

Memories triggered by wait for the last bus

By Ruth Ostrow

"WHEN is the bus coming? When is the bus coming?" my father-in-law would insist, every time we went to see him in the old-age home. My husband had reluctantly sent his dad, Jacob, into the home two years previously because he was developing a form of dementia that was making it impossible to live independently.

Jacob had been doing strange things like wandering around his Bondi apartment all night. Then it got worse. Once his wife, Eva, woke up to discover him doing laundry at 3am. And then the situation became critical. One night he stacked the kitchen chairs on top of each other to fix an imaginary light bulb. The whole lot toppled and he ended up in hospital with broken bones.

Lying in hospital, he began his inquiry about "de bus", as he called it in his thick Polish accent. It was a faint murmur at first but became more vocal and more insistent once he'd been put into the nursing home. "But it's coming soon, we must go to the bus stop," he'd demand loudly, growing fractious, angry, clearly frustrated.

"Where is the bus going to?" my husband would ask. The answer was always the same. "To Bondi Road. I have to get home to Eva," he'd say, going through fictitious timetables in his head. Slowly, Jacob's mind deteriorated. He would often confuse others for his son. But he continued to obsess about the bus.

As time went on, the destination of the bus changed. Now it was going home to Poland where he lived peacefully before the war, before the Nazis exterminated his family and forced him to escape to Siberia. In his mind, he wanted to make his way back to a time of safety before the terror and the displacement.

The bus became a metaphor, a journey into memories of things past, things yearned for -- childhood, mother, home. "The bus goes to Madjarverski Street, then down to the village square," he would tell us, describing a bus with bells on it, the children, the cobbled streets, a world long gone.

Eventually Jacob no longer remembered his flat in Bondi, his house in Poland, or even his wife. In the last few months, he declined quite profoundly. But he would continue his questioning. "Why? Why isn't the bus here yet?"

For us, his family, the bus became a symbol of the proverbial existential dilemma.

"Where is the bus? When is it coming? Where is it going? And where has it been?" we'd all laugh together, trying to find some joy in the terrible confronting reality of watching people lose their dignity, their freedom, and their minds. "Perhaps it's the bus to freedom from the ravages of his poor body," I would speculate.

Last week my father-in-law died. It was not unexpected but sad nonetheless. He had lived a good life compared to most men and women of his generation -- Polish Jews, most of whom didn't make it past their tender years, meeting their deaths in concentration camps. To have made his 80s and carried his lineage on to three wonderful grandchildren, was a tribute to a life well lived.

But the pathos comes in leaving behind a wife who loved him for 56 years.

Trapped in a wheelchair herself, dreaming of things long gone, she doesn't have the relief of madness to make her suffering and losses more tolerable.

On the morning of the funeral, we gathered at the nursing home where Eva now resides and helped staff arrange transportation of friends and residents. One by one the oldies, in their frames and wheelchairs, were hoisted on board a special wheelchair-friendly vehicle by an electronic gadget.

Sitting there, strapped into my seat with 20 old folk around me, I suddenly had an insight. "My God. This is it. This is the bus!" I exclaimed to my husband, who jumped in surprise. "There was no profound existential meaning after all. Your dad was talking about the daily bus to Rookwood Cemetery!" I said, making him laugh through the tears.

After the funeral service, we returned to the nursing home. Sitting with my mother-in-law over lunch, I noticed a woman a few metres away. She was barely able to move and was having enormous trouble lifting her fork with her trembling hand. "Do you want chicken Mrs Apple?" I heard an attendant screaming kindly into her deaf ear. She nodded. Then in a raspy voice, hardly audible, I heard her ask: "Jenny, darling, when is the bus coming?"

"The bus!" we all screamed together in unison, and again started laughing. And suddenly I was crying -- crying for brave Eva who is left alone now that her darling husband has gone, crying for this brave woman trying to be dignified as food falls from her mouth. But not crying for Jacob. We don't know when that bus with bells is coming, we don't know where it is really going. But from what I've seen over the past few days, its coming is a blessed relief.

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