

Rocha and Riva

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Rocha and Riva were sisters. Rocha was "Grandma" to me and Riva was "Ma" to everyone including myself. Rocha was my paternal grandmother and Riva was my maternal grandmother. They emigrated to America in the late 1890's from Ponevezh in Kovno Guberniya near Vilna, Lithuania. Guberniya was the Russian name for a geographical district. Lithuania was part of the Russian Empire in the 19th century. My grandparents knew how to speak Russian but always communicated in Yiddish.

Ponevezh had a tradition as a place of Torah and occupied a position of honor in the rabbinical world. In the 19th century, it was predominantly Jewish and its many Synagogues were the center of intellectual, social and religious life. On Shabbat, all business in the town ceased. It was truly a time when people connected deeply and strongly with one another. Families were interdependent and it was not uncommon to have cousins marry cousins, as my parents did later on in America.

My grandfathers, Samuel, Rocha's husband and Elias, Riva's husband, had come to America a year prior to their wives' arrival in order to explore the new country and establish a home for their families. It was a well known "fact" in Eastern Europe that the streets in New York were paved with gold, a far-fetched concept, but any place would have shone with promise compared to the uncertain life of Jews in Lithuania, with the occasional pogrom, times of famine and the prospect of men being conscripted into the Russian army for twenty-five years.

My grandmothers finally emigrated to join their husbands; one can only imagine the arduous ocean voyage in steerage with small children in tow. Rocha traveled with four children and Riva with two. And then, what a feeling of exhilaration and hope and wonder in beholding the Statue of Liberty before the ship reached Ellis Island! However, what followed was bewilderment and chaos as the greenhorns were subjected to a thorough interrogation by an interpreter followed by an intensive medical examination. They must have trembled at the prospect of rejection or quarantine. In 1898, an article in the New York Times Magazine decried the lack of courtesy extended to these weary travelers. To add to their woes, Orthodox Jews like my grandparents could not satiate their hunger at the one non-kosher restaurant at Ellis Island. Perhaps, they were better off since it was common knowledge that the new bedraggled immigrants who could not fathom English, were victims of inflated prices for the food.

My grandfathers had found housing on the lower East Side of Manhattan, the teeming neighborhood for Eastern European Jews and others of foreign origin. My grandparents moved from one tenement to the other and on several occasions, lived next door to one another. My father described his first residence on Pike Street where the common toilet for the building was in the yard below. The dwellings were called railroad apartments because one small room led into another with no connecting hallways. There were still some gas lights on the streets of New York and automobiles were a novelty. My mother told me that when an occasional automobile appeared, the people on the street would jeer, "Get a horse!"

Despite the physical deprivation, there was rich intellectual life on the lower East Side, My parents and their siblings frequented the Educational Alliance, a charitable society that provided classes and discussion groups for hungry young minds. There were many participants who emerged from that environment to contribute positively to American society. Morris Raphael Cohen, the distinguished philosopher, for example was a contemporary and friend to my mother's sister.

Eventually, the Jews of the lower East Side moved upward (literally and figuratively) to Harlem which had become a Mecca for Jews for almost 30 years, beginning in the late 19th century. Riva moved with her entourage family to 111th Street and then, improved her status even further by establishing residence on West End Avenue. I am not certain if Rocha had the resources to follow her sister to Harlem since fate had not been kind to her. She became a widow much too soon...

Riva also had many adversities but seemed to surmount them all. She was married twice. Her first husband was an old man who died after ten years of marriage with no progeny. Although she never described the political oppression from which she had escaped, she did talk with horror about having to endure the ancient Jewish ritual that accompanied widowhood. Her husband's brother was entitled to throw old shoes at her to liberate them both from her remaining his chattel.

Her second husband, Elias, was my grandfather, a flamboyant and volatile widower, with grown children. He died long before I was born. It is not clear to me how he made a living in Ponevezh but in New York he bought and sold real estate and ultimately gambled away all that he had acquired. His second occupation was that of a bookmaker, an illegal practice in America but not so in Lithuania. He chose not to distinguish between the disparate laws and on several occasions, the police were at his door. Somehow, he was never caught.

Although he was generous with his own gambling allowance, he was parsimonious and rigid with his children. He denied my mother cocoa because in his view, milk was too expensive and not necessary. She begged to attend Hebrew school but he insisted that Jewish studies were not for girls. Yet, my mother adored him and remembered fondly how he would sit on a stool in the kitchen, every night, in true Russian style, drinking tea with a lump of sugar in his mouth. Photographs of him depict a distinguished looking and handsome old man with a trim white beard.

At 80 years of age, he visited his daughter, my aunt, who had married a cousin and moved to a plantation in South Carolina. When no one was around to chide him, my grandfather took a horse and disappeared, riding bareback as he had done in the old country. Ultimately, he broke his hip from a fall in the house. As he lay dying from bed pneumonia, he begged to listen to familiar Jewish melodies. Only then could he leave this world in peace.

Riva was thin and slight, but looks can be deceiving. She had survived typhus, diphtheria, smallpox and typhoid. There were no scars or visible indication that she had been so afflicted. She lost two children in her lifetime, twin girls – one was accidentally smothered in infancy by a wet nurse, and the other died of cancer in middle age. Riva lived 96 years and her faculties failed her only in the last year of her life.

Two years after she settled in New York, she turned 40 and had what was called "a change of life" baby, my mother. In those days, women gave birth at home with the assistance of a midwife. Palliative drugs as we know them now did not exist. She and my grandfather already had two school age children who were born in Ponevezh. Now they were saddled with an infant. My grandfather's unstable income did not assure financial security for the family. So, Riva who had been working as a customer peddler, (a practical job for many immigrant women), could not afford to remain at home. Daily, she had been taking the ferry to Hoboken, New Jersey, where her customers lived. A new baby could not stand in her way. She hired a neighbor to care for the infant. But unfortunately, the neighbor stole the milk that had been left for my mother and gave it to her two sons. My mother was fed sugar water instead. After a long day of work, weary Riva returned home to feed her family and finally, fall into bed to suckle her baby intermittently through the night.

By the time I was born, Riva was 79 years old, and long since retired. She was living in a luxurious apartment on Central Park West. Her son, my uncle, had become a doctor and provided well for his family. There were no old age homes then, as we know them now. All the generations lived together. My own mother did not leave her parental home until she married her first cousin at the age of 37!

Every Saturday, my mother and I would take the "El" from the Bronx to Manhattan to visit my grandmother. Although our home was always strictly Kosher, the rules of travel on Shabbat were not observed. Riva did not seem to mind. She was always dressed for the occasion in a black dress with white collar and cuffs. She never wore short sleeves, even in the heat of summer. Her ears were adorned with small diamond earrings. Her bearing was regal and in my young imagination, the high black hat which she wore on Shabbat was the headdress of a queen.

As a small child, I would sit at her knee and watch her daven from a Siddur. Her vision was impaired so she used a magnifying glass to scan the pages. Her prayers sounded like whispers to me. All I could hear were

sibilant sounds but I sensed that what she was doing was very important. Occasionally, we would go to Morning Services in a Synagogue nearby. I sat next to her and was thrilled with the music and the cadence of the prayers, particularly when it came to the word "*aleinu*". I thought the entire Congregation was singing to me, Elaine.

On Shabbat afternoon, guests would wander in for conversation and tea which was poured from a large brass samovar. There was always babka and chocolate cake that my grandmother had made herself. A happy ambience prevailed. Riva would hold court with her guests but never fail to acknowledge my presence in a most respectful manner. One of her guests was known to me as Rabbi Solomon, a gentle man whom my grandmother had known in Ponevezh. He promised me that he would officiate at my wedding. I was seven years old at the time.

When I went to high school, and was studying French, Riva and I would exchange languages. I would say a word in my newly acquired French and she would repeat the French word carefully after me with her Yiddish accent. Then, she would translate the French word into Yiddish and I would repeat the Yiddish word after her. We would both rock with laughter.

She was determined to speak English correctly. Her efforts resulted in the word "apple" being pronounced "ahpple" and "banana" became "bahnahna". Rocha, never tried to lose her accent: "apple" remained "ehpple" and "banana" remained "banehna". Improving her accent was not her priority because this grandmother needed all her resources just to survive.

When Rocha's oldest son, my father, turned 13 years, his father, my grandfather, Samuel, succumbed to liver cancer at the age of 40. Besides my father, there were three younger children in the family. Like her sister, Rocha had also been a customer peddler but after her husband died, she had too many young offspring and had to remain at home and rely on her small savings as well as the contributions of my father who quit regular day school, found employment and continued his education at night. My father often described the hunger in his household and how his mother would dilute milk with water to nourish her brood. By sheer determination and his inherent gifts, my father earned several graduate degrees in mathematics and engineering. However, when he entered the work force, anti-Semitism confronted him. He continued to work in a related profession during the day and would set the alarm clock for a 2 a.m. in order to study for the CPA examination for the rest of the night. Later on in his life, unfortunately, there were medical consequences from this regimen. He always lamented that he was an engineer by profession and a CPA in captivity. The struggle to survive as a Jew persisted in the new land. Sadly, the streets were not paved with gold.

Unlike her sister, Rocha was stocky like a stereotypical Russian peasant. My father would take me on a long walk to visit her every Sunday. She consumed me with affection and sang Yiddish lullabies for my benefit. She described her husband, my grandfather, how handsome he had been and how kind he had been to her. She regaled me with stories about his erudition as a rabbi and a teacher of Judaism. As I reflect, her sister, Riva, never mentioned her husband's name to me at all in all the time I spent with her.

Rocha lived in a small three room apartment on Nelson Avenue in the Bronx with her two unmarried daughters, my maiden aunts, one of whom had become a math teacher in a junior high school. My father and his brother had moved out and married years before. There was something mournful in that house. In retrospect, it occurs to me now, that despite her travail, Rocha's humanity and capacity to reach out in love to me was limitless. However, as a child, I idolized Riva, who appeared to be the winner in the game of life. Rocha died quietly at 86 years long before her older sister, Riva, who triumphed again by outliving her several years.

My grandmothers had a history of mutual dependence along with a healthy sibling rivalry. Riva was reputed to have been jealous of Rocha's good looks and popularity with young men. Rocha married for love and Riva married, twice, because it was expected of her to do so. To me, they were my grandmothers who never stopped arguing. They were diametrically opposite.

I have always been sorry not to have asked my grandmothers about their lives in Ponevezh. I always imagined it to be like Tevya's Anatekva but my research informs me that it was a larger community with the distinction of having the famous Ponevezh Yeshiva.

I wonder what motivated my grandparents, in particular, to move so boldly from the familiar place of their childhood across the ocean to a country where a way of life was so uncertain. Did they really believe that the streets were paved with gold? Regrettably, those questions shall never be answered. As children, we take the people we know and love for granted. Our universe is ourselves. We ask few questions and their legacy is a given. In these pages, I have tried to piece it together and can only contemplate the rest.