
Golda Olga Ryss (nee Gutman) – famous Opera Singer and Coach

Profile by Beulah Gross, Australia

Golda Olga Ryss (nee Gutman) (1893 – 1980) was a first cousin to my grandmother, Henny Ausbruch (nee Eliasov) as their mothers, Johanna and Mariana Mau, were sisters.

They were born and lived in Libau (now Liepaja) in 1854 and 1858 respectively.

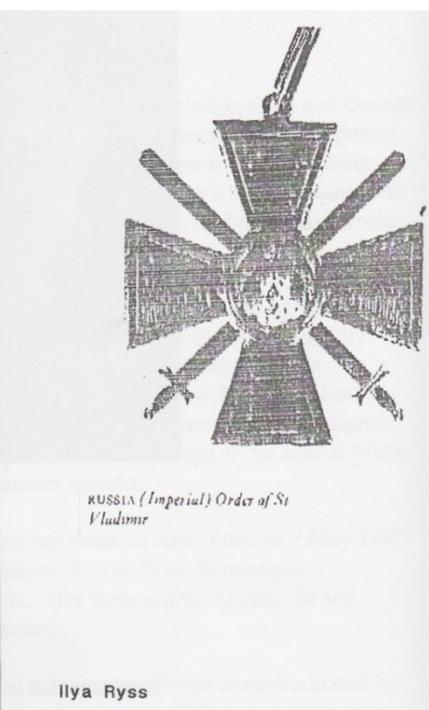
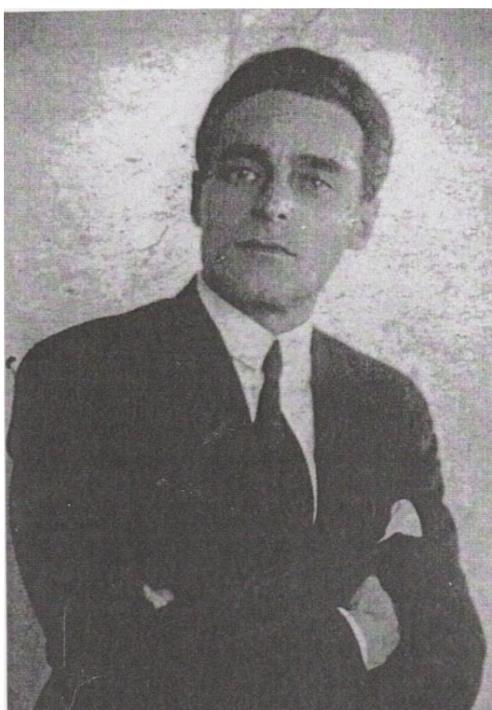
Trained and toured in Russia

Golda Olga, always called Olga, was born on 18 April 1893, the fifth of seven children to Johanna and Leopold Gutman. She had a wonderful operatic voice and trained at the St. Petersburg Conservatoire in Russia at the same time as Jascha Heifetz studied the violin there. Olga finished at the Conservatoire as a Laureate and received a gold medal, which has since been lost.



She married Ilya Ryss in Tbilisi, Georgia in the house of friends, the Zilberschmidt family. Mrs Zilberschmidt, known as 'Lissitchkina', was also an opera singer. (**Note:** 'Ryss' means 'lynx' in Russian.)

Olga toured Russia, Iran, the Baltic States and Western Europe as an opera singer for many years as Olga Ryss. During the 1930s she was the leading soprano at the Russian Opera in Berlin. She later went to live in South Africa before emigrating to America.



Ilya Ryss was one of sixteen children of a rabbinical family from Rostov-na-Donu (Rostov on the River Don, now Rostov). The pre-war Jewish population of this town was 26,323. Ilya

was originally a lawyer. Growing up with the Cossacks in Rostov, he was an accomplished horseman and joined them there. During the First World War he commanded a full regiment of Cossacks, was wounded and received the Vladimir Medal from the Tsar. This was a rare honour for a Jew.

Note: *The Order of St Vladimir* - instituted 1782 by Catherine II, in four classes, originally as a civil decoration for distinguished long service in the forces, with or without swords. The red enamelled straight armed cross *pallee*, narrowly edged in black and gold. *Obverse* On a black medallion, the initials of the Saint on a crowned ermine and red background. *Reverse* The date of the foundation. *Ribbon* Equal stripes of black, red, black, or with the red slightly wider. (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*).

George J. Ryss, (known to the family as 'Yuri') the only child of Ilya and Olga, was born in Riga on 3 April 1922. Ilya and Olga were divorced during the 1930s and Ilya then went to Berlin. George saw his father there for the last time in 1930 just before Ilya left for Buenos Aires where he worked as manager for the Yiddish Company. Ilya died in Buenos Aires on 31 January 1934, a young man still in his forties.

Opera in Johannesburg

In 1935, when it became obvious that war in Europe was inevitable, Olga and George emigrated to South Africa. She dedicated the next twenty years to the development and production of opera in Johannesburg after relinquishing her own stage career. She was involved in all aspects of opera production and became a much sought-after singing teacher. Many of her pupils became very well-known in the operatic world, notably Hanlie van Niekerk.

Revered Voice Coach in New York – with Jennie Tourel

In 1956, after the world-famous mezzo-soprano, Jennie Tourel's, (real name Davidovitch) concert tour of South Africa, Olga went to America where she lived with her sisters in New York City. She established a voice-coaching school there and became Jennie Tourel's voice consultant. She was considered the greatest voice coach in New York City but generously gave many free singing lessons, especially to the new Russian emigres. For many years Olga and Jennie achieved great success teaching at the annual Music Festivals in Aspen, Colorado during the summer months.

Olga continuing working until shortly before her death in New York on 7 May 1980. She is buried in the Westchester Hills Cemetery, Steven Wise Synagogue, Greenburgh, Westchester County, New York. Her three sisters, Genia, Ida and Raissa, are buried together at a nearby cemetery.

After her death, Olga's teaching and musical achievements were commemorated by the formation of an **Olga Ryss Scholarship Fund in Aspen**. This has since become defunct.

In South Africa George studied to become a Civil Engineer. In 1954, after an injury sustained while playing rugby, he went to live in Spain to study the guitar. After some music study he went back to engineering at the US construction base in Spain. In 1958, George left Spain to live and work in America at various locations. In 1959, he went to Maracaibo, Venezuela and later to Puerto Rico before returning to America for good. He was married for many years to Anna (surname not known) but they had no children. Anna died in about 1993.

Olga and
Jennie Tourel



Olga & Hanlie
v Niekerk, NYC



In 1994, after many frustrating attempts, **Beulah found George** living in Freeport, Long Island, New York. A flourishing correspondence commenced culminating in a visit to him in June 1995. George supplied a lot of information about himself, his family and especially his mother to whom he was still devoted. The walls of his home were full of certificates and diplomas relating to his profession and old family photos. He was still in touch with his mother's pupils particularly Yoriko Abe, Vivienne Thomas and Mike Trimble. He had three guitars - flamenco, classical and ten-string - which he couldn't play anymore due to advanced Parkinson's Disease. He told Beulah and Rachi that he has been a regular columnist in *Flamenco Magazine* since 1982 as a Spanish music critic and was a civil engineering consultant. George gave Beulah a treasured Russian doll/tea-cosy which had belonged to Olga.

George died unexpectedly from a heart attack in his home on 30 November 1995. He is buried in Westchester Cemetery next to his mother. (See more pictures articles and testimonials below)



MUSIC IN THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS

Paul Shapshak (*right*), son of the Johannesburg sculptor René Shapshak, chats with his teacher, the world-famous violinist Szymon Goldberg, and a fellow South African, Olga Ryss. Miss Ryss is known in South Africa for her work in opera for a period of seventeen years. Both Miss Ryss and Mr. Shapshak are faculty members of the Aspen Music School, situated high in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado.

A CONCERT BY PROFESSIONAL SINGER OLGA RYSS
WHO HAS TRAVELLED HALF THE WORLD
NOW ON HOLIDAY IN HER MOTHERLAND

Although Olga Ryss was born in Libau, Latvia, Riga music lovers seldom had the opportunity to hear her at the beginning of her career. Her voice, which is very special, has been heard in every corner of the world.

After receiving a Laureate from the St Petersburg Conservatorium, Olga began her internationally acclaimed career in Russia. None of her contemporary singers can boast the same number of international performances as are recorded in Olga's biography.

She sings in the original language of the composers and her repertoire includes twelve languages. At present she is preparing for a concert on 21 November.

Olga's grand world tour began in south Russia, then Persia and South Africa. The tour could be likened to the verse of the famous poet, Igor Severjanin, 'From Moscow to Nagasaki, from New York to Mars'. Examples of the barriers Olga Ryss had to overcome are that in Persia the conditions for theatre were primitive, totally Asian in some aspects such as how to seat an audience and that in South Africa interest in bridge-playing paralysed interest in other intellectual pursuits.

Although her travels so far have not included New York or Mars, the distances from Libau to Cape Town in South Africa are as far as those attempted by the Latvian aeronautic hero, Cukors, who is currently in Gambia.

After her successful tour in South Africa, Olga gave concerts in Germany and was invited to sing the role of Jaroslavna at the Berlin State Opera.

But times changed and she had to leave Berlin. She returned to Libau and a few months ago, her performance in the role of Liza at the Latvian National Opera was highly acclaimed especially as she was the first non-Latvian to sing in the Latvian language.

Lately, Olga Ryss has been resting in the quiet surroundings of Libau and Riga. After a lengthy break, Riga music lovers will again have the opportunity of hearing this talented singer on Tuesday, 21 November. The concert will have an interesting diversity including arias and romances from classical and contemporary composers.

This singer's voice is magnificent and this concert will make a mark in the future success of Olga Ryss.

(Rough translation of newspaper article)

HANLIE MULLER

Po Box 1376

Cape Town 8000

October 22, 1980

Dearest Yuni
Dearest Anna,

I ask you to forgive me my long and regretful silence. How many times have I started a letter to you the passed months, and had to stop overcome by sadness and not knowing how or what to write.

For more than a week after I received your first letter I was in no condition to talk or react or write normally - this incredible sadness of my darling Olga, just finished me off. My mind and heart is filled with distress, sorrow and lament and I cannot come to peace with myself because I keep on saying to myself I should have gone to see her to help her to be with her - O, how I loved her so incredibly much, to me she was more than a mother. What a great person and personality, how I can only thank God for her wonderful life and all she has done and meant to me and my children.

It was a consolation to me that Piet was present at the funeral. The music and culture she brought into my life is

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is continued through Pirelli; she has poured from her soul and heart and mind great human and musical qualities into our lives, immeasurable by any human standards!

Please accept my deepest sympathy for you as her son whom she loved so deeply. It is with affection and compassion that I shall always be with you in my thoughts and prayers in memory of our darling Olga.

Be so kind and convey my dearest and warmest message of sympathy to Raissa and Genia.

Thank you also for your letter in July and the photograph and cuttings. We are all keeping well. Please let me know if you would ever like to visit South Africa you and Anna are most welcome to stay with us.

All my love and
kindest regards
Hanlie

Letter of appreciation by renowned South African soprano Hanlie van Niekerk who was trained by Olga Ryss.