

Aunt Anne's memoirs

Some time ago, my brother Jack decided to write memories of his youth which he addressed to his grandchildren. I too received a copy and found it interesting, but it was not my memories and I wondered whether my granddaughters would also like to know something of their roots.

I did not know my grandparents, they never reached England. My father Abraham came from a small town called Rassein on the Lithuanian Russian border. The family name was Lipshitz and, I believe they were fairly wealthy and owned property. When Abraham was quite young he was sent to a very well-known Yeshiva in Slabodka. Later he immigrated and came to London. As a young man with no profession except a good knowledge of the Torah, Tanach, Talmud and Gemorrah, he started teaching Jewish studies. He must have been an excellent teacher though very stern. At one time he had one of the largest Cheders in the East End with some 200 pupils, and this you must remember was a Cheder where children came after school and on Sundays. His main task was preparing the boys for their Bar Mitzvah and even writing and coaching them in the speech they had to deliver - all this in Yiddish. He was an ardent Zionist and there was always the blue J.N.F. (Jewish National Fund) box both in the Cheder and at home.

He was a natural leader and founded a number of Jewish societies, among them the Gemillat Hachessed which distributed milk and coal tickets to poor Jews during the winter. Another society Bikur Cholim visited the sick in hospital. He was the President of the Cannon Street Road Synagogue and was one of the founders of the East End 'Lovers of Zion, a Zionist club.

My mother came from a small village, Koshida, near Kovna. Her father was a farmer, but he did not own his farm, it belonged to a rich Lithuanian. Her family name was Shoham. In spite of being a farmer her father was learned in Jewish studies and they always had a Yeshiva Bocher to live on the farm to teach the boys. When my mother was twelve years old, she was sent to live in a Rabbi's house in Kovna to help look after his children and in turn she was taught Yiddishkeit to know the daily and weekly prayers. I suppose today it will be similar to an au pair.

I have the greatest admiration for these grandparents, knowing that there is no future for their children in Lithuania they were determined they would have a better life and that could only be done by emigrating. Uncle Eliya, who was the oldest, was the first to be sent. He had been trained as a Shochet and was very religious. He was told that once he got settled in England or America, he must find a husband for his sister, Zelda, and send for her, then to send for the next child and so on.

Uncle Eliyah was very good looking and on his way to London he stopped for a few days in Vilna at an address he had been given, the Ogus family. They wasted no time and married him off to their daughter Katie, a very plain young girl, and sent them both on their way. When Uncle Eliyah found work, as promised, he sent for my mother, his sister Zelda, and arranged the marriage with my father. Later he sent for the next sister, my Auntie Fanny and the last to come was my Uncle Sam, but he did not stay in London and continued on to America where he became a farmer in Jersey, Connecticut. The three members of the Shoham family who stayed in London, were very close and the three brothers in law, Uncle Eliyah, my father and Uncle Yithak (Auntie Fanny's husband) remained good friends all their lives.

Now something about my home. As I've already said my father was a keen Zionist, and in our hall there was a large photo of Herzl, on the right-hand side a photo of Israel Zangwill and on the left a photo of Max Nordau. Another picture in our Hall was that of a snow-covered landscape. In one corner was some ruined wooden houses and crossing the snowy fields was a long line of Jews fleeing

their homes after program, men, women, children, with bundles, pushing broken carts, etc. I suppose it was to remind us of the dangers of the Diaspora.

We had a small room which was called the library of the study and we did our homework there. It contained a piano and above the piano was a large copy of Ludwig Bloom's famous painting 'The opening of the Hebrew University on Mount Scopus,' and at the back of the painting was a black and white sketch of the same scene with all the names of the famous people who had attended.

When I look back, I'm filled with amazement how my mother managed. She was hard working and a good housekeeper. We were seven children plus my parents and a sleep-in maid, so she cooked daily for ten people. Thursdays were baking days and she filled large tins with homemade biscuits, mandlebrot and what we called rolypollies. Apart from this she knitted scout stockings for the boys and my sister Sarah and I had a number of knitted dress dresses with knickers to match. She knitted on four needles, so there was no seams and she knitted without a pattern. One year she bought a roll of striped flannel and made pyjamas out of it for the whole family. She also sewed gingham summer dresses for Sarah and me. She was a very quiet woman, rather shy, in great contrast to my father who was very outgoing and talkative.

I don't think there was a lot of money, but all the children had private Hebrew lessons and piano lessons. Jack was the exception, he had violin lessons. We were well dressed, I remember having a new dress and new shoes every Pesach and Rosh Hashanah, the food was excellent, mother was a very good cook. She also had green thumbs and like gardening. I was told that during the First World War when the family left London because of the air raids and spent a year or two at Henley on Thames, she transformed the little garden into a vegetable plot, growing potatoes, radishes, lettuce tomatoes as vegetables were then in very short supply.

As I mentioned before, my father was an ardent Zionist and spent a great deal of his free time in Zionist and charitable activities. At one of the functions at the 'Lovers of Zion' Club, I had to stand on the stage and recite Bialik's poem. I said it parrot fashion, probably not understanding a word and I remember distinctly the new dress I wore for the occasion; it was navy blue with green trimmings. I loved poetry when I was young, English, not Hebrew and I used to make up stories and was good at telling them. I had a series of stories about mischievous twins who are always getting into trouble, these stories were created for our youngest brother Arthur and he wouldn't go to bed if I didn't tell him some new adventures of the twins.

These little things seem to stand out far more than my attendance at the elementary school. I was considered a good pupil and was amongst the first three in the class, so my parents decided to send me to a well-known secondary school known as Central Foundation. Looking back, I don't think I learned much at school. My knowledge, I think, came mostly from reading. I devoured books.

My oldest brother, Hyman, who followed my father's footsteps and was also a keen Zionist, together with a young South African Jewish boy, Norman Lourie, started Habonim which was a Jewish scout movement based on the British scouts, but with Jewish content. Apart from camping and scouting, Jewish history was introduced, Jewish literature, pride in being Jewish and Zionism.

After some training I became the leader, or as it was then called Rosh Gedud Hadassah. I had some forty girls, aged ten to fourteen and we met twice a week at the Harley Street Synagogue in Bow, East London, the synagogue giving us use of their Hall. Our meetings consisted of talks on Jewish and Zionist history, stories of famous Jews, games songs and dancing. The movement spread rapidly, and branches were opened in Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds and all the major towns. At our annual camp in the summer holidays, we met members of the various branches and lifelong friendships were

formed. It is through one of these camps that I am here today in Israel. I was very friendly with a girl my own age, Elise, who came from Brighton. We met at the annual summer camps and she often came to London to senior Habonim meetings and parties. It must have been at the summer camp of 1935 when I saw Elise after an absence of a year or two. I asked what had happened, where she had disappeared. She told me she spent a year in Palestine staying with a well-known family, the Ruppins. All she had to do was give the three children, three English lessons a day and she lived as a member of the family and had a wonderful time.

I told Elise that I envied her, and she wrote to Mrs Ruppin for me to take her place. Three months later, I received a letter from Mrs Ruppin inviting me, my duties will be giving three English lessons a day and helping her and Dr Ruppin with their English correspondence. I would be free in the mornings to work. It was not easy persuading my parents, but I did so, and in April 1936 I set sail on a tiny boat named 'Tel Aviv' for Haifa, stopping at Splitz, Venice, Trieste and finally Haifa. However, 1936 was not a good year, whilst at sea, riots broke out in Palestine and there was a curfew in Jerusalem.

I was met at Haifa by Esther Milstein. I had known Esther from Habonim and had intended spending my first weekend with her. However, she said the sooner I got to Jerusalem the better as the road might become dangerous. The train journey to Jerusalem should have taken three to four hours but it took eight, stones were thrown at the train as we passed through Arab villages, windows were smashed and there were many stoppages. You can imagine how I felt, my first day in Palestine, alone on a train knowing there will be a curfew by the time he reached Jerusalem and I wondered if I would have to spend the night at the railway station. The train eventually reached Jerusalem where Dr Ruppin was waiting for me.

I stayed with the Ruppins for a year and a half. I had promised my parents I would return after one year but was very reluctant to do so. It was a lovely period and I enjoyed every moment in spite of the riots, curfews etc. I made many friends. Mrs Ruppin who was considered a difficult woman evidently like me, and as I was not paid, she was always giving me presents. My work was easy, and I met a lot of very interesting people in their home. As I was free in the mornings, I found work at the Vaad Leumi which was then considered the Government of the future Jewish state. Once the curfew was lifted, I attended Hebrew classes and made lots of new friends. It was a pleasant period for me, and I decided that I wanted to live in Palestine. In those days it was not easy getting a permanent certificate, but Dr Ruppin promised if I decided to return, he would arrange it for me, so after one and a half years I returned to England. London seemed very dull after Jerusalem and I was determined to return. Unfortunately, it was the time of Munich and the threat of war, so I had to wait, but eventually Dr Ruppin sent me my certificate and I returned to Jerusalem in December 1938, a short period before World War 2.

Mrs Ruppin asked me to live with them even if I found a full-time job, there were only two children at home then and she said the lessons were not so important as we talked English at mealtimes and my room was awaiting me. So, I returned to the Ruppins and found a full-time job at Barclays Bank as secretary to the local director in charge of all bank branches in Palestine and Cyprus. It was a well-paid job and I stayed with the Ruppins until I married in April 1940.