

## BLOOMSTONE HISTORY WRITTEN BY PESSI BLUMSTEIN

Ein Hashofet c. 1989

### MY PARENTS' HOME

The story of my parents' and grandparents' home is of a world that was and is no more. It is telling of the past, of their legacy, of a culture that was destroyed, of a little Lithuanian town [Keidan] where hard-toiling Jews lived. It is to tell of a revolution that had failed, a world war, pogroms, refugees and wanderings.

It is the story of the Enlightenment generation which fought for a free secular Jewish culture, of a Jewish family with its beginnings in a Lithuanian town, continuing on the shore of the Azovian Sea, near Crimea, White Russia, back to Lithuania, emigration to Canada and finally *aliyah* to Palestine (Israel).

I remember a family of 12: Mom, Dad, 7 children, Grandpa and his two aging daughters who lived with us. My grandfather [Avraham Blumshtein) was a *melamed* (a tutor) in a very small town. He was very respectable, wore a groomed beard and looked like a celebrity. An orthodox Jew according to Lithuanian standards.

His first meeting with a mirror was on his way to Kaunas [Kovno], the capital. While in the public bath he observed a good-looking Jew smiling, approaching him for a handshake.. He would always tell of this episode with a broad smile on his face.

This grandfather was the dominant figure in this period of our life [probably 1915 ff]. The numerous legends he used to tell of his own imagination, an enchanted world terrifying and appeasing at the same time. Angels and ghosts prevailed intermittently or even side by side. The stories were always in the first person full of imagination and hair-raising action. The good had always beat the evil. He loved children and used to make up rhymes on every subject we asked for. He would improvise toys from various pieces of junk. He was very helpful in our poor household.

My father [Dovid Itzik Bloomstone], a genius, a graduate of Ponievezs and Slabodka *yeshivot* [was] ordained for the rabbinate. He never made it his profession. He would decide on questions of *kashrut* for the poor women while mother would beg him to be lenient with his decisions.

He was among the first of the Enlightenment generation, established the "reformed *cheder*" [Hebrew school] where Hebrew was interpreted in Hebrew. Wore his clothes short and joined the Zionist movement. He opposed the strict interpretation of the *Halacha*. He was what one might call a rational orthodox.

With his intellect sharp as a razor's edge he analyzed every new phenomenon -- he took the good and left the bad (ate the fruit and threw out the peel). His memory [was] like a "plastered cistern



Which loses not a drop." His intellectual domain included *Talmud*, Bible, Hebrew, world literature and the Hebrew press of the Enlightenment period. He was a gifted teacher and left behind him large numbers of admiring disciples.

He admired and loved nature, actually an agriculturist at heart, he also cherished handicrafts and knew how to fix everything. The need to maintain 12 persons prevented him from materializing his aspirations and go along with the leading people of his generation.

He was a teacher in a public school. His salary was equal to that of the Russian teachers with small families. He resorted to overtime classes, lectures in public places and synagogues. He did everything possible to enlarge the family income. He would bring home the remnants of food left over by pampered wealthy children. It was like a treasure for us.

[When the Russian revolution started] we were refugees on the train till it stopped at Mariopol on the shore of the Azovian Sea. Every one of us [had] a small bag of belongings and hoped to come back [to Lithuania] within a few days as had been promised. They put us in synagogues with all the other refugees who didn't manage to get off at former stations. Some of the Russian women brought food and even took us home for a few days.

My father was the first to get employment as a teacher. A relation shoved up – she got there as a young girl and found an apartment which we shared with another family. We soon understood that we are there to stay for long and took the relevant measures.

Father liked Russia, the wide spaces, the climate, the amiable people, the fruits and vegetables which we didn't have in Lithuania in the congested small town. He believe in the Revolution and in the relief it will bring to the Jews, cultural autonomy, emancipation and good prospects for the education of the children.

Mother [Ester Abilovitch Bloomstone] married at the age of 16, gave birth to 7 children. She came from a wealthy home. Her father was a grain merchant and owned a bakery. She knew how to read and write and even arithmetic. She succeeded in marrying the genius (ILLUY) [a Hebrew word meaning a great Jewish scholar – "anointed" or "exalted"].

She was respected by society and had the position of reciting the prayers in the synagogue to the illiterate women. She fully believed in transgression and punishment and was certain to get to be in hell for our sins. But she never intervened in our ways of life.

Among ourselves we named her the "Angel of Peace" and sometimes even in a derogatory sense. She couldn't stand quarrels and always came to our defense while father was ready to punish even severely. She never raised her voice and fulfilled her task as the obedient, servile wife.

The house was always full of visitors – despite the economic shortage. The aunts would always bring young revolutionaries who sought refuge. They would dress them up in the orthodox style robe [and] beards, and sometimes even as women. To us children, it was an



amusing spectacle. We always heard revolutionary songs, saw red flags and overheard horror stories of their experiences.

Memories, memories...It's difficult to detach one's self from the Pandora's box that I opened. A Jewish soldier, a deserter from the Austrian army came at midnight and asked for shelter. Despite our suspicions, we had decided to put him up. That night everyone went to bed equipped with kitchen knives, axes [and] hammers under the pillow. How we rejoiced when we found out he was really a Jew who fled.

As the revolutionary period continued life became more difficult. We lived near the seashore. The Ukrainian neighbors waited for the moment they could molest us. Their children whom we played with during the day were hungry, too. We tried to satiate our hunger by sucking on acacia flowers and from the dried leaves we rolled cigarettes and smoked in hiding.

Pogroms, starvation and a night siege [occurred] on the house where all the Jewish neighbors took shelter. We screamed and did not open. The Ukrainian neighbor who most probably joined "the party" told us he would defend us if they had broken in.

It was a harbor town and changed hands very often, the Reds, the Whites and the Greens took advantage and pogromized. The murderer gang leader Machno [of] the Cossacks would throw a loaf of bread into the crowd watching with joy the fight over it. The chaos grew, starvation and feathers from ripped pillows were a constant experience. The bread lines lengthened, the forged food cards multiplied -- we did everything possible to survive.

My brother [Velvl] who was a member of the "Self Defense" would bring wood from the fences so we could keep a fire going to warm up. Great grandpa [probably Grandpa Avraham] would preach and moralize. Mother and my sisters would go out to the village carrying on their backs precious damask table cloths, silverware and gold rings, and come back home toward evening with some beets, melons, squashes -- and even this came to an end. Hunger reigned.

Then repatriation was declared. We were at liberty to go back to Lithuania. A discussion broke out, harsh and meaningful. Father was convinced that an end will come to our suffering and a new light will shine with the victory of communism. He wanted to participate in the construction of a new world. Mother, fed up with suffering, revolted for the first time and demanded to return home -- to her former world and perhaps safe shelter.

My oldest brother [Velvl], active in the communist youth, got a [rail] car in a cattle train loaded with refugees that was bound to take us to Lithuania. We took with us Mother's sister and her family -- this despite the tense relations between them. Thus we were 15 persons in the [rail] car.

Do you remember Dr. Zhivago's return to Leningrad? Our trip was very similar. Shootings, raids. As we stopped to cook in the snow, the train would pull out and we ran with the boiling pots back to the car. Many times this turned out to be just a maneuver -- the scene repeated itself many times daily.



It took weeks because of the ruined tracks and the raids by the Cossacks who killed anybody who came across their path. As children we didn't sense the dangers as much as we felt the hunger. Not everybody survived all these agonies, others were hit by bullets. We finally reached the town of Gomel -- a known Jewish community. They put us up in some soldiers' barracks. Every family got a platform -- eleven of us packed like sardines on the wooden platform. Our barracks housed the various "rats" (escapees) from the Revolution: Whites, Cossacks, pogromists, various "old faith believers" and Jewish merchants. We were stuck there for 6 months, waiting for visas from Moscow.

Diseases like typhoid claimed many casualties. Many families were wiped out. We, the children, took turns alternate nights to wash up in the basins -- which disturbed the sleep of the gentile neighbors who threatened with murder. I still remember the horror of watching children dying after their mother who was the first to pass away.

Father got a job in Gomel. He demonstrated his teaching ability and was enthusiastically accepted. Mother and the sisters went to work sorting out rags. They managed to take out on their bodies pieces of velvet, felt and wool. We opened up a little shoe shop [with] shoes the tops made out of cloth and the soles of ropes. Moshe and Hinda [Pessi's siblings] were the salespeople in the market. I was then 7 [years old] and was enchanted by the market.

On the outskirts there were orchards which the government confiscated and turned over to the teachers. When it rained, all of the refugees invaded the orchards and filled up bags with apples.

Finally, the visas arrived but none for Grandpa and our aunt. This despite the fact that they had the same passports. We had faced the dilemma -- to forego the good of the children and stay on, or leave Grandpa and our aunt. Father couldn't mobilize the strength to leave his father by himself. We had advanced towards the border town Biala. Quarantine, hunger -- only herring -- and water rationed.

We managed to reach Lithuania. The house was there intact. We found our table inside. The neighbors brought some more equipment. There was quite a bit of excitement in town because I cannot understand what the Jews in the town lived on. There were some real Jewish farmers who grew mainly vegetables. We, too, restored our vegetable garden, grew the commonly known vegetables and introduced new ones: lettuce and tomatoes. This was Mother's kingdom. How in the world did she manage household, the vegetable garden, laundry, baking, cooking and helping the needy ones?

There were all the [political] parties in the house: Father *Mizrachi*, the oldest brother [Velv] a communist and his fiancée [Pessl], Zalman *Poale Zion*, all the others *Shomer Hatzair*. I was too young to join. We spoke Hebrew at home and in the street. Emissaries of all kinds would visit our home. The house was back to life again. [Likely date around 1919 or 1920]

I remember one night sitting up and crying because Mother gave my bed to a *shaliach*, Yaakov Gottlieb (Amit) who came to organize the scouts for the *Hashomer Hatzair*.



After 4 years we left for Canada to join Father and Ada [the oldest girl]. [Once we were in Montreal] Father bore the burden by taking on extra work, private tuition, lectures, etc. He was respected by all the younger teachers and our home would again bustle with visitors. There were political debates. The visitors' children used to eat at our table. It was Mother who worked the hardest. She also had to make peace between us. The move toward *Aliyah* [to Palestine/Israel] began with Hinda and Moshe [around 1931]. Zalman followed [in 1932]. Ada went to look around [in about 1933] and stayed on in [Kibbutz] Ramat Yochanan. I was next [in 1934]. My parents and Batya closed the ranks [in 1935]. [All went to help found *kibbutzim*]. Zev [Velvl -- Shirley's father] the oldest brother, a leftist, remained [in Montreal].

[In Palestine] Father bought a plot of land and joined the "*Herut*" [freedom] Association which planted orange groves. His dream was to become a farmer. He implanted in us the love for the land as well, and taught us to refrain from getting involved in teaching.

From the *yeshivot*, he carried with him all his life TB [tuberculosis] and the disease finally subdued him. The day I left [Montreal] for Palestine he entered a sanitarium and kept it a secret from me. When he was discharged from the hospital [in Montreal], he left for Palestine. He had hoped one of his sons would join him to work the orange grove he had bought. When he failed trying to convince us he came [to live] in Ramat Yochanan. He taught Bible to adults [and] read extensively. He lacked the adoring audience and the extensive family near him [he had had in Canada and Lithuania]. Mother worked with the other old women and acquired friends.

I am overwhelmed with the mass of memories. The story is subjective and I find it difficult to select what might seem to be more important. These are memories of a world which is no more in existence and probably part of the life history of many others as well as of the Jewish people at large. A history of a wandering people -- a broken people. A people that participated in all wars not of their own. We lost the best of our youths in their struggle for the various ideas, ...isms.

I couldn't stop the dam that broke open and the story grew long. Forgive me for taking advantage of your patience.

\* Note: words in parentheses ( ) are Pessi's; words in brackets [ ] are mine -- Shirley Bloomstone Angrist



## COMMENTS BY SHIRLEY AFTER ASKING PESSI QUESTIONS

1-4-98

I was puzzled as to why Pessi's family left Lithuania for Russia making such a horrendously difficult trek of about 2000 miles with such a big family. She says her family was exiled by the Russians because their town was close to the border with Germany. The Russians thought that Jews were spies because Yiddish sounded a lot like German. So when World War I broke out the Russians drove out Jews from border towns and made them go to Russia, although they were told it would only be for a short time. They ended up staying seven years! They left when Pessi was about a year old in 1914 (she was born in 1913) and returned when she was about seven or eight in 1920 or 1921.

I asked why they went so far to the Sea of Azov? Pessi says it was the end of the train line. Also they had a cousin there (Trooma, daughter of Aunt Eeta, related to Pevznern) who helped them a lot.

Four years later, by 1925, the Bloomstones had all left for Montreal. Of the people who went to Russia, her grandfather Avraham and one of his daughters, Rochel Leah, couldn't get back into Lithuania, so they went to Montreal directly from the town of Gomel, Russia. So did Hodel, another of Avraham's daughters, who met her husband Loveh in Russia.

They were in Russia not only for WW I but also for the Russian Revolution. Pessi's mother Ester has taken her jewelry, which was good stuff because she was from a wealthy family. Dovid Itzik loved the Ukraine (Sea of Azov area in Crimea) and wanted to stay. He believed the Revolution would be good for Jews. He didn't like shtetl life, found it too provincial and gossipy. Ester wasn't having it, she insisted on returning to Lithuania around 1921.

Pessi's brother Velvl (Zave) (Shirley's father) served in the Lithuanian army possibly sometime after they returned to Lithuania (c. 1922). His father Dovid Itzik said "let him go, it's good experience for a young man." Dovid Itzik didn't approve of Jews who refused to serve. In fact, Velvl met his wife Pessi while he was in the army. He did not serve in combat. He was responsible for food products, maybe distribution. He had been in a Communist youth group. Pessi said everyone did that.

I asked Pessi if the Bloomstone family were founders of the kibbutzim where they settled. Her answer was not exactly, but in a way. Her brother Zalmen went to Ramat Yochanan first and her sister Ada came there to visit him and decided to stay. He was one of the early settlers but not a founder. He was part of the *Kvutzot Hatzafot* (the northern group) who were mostly from Canada and USA with backgrounds from agricultural schools. At Mishmar Haemek, Hinda and Moshe went for one year to learn how to set up a kibbutz, then Moshe helped start Ein Hashofet. At first, Ein Hashofet was in Chadera with tents and shacks. Pessi went there first; they all did very heavy labor, digging, construction, cleaning up the area. Then they bought land from the *effendis* or Arab sheiks who owned vassals to work the land; the vassals were paid to leave and slowly drifted away.