

Under the WarZone

SANDRA M. GILBERT

My Jewish Ukrainian grandma-in-law has sidled up
to my Russian Orthodox grandma, the *shabbas goy*.

They are old & wise, about 130 years old each of them,
but have no idea how they came to this narrow trench in the ground,

they who never met in life, but even so
they are whispering intense confidences:

grandma Sarah, my husband's grandma, tells grandma Sasha,
my grandma, that she was a revolutionary, that she was flung

in jail in Kiev (before we started to call it Kyiv), & grandma Sasha
tells Sarah how she would light the great coal stove for the Jews next door

when she lived in Rostov near Moscow, before her mother took her to Paris
to live at the Cathedrale Alexandre Nevsky, & oh they are distressed,

though all their children are dead too, & though most of their grandchildren
have disappeared also: still, they've been told to war with each other, to

shoot & bomb each other, way down there underground,
& they are conspiring violently: shall they arise & escape to Poland?

They *never* liked Poland! Should they try to haunt a basilica somewhere
or a synagogue or the memorial to BabynYar?

Unsatisfactory. The guns roar overhead. They almost have to scream to hear each other, each one boasting about her offspring's high IQs,

at the same time moaning about the yellow fields outside Kiev, outside the dungeon where Sarah once huddled, & about the icy winter nights when

Sasha waited for Christmas to come, all night long in the candle-lit cathedral, clinging to her mother's waist. The rockets blast.

The guns ratatat. They are so close to each other, whispering, that they could hold hands if they still had living hands. But now all they can do is mutter

Hospody! O Lord, O Lord, Hospody-
the words my grandma Sasha said as she limped around the Queens apartment

in her old age, the words I just heard a young Ukrainian mother murmur to a camera man on TV.

Hospody! O Lord.....

About the Author

Sandra M. Gilbert is distinguished professor emerita of English at University of California, Davis, a literary and cultural critic, a public intellectual, a feminist, and a poet. She served as president of the Modern Language Association, was the first M. H. Abrams Distinguished Visiting Professor of English at Cornell University (2007), and has received Guggenheim, Rockefeller, NEH, and Soros Foundation fellowships. In addition to her work as a critic, Sandra Gilbert has published multiple collections of poetry such as *Emily's Bread*, *Blood Pressure*, *Kissing the Bread: New and Selected Poems 1969-1999*, *Belonging*, and *Aftermath*, as well as a body of work on loss and grief including *Death's Door: Modern Dying and The Ways We Grieve*.

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