

A PORTRAIT by Sheila Swartzman



I have an old black and white photograph of my grandmother. She is not much taller than me and round, with Slavic features and wispy grey hair in a bun at the back of her neck. She has her right arm around me, folding me into her side, and she is pulling my older brother towards us. He is resisting her grasp, stiffening his back as if he does not want to join in such a strong feminine phalanx. I have an ear-splitting grin on my face, totally secure in her embrace. She was my ally, especially against my mother who was prone to send me to bed without my supper when I

misbehaved. My grandmother would then sneak into our bedroom with a bowl of sliced bananas and cream, in case I should starve to death. She was also my staunchest fan. When I started taking speech and drama lessons to correct a nasal quality to my voice, she was there at the Eisteddfod for my debut performance. As my lifeless body was carried across the stage in the role of one of Medea's murdered sons, she gasped audibly and clutched her breast.

My grandmother and I shared a bedroom for six years until she died, at the age of eighty-three years. She came to live with our family after my grandfather died, not just that my mother was her only daughter out of eight children, but because she got on well with my father, who called her admiringly "The Old Lady". My grandparents had been part of the 60,000 Lithuanian Jews who emigrated to South Africa at the turn of the twentieth century, partly to escape privation at the hands of the Tsar and also to avoid conscription into the Russian Army. Despite living in South Africa for fifty years, her English was non-existent and as I spoke no Yiddish, our verbal communication was minimal.

My grandmother completely commanded the kitchen. She made paper thin crepes, filled with cream cheese or jam and dusted with powdered sugar and when I begged her often enough, she would relent and make her "bulkalagh", yeasty cinnamon rolls with raisins and sugar and currants. I ate carefully, unfurling the roll, until I arrived at the centre which always had the most cinnamon and a currant embedded in it. Now I am a sucker for those large stodgy jobs one finds at the airport, in the vain hope that when I get to the centre I will find that golden nugget in the middle.

As I grew older and learned to read, it was my job to accompany my grandmother on her monthly expedition to the Post Office to collect her old age pension. This was always an auspicious outing for both of us. She put on her best print dress and a black hat with a veil. We walked the mile and a half in the hot African sun. I had to make sure that she received her monthly stipend of two pounds and that it was then transferred into her savings account. She signed her name, Sora Riva Loon, in a spidery unschooled scrawl.

When I was eleven, my grandmother took to her bed with heart failure. The family doctor came often and left her pills. She wore a bed jacket that my mother made for her, a soft knitted cape. Now her plait lay about her shoulders and she would let me comb the thin strands. She died within four months, a slow ebbing away of breath. I was not allowed to go to the funeral as my parents thought it would be too traumatic for me, but the real shock was seeing my father, leaning against the mantelpiece, weeping.

It is said that language is the essence which makes us human. I do not know what words my grandmother said to me during the six years we shared a bedroom. Perhaps what we exchanged was a pre language, the sort of cooing that mothers and infants experience and grow together with. Looking at the photograph with my grandmother, I know that when I think that my childhood was lonely and isolated, I have irrefutable evidence that it was not so.

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## **A Portrait by Sheila Swartzman**

A word about me:

My name is Sheila Swartzman. I was born in Johannesburg to Hetty Loon and Dave Swartzman. I married Ken Bloom there and had a daughter, Dianne. I graduated from Wits Medical School in 1966. We emigrated to Cincinnati where my son Rob was born. We lived in Toronto for 6 years, where I became an anesthesiologist. After that we moved to San Antonio where we still live.

Date written: 2016

Date Posted on the CHOL Share your Story Site August, 2022

