

Message in a Bottle

by Glenn Morrow, Museletter editor

I found it in a box of unmarked tapes. The rest of the cassettes were of no consequence, but this one was something unexpected. What flowed from my tape player was the unmistakable voice of my long-deceased grandmother, telling tales of her childhood in Russia and her life as a Jewish immigrant in the Lower East Side of New York City. Many were family tales that I had never heard before, recovered fragments of a vanished world in a jumbled box of cheap cassettes.

But what is as interesting as the stories themselves is the other voice on the tape, the interviewer coaxing the tales from memory. The voice is my father, also deceased, a small-town Pennsylvania Episcopalian, an electrical engineer with an engineer's penchant for the solvable, the here-and-now. Never much of a storyteller or a talker himself, this quiet man set out, when no one was watching, to save the stories of his boisterous, aging mother-in-law on an unmarked cassette like a message in a bottle. The question, simple and profound, is: "why?"

The impulse to remember is one of the things that makes us most human. No person, no world is quite lost so long as some teller remembers the story. Our task as storytellers is to remember and to recreate the lives of people and the real and imagined worlds they inhabited, ever vanishing as the Angel of Time is eternally blown backwards into the future. All of us, engineers as well as storytellers, somehow sense the deep importance of remembrance, an obligation as sacred as it is often awkward. Stories are lost, and the loss is incalculable. Stories are first lost not for lack of tellers, but for lack of listeners to request the tale.

Storytelling is unique because the act of listening to a story is unique. In other arts and entertainments, the creation is held before the audience, to be experienced, appreciated. But the storyteller gives the story wholly to the listener. In the act of listening, the listener *becomes* the storyteller, the one charged to remember and next to tell the tale. May God help us all to be better listeners.