soft '*laila tov*'.



All of these moments were formative experiences for me, and yet in my Grand Maman's lifetime I found it very difficult to answer the pressing question: 'Do you feel Jewish?' I didn't really know what it meant to be Jewish, and I was not the sort to profess any sort of belief without first being absolutely sure of myself.

You see, there was another side to my life. Growing up, my Dad – an atheistic composer – regularly stressed his rejection of religious tradition. For him, being Jewish was something he associated with a people – with the nation of Israel – above all else. He spent every summer there as a child, a Sabra through and through. This was something that did not enter into my own reality, since my parents got divorced when I was three and I only visited Israel once when I was a toddler. I have since taken the time to explore the country with family, but this was not the case at the time. As a result, I was left a tad muddled as to the state of my Jewish identity.

After the divorce I lived with my Mum, a scholarly musician and agnostic from a liberal English background. We read plenty of books and sang together at the piano. Life took on an Anglican tinge and I soon became a chorister – first at the local church and then at successive cathedrals. I flounced about in a cassock and surplice and familiarised myself with all the great liturgical repertoire. I made my home between the yellowing choirstall lamps and the omnipresent clouds of incense. Ecclesiastical architecture was as familiar to me as the walls in my bedroom, if not more so. My Mum and I joked with one another that we were ‘musical Christians’.



Over the years, I celebrated a great big mishmash of religious holidays at irregular intervals – Pesach, Christmas, Hanukkah, Easter – all from a secular perspective. I hunted for chocolate eggs in overgrown green gardens, searched for the hidden matzah in my Dad’s living room, rehearsed endless carols for Advent and sang Hebrew songs while spinning dreidels. Sov sov sov.

I think that the reason I could not respond to my Grand Maman’s question in her lifetime was because I was – in the most beautiful way possible, it must be said – somewhat confused by the rich and kaleidoscopic range of influences thrown my way.

It is only as an adult that I have found my answer, because now I am old enough to know that life is not simple and educated enough to know that Judaism is even further from it.

The answer is: ‘Yes, Grand Maman, I feel Jewish. I am a Jewish atheist, a musical Christian and a cosmopolitan Brit. I am part of the diaspora and I am English. I am as my name dictates: a bit of this and a bit of that. Natalie Borenstein.’

