

My Grandmother

Ruhel Leah Szulc, 1869–1942

I grew up without any grandparents, because my parents left their families in Poland in the early 1920s to fulfill their Zionist dreams in Palestine, and they never found it possible to go back for a visit. This meant that I never had loving grandparents to indulge or care for me. My brother was born in Poland, and some photos of him with aunts or cousins have survived, but I was born in Palestine some years later. This doesn't mean that I didn't know about my grandparents.

Letters with foreign stamps and unusual handwriting came quite often, and I picked up snatches of information from the stories our parents told us. Actually, I only had one set of living grandparents, my maternal ones, because my father's parents both died in the 1917 typhoid epidemic during World War I, within a few weeks of each other. This grandmother was Esther Leah Shapira, and I was named after her. I gathered that she was a quiet, gentle woman. My father recalled that the family predicted that she would not last long after her husband died. His name was Yehiel ben Issahar Shapira, and my brother was given his name. Nevertheless, Esther Leah did have an influence on my growing up, even from the grave, but this story doesn't belong here.

My maternal grandparents were Avraham ben Yosef Szulc (Schultz), 1865–1926, and Ruhel Leah née Bokchin, 1869–1943, both born in Lodz. Although the family name suggests some German origin, no evidence of this has been found. Many Jews from different parts of Poland came to Lodz in the early years of the 19th century and settled in nearby villages such as Strykow, where my great grandparents were born, and Ozakow. With the development of the textile business for which Lodz became famous, these satellite villages were gradually incorporated into the growing city as suburbs.

Avraham Szulc also entered this industry and acquired a sock factory, which provided the family with a very comfortable living. I don't know if he founded business or took it over from his father. He was also a devoted Gerrer Hassid and an agent for the Gur lottery, so I presume he was very active in the community and still had time for visits to his rebbe. He and Ruhel Leah married in 1887 or '88. I presume that in their Yiddish-speaking family she was called Ruhel or Rohellah. She bore him twelve children, four of whom died in infancy. The surviving children were seven boys and one girl named Frimmet (Fruma), who became my mother. She was second in the hierarchy, coming after the oldest son Simha, who was born in 1893; the youngest, Yidl was born in 1907. (For a list of this generation's children and their dates, see the note at the end of this chapter.)

They lived very comfortably with adequate domestic help, and even a wet nurse when necessary. My mother used to tell me that the big laundry was done every couple of months with extra male help; the sheets were hung in the attics to dry. I presume they didn't change the sheets every week, and probably the weather too had to be taken into account. Avraham often brought Ruhel gifts of jewelry, and there were obviously many occasions calling for this. My mother also spoke of long summer visits to the famous spa town of Carlsbad, which necessitated the bringing of kosher utensils from home because they used to rent an apartment, but I don't know if or how many of the children were taken along. However, the good life didn't last. After World War I, a tremendous inflation crippled the whole economy. One had to go shopping with a bag full of worthless paper money, zlotys and/or rubles, and there was little to buy. I have no idea how they managed, but perhaps this situation was the catalyst that spurred several of the brothers to emigrate. Also, it may have been a factor in the early death of Avraham in 1926.

We only have one photo of Ruhel Leah. She was not a pretty or handsome woman, unlike the biblical Rachel, who was "beautiful and fair to look on." She appears to have been

a little overweight, wearing an unattractive black *sheitel* (wig), and has the saddest eyes I've ever seen. She was in her late sixties when the picture was taken, perhaps even in her early seventies, when war overtook Poland in 1939.

She didn't inspire any interest, and when I was young I didn't have particular feelings about her, except that I knew she was my mother's mother, my grandmother, in far away Lodz. Once she sent me a little pair of gold earrings, attached to a small photo of my grandfather, but my mother was against having my ears pierced and I never wore them. They were lost somewhere. However, in recent years, long after my mother passed away, whenever I come across this photo, I began to wonder about that expression in my grandmother's eyes, about the cause of her unhappiness. I began to speculate about Ruhel's life, so different from mine. I would try to imagine myself in her place, wondering how I would have felt experiencing the life that she had lived.

As my own life experiences began to pile up, happy and sad, and the influence of the aging process began to affect my ideas and attitudes, I began to understand that she did not have much joy in her life and that she must have been terribly lonely, especially at the end of her life. With this I could empathize, because parents and friends move on; one's children grow to adulthood, begin to live their own lives and establish their own families; and inevitably separation sets in, no matter how kind and attentive they are.

Frimmet's parents permitted her to attend a regular Polish school and then she worked in a Jewish kindergarten or orphanage. The first major clash between Frimmet and her mother Ruhel that I know of came when she married my father. As a married woman, she refused to have her hair cut and wear the traditional wig! An early expression of Women's Lib on an issue which was very important to her parents. Indeed, Ruhel was not at all happy about the marriage, because she knew that the young couple planned to emigrate to Palestine, my father being a fervent Zionist. A houseful of boys and young men does not make up for

an only daughter with a baby, a continent away. Ruhel must have missed her daughter very much.

My parents married in 1919, and went first to live in my father's town of Lentshitz (Leczyca), a small but historic place not far from Lodz. She was the first out of the house but as yet not far away. The first of the siblings to leave the country was actually one of my mother's brothers, Fishel, just a year younger than she was, who had gone to join a Hachshara farm for agricultural training in Germany, with the aim of going to Palestine. He had served in the Polish army in World War I, but was called up again in 1920 when trouble broke out on the Russian-Polish border. He resented this second tour of duty and sought a way to escape. At that time, the selling of identity papers of soldiers who had fallen in the war created a brisk trade. The Szulc family managed to buy such papers and my mother, suitably accompanied by a girl friend, went to Fishel's camp in order to deliver them. She was pregnant at the time with my brother, and passed herself off as Fishel's wife, thus not arousing any suspicion. With those freedom-giving papers granting him a new identity, Fishel walked out of the camp, boarded a train and crossed the border legally into Germany, where he joined a Hachshara group.

After three years' training, he arrived in Palestine in 1924 and met up with my parents who had arrived in 1922 and were living in the coastal town of Herzliya. As he had no other papers, he remained with his adopted name of the fallen soldier on his papers, Nomberg, which has been the family name ever since.

In the spring of 1926, when my mother was pregnant with me, she happened to find a letter from home addressed to Fishel, announcing that their father had died. Because she was nearing the expected date of birth, he had kept the news from her. So my grandmother Ruhel, in the space of four or five years, became a widow and saw two of her children and two grandchildren living in the unfamiliar, unfriendly land of Palestine. But this was not the end

of her troubles. The good comfortable old days had vanished in the continuing postwar economic crisis. My parents were aware that the family was in need, but their own situation was not exactly brilliant. Nevertheless, my mother occasionally sent Ruhel small sums of money which she herself could scarcely spare.

In the wake of this situation, the next brother Pinhas decided to seek his fortune in London, to which he emigrated in the mid-1920s. There he learned bread-making and opened a cake and bakery shop in London's East End, which became a very good business. Eventually, he married and fathered a daughter, Jean, in 1930. Ten years later, in 1940, he sent her to us in Melbourne as a war evacuee, one of a large group of children being sent from London to safety in faraway Australia. Because of the dangers of sea travel, with the threat of U-boats and torpedo attacks, they traveled in a convoy. It was quite a brave decision for parents to make in those days.

In the early 1930s, two of the younger brothers Yehiel (Chiel) and Yidl decided to emigrate to Brazil, but eventually Chiel moved to Uruguay and settled in a town called Paysandu. In 1937 the wife and son he had left in Poland joined him, and a daughter Mary (Miriam) was born in 1940. Though my mother scarcely knew these younger brothers, she kept in touch with them, and especially with the daughter Mary. She became an English teacher when she grew up and wrote us beautiful letters. Her family, three daughters and a son, grew up with a strong attachment to Israel; they have many relatives here from the other side of their family and have paid many visits. Some of the grandsons have spent a year in the country on leadership training courses.

In 1938 Lipman (Lippa), who had settled in a small Polish town called Brody, asked my mother to get permits for him and his family to come to Australia. My parents had become naturalized citizens and were able to do this, and soon Uncle Lippa arrived in Melbourne, followed within the year and before the war by his wife Reina (of the gold teeth),

and daughters Hanna and Mindel. At last we had family with us and I had cousins.

Though I got on well with the cousins, we were not “happy families.” My uncle was difficult to get on with and his relations with my mother, and father, were strained. It was one *brogez* (feud; not on speaking terms) after another, interspersed with peacemaking on Yom Kippurs, initiated by Reina. They just didn’t get on, and even when they made an attempt to settle in Israel some years later, my mother and this brother hardly ever met.

However, there was one important occasion in the 1980s, when the five siblings met together in Israel. It is truly a historic photo. Herschel and his second wife Lily visited us very often. Lippa and his wife were living in Netanya, and Pinhas, who was then living in Melbourne, decided to come together with Herschel. This was his brother Pinhas’ only trip to Israel. Together with my mother and Fishel, that made five Szulc siblings. I have a photo of this occasion, which unfortunately never repeated itself, but I think Ruhel would have been happy about it, and to know that her children maintained contact. Though their leaving Poland had saddened her life, it had made their survival possible.

Out of her eight surviving children, my grandmother Ruhel, who stayed in Lodz, was left with only two sons there. The oldest Simha was married with four children and Herschel, second from the last, had two young ones. Times were bad. Besides the economic situation, the growing Nazi threat began to pervade the air. I think that by this time my grandmother was living in an old age home. At that time these were not the comfortable accommodations of today and usually two persons had to share a room. Simha’s wife had passed away and his oldest child, a son, had married; I don’t know exactly in what order these two events took place. The life of his next son, Efraim, now aged about 17, was quite disrupted, from personal as well as external political points of view. He felt very much adrift and saw that Poland had nothing to offer him. When his Uncle Herschel discussed his plans for fleeing to Russia, Efraim decided to join him. In the light of the growing Nazi threat, Polish Jewry was roughly

divided into two groups about how to react. Because the rabbis warned that it was dangerous to leave – that there was no Jewish life “out there,” no *kashrus*, no Shabbat or festivals and everything (food, drink, clothing, etc.) was *trief* (unfit for Jews) – many Jews thought it better to stay and trust in the Almighty’s goodness to help them survive. But others, perhaps less believing, less optimistic, feared the worst; they sought ways and means to leave Poland. I don’t know whether Simha stayed because of his religious beliefs or because he didn’t want to leave Ruhel. Obtaining a foreign visa was almost impossible, even if one had the money; but going to Russia was relatively simple. As planned, Herschel and Efraim joined the mass of Jews moving across the country towards the Russian border. Like most men, Herschel left his family behind, believing that women and children would not be harmed, but shortly after setting out he became anxious and regretted his decision. Herschel decided he must return to his wife and children. Unfortunately, German soldiers picked him up and imprisoned him.

Efraim continued alone and succeeded in crossing into the Soviet Union where he was arrested and drafted into the army. He served mainly near the Mongolian border. After the war, he settled in Moscow and married Sonya Berman, a young orphaned woman who had fled Poland on her own. He worked as a linotypist (typesetter) for a newspaper; she was a dressmaker. They found it prudent to hide their Jewish identity, especially from their son. Both only learnt the tragic fate of their families after the war.

The decision to create the Lodz ghetto, the first of its kind, was made in December 1939, and was carried out by February 1940. Ruhel lived in the ghetto with Simha and his family. She was now 73 years old. What could her life have been? Was she still in the framework of the old-age home, or did she have to fend for herself? Was there food, heating or any amenities? How often did she say the *Avinu Malkeinu* prayer, asking “Our Father, Our King” not to abandon her in her old age, in her hour of need?

Sometime during 1941 Simha fell ill and passed away. Ruhel remained alone. The

mass deportations began in 1942, and the records which my brother Alec investigated show that Ruhel was sent to Auschwitz where she was murdered, sometime between 1942 and 1944. The Russians liberated the infamous Lodz ghetto only in 1945.

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Much of the personal aspect of what I have written here we learned only after the war. First, we received a letter from Herschel, who had survived many camps including Buchenwald. It was incredible that he still remembered our address in Australia, but presumably there were agencies like the Red Cross, who assisted the DPs (Displaced Persons) in finding relatives. He wanted to come to Australia, but needed more time to recuperate and to look for family survivors, but found none. Eventually, he arrived in Melbourne in the summer of 1948, just a few weeks before my brother and I were about to leave for Israel. He stayed with us for a few months until he got acclimatized, then found a job as a machinist in a men's clothing factory. He found other accommodation and after some time, in 1951, a second wife. I saw Herschel for the last time when I visited Melbourne in 1989. He said he had a gift for me and when I opened the package, I found a nice place setting, a knife, fork and spoon. I looked at him questioningly and he said, "This is the first thing I bought when I left the camp. I wanted to eat like a civilized person, and feel normal again."

In 1958 we heard through my Uncle Fishel in Rishpon, that his brother Simha's son Efraim, who had fled to Russia with his Uncle Hershel, had arrived in Israel with his wife Sonia and son Azriel. They had taken advantage of a new Russian law, which allowed Polish citizens to be repatriated, and immediately made arrangements to continue to Israel. He too had remembered the whereabouts of his farmer-uncle at Rishpon, but didn't know that our (his Aunt Frimmet's) family was now also in Israel. He soon found work and housing, and his wife Sonya continued as a dressmaker, gradually building up a clientele, including my

mother and I. We stayed on good terms and met often. They filled an important emotional gap for my mother. It was fascinating to hear their stories and we all enjoyed the traditional dishes Sonya served when we came for a meal.

Incidentally, some members of my father's family, a nephew and a niece with her husband and son also arrived in Israel, having fled to Russia where they spent the war years of hunger and hard labor in Siberia. They were the only survivors of a family of seventy souls.

Though the descendents of the Szulc (Schultz) family are spread out over the world, we try to keep in touch; we still remember the generations which went before and are impressed by those who had the courage to leave because they were determined to find a better life. In so doing, they ensured the survival of their family. Ruhel suffered because of the changes that swept over her, but I think she would agree that leaving was the better alternative.

Shakespeare summed it up well when he wrote "all the world's a stage," but he might well have added that the play presented does not change but constantly repeats itself. The scenes change, the languages change, the costumes change, the wars have different names, but the story does not change – birth and death and the span between; a beginning, a flowering, decline and an end; ambitions are achieved or disappointed; love is triumphant or unrequited; wars are won or lost; people are happy or not, and loneliness lies in wait. The stories are human stories and they can be enjoyed over the centuries, because they speak to the heart and mirror the human experience and create the chain of human history. They are timeless because they are genuine; we can identify with the characters and feel with and for them; we are able us to understand the lives of other people in other times, as I can identify with the life of my grandmother Ruhel Leah, whom I never knew...may her memory be for a blessing.

Note: The children of Avraham ben Yosef Szulc (Schultz), 1865–1926 and Ruhel Leah, née

Bokchin, 1869–1943:

Simha, 1893–1941 d. Lodz, Poland

Frimmet, 1896–1980 d. Jerusalem

Fishel, 1897–1982 d. Rishpon, Israel

Pinhas, 1899–1986 d. Melbourne

Lipman (Lippa), 1901–1991 d. Melbourne

Yehiel (Chiel), 1903–2000 d. Uruguay

Herschel, 1905–1994 d. Melbourne

Yidl, 1907–1989 d. Brazil