

Branches on a Family Tree- a taste of genealogy, by **Richelle Shem-Tov**

Digging down towards the roots and then climbing up the branches on one of my many family trees, I found a few branches to which I felt connected. There is no end of stories tucked away here, but most of them have slipped away. Perhaps someday, someone will tell more.



The particular tree that I am referring to is that of my paternal granny, Doris Hirschmann. Her maiden name was Thal. For generations, the Thal family had lived in Courland, then part of Russia. In the early 20th century, it became a province of Latvia. The Jews from Courland were often relatively prosperous and educated. Almost all the children – boys and girls, rich and poor – attended schools, which provided a mixed secular and religious education.

Most of the Jews were observant, although less learned in Jewish studies and lifestyle than their brethren in Lithuania. Many Latvians had in fact emigrated from Lithuania, but the original Jews of Courland came from Prussia. German remained the dominant culture. Although Courland was part of the Russian empire from the mid-eighteenth century until 1918, most Jews preferred to speak German. When conversing amongst themselves in German or Russian, their talk would be spattered with colourful Yiddish expressions. My own grandparents were such people. In South Africa, they adopted English and Afrikaans as their spoken language, but my dad would hear them talking in German when on their own or, if they did not want the children to understand.

Restrictions on the Jewish population in Latvia varied, depending on the level of tolerance of the ruling power at the time. Generally, they were able to earn their living as tradesmen, industrialists, artisans, teachers and professionals, such as dentists and doctors. Being well versed in Russian, German, Latish and of course Yiddish, many were employed in government offices as clerks and translators. As a result, they were often accused of being spies by either the Germans or the Russians.

In delving into a genealogy study of the Thal family of Mitau, Courland, starting in the eighteenth century, I came across a branch which I believe is that of Doris Thal's family. And therefore, also my own.

The first name listed on this tree in 1792: 1. MOSES JANKEL² THAL (JANKEL¹) was born 1792 and died 'Unknown'. He married GITTEL. She was born in 1796 and died 'Unknown'.

I went through the very long list, 'climbing' the branches, family after family, but could not find a Doris that married a Herman Hirschmann and died in South Africa. I did find a few named Dora where the dates of birth might have fitted. And then when reaching the more recent branches – the 4th, 5th and 6th generations in the 20th century, I came across names of those who were born, married and/or died in Southern Africa. Some of the surnames mentioned I remember as being those of my father's relatives. Paths in this labyrinth were opening up. And then I came across the name "Roy M". Bingo, I had climbed the right tree! I will tell of Roy a little later, but let me start with my Granny Doris.

Doris: Knowing that I was on the right tree, I climbed back in time until coming to a branch, listed as the third generation. I believe this to be of my granny's immediate family. It appears that she was named Dora and must have changed her name to Doris, possibly on coming to South Africa.

I learnt that my future grandmother, Doris Thal was born in 1875. In 1897, she left her home and family in Mitau, Courland, to journey by sea and land to marry my grandfather Herman Hirschmann. Like her, he too came from Courland. He lived on a farm in Woodbush, in the far north of South Africa. It must be noted that many of the Jewish immigrants to South Africa at that time, were young unmarried men and it was common practice for their families in Europe to send young Jewish women out to become their brides. It was no easy matter for these brave young women to leave their homes and families for distant countries with different cultures and marry men that they hardly knew, if at all.

Herman and Doris had five children and lived first on a farm named Woodbush and later in the town of Pietersburg, today, Polokwane. She died there in 1943.

I was told by a number of family members that Doris came from a poor but highly educated family. Apparently, she herself was a singer and gifted pianist. She died when I was three. I remember her mainly from pictures and hearsay. I know that she was a much loved and highly regarded person.

I will record the little I have gleaned from some research and mainly hearsay on her family.

Maurice, her elder brother joined the Hirschmanns in SA in the beginning of the 20th century. He managed their farm-store in the Woodbush area. I was too young to really remember him. By then, he was an old man and lived with his second wife in a little cottage behind our house. He had two daughters, Ruth and Bella, older than me and my brothers by a few years. They spent much time at our home and were wonderful fun cousins. They had fascinating life stories, but I shall not walk too far down this branch. Ruth eventually settled in Natanya, Israel. She and I renewed our long and once close relationship. She has since passed away.

Doris' sisters: Her family in Courland was politically active and influenced by the Socialist wave that swept Eastern Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century. I know of at least one sister who was a student at a university in Riga. When my father was a little boy on the farm, two of her sisters took the long trip from Latvia via London and Cape Town all the way to Woodbush to spend several months visiting the family. They, coming from revolutionary times in Latvia and like many other young Jewish people there, were involved in the struggle of the Latvian peasants against their Russian and German landlords. On their visit to Woodbush, they were understandably shocked by the conditions of the black farm workers. Apparently, one morning they decided to invite these folk to join the family for breakfast. Of course, in those days in the South Africa of White masters and Black servants, this was out of the question. The Black folk wisely declined this embarrassing proposal. I believe my grandfather was quite relieved when these young sisters-in-law returned to Europe.

The Hidden branch: After some hesitation I decided to hop onto this branch of the family tree. These relatives were quite close, our families being in frequent contact. Only in recent years did I hear this fascinating story from a granddaughter with whom I became friends. It was told her by her mother, who herself was only half sure of its validity. It was certainly never mentioned when we were children.

Nachman, my granny's relative (I will call him this though it is not his real name), came to SA from Courland in the early twenties, where he ran a general store in a country district. He was unmarried and alone. Here too, a young bride was sent out from Latvia to marry him. She came from a highly respected and apparently wealthy family; was

young and attractive, with an academic education. It was somewhat odd that she would be paired with this older man living in the bush in faraway Africa.

The story goes that in Europe in the early 1920s, this young woman, the narrator's grandmother, had a love-affair with a non-Jewish professor and fell pregnant. Her family, no doubt greatly distressed, hastily arranged the match with the Thal family of Courland and this unhappy young lady had little choice other than to sail to South Africa.

'Nachman' met her at the ship in Cape Town where they were apparently married in a civil marriage, before returning to his home. Here she could have her baby far from the public eye.

It seems that their lives together were not blessed with much joy although she did have a second child while they were still together. At some stage the couple divorced and she moved to the city. Both she and Nachman remarried. Her eldest child, unlike any other in the family was blond and blue-eyed. She herself mentioned that she could distinctly remember hearing her father say in an argument, "Well she is your child, not mine." The date of marriage was registered exactly nine months before the registered date of birth of their daughter. It is suggested that she might have been born a few months earlier. The story was never related openly. The grandchildren, like their mother believe it to be true.

The granddaughter who narrated this story, told me that her grandmother told her that never a day passed without her remembering her long-lost love in Riga, Latvia.

There were probably many similar stories hidden in the cupboards of those times.

Roy's story: Now at last I have reached this branch.

In 1959 I was a second-year physiotherapy student at Wits Medical School in Johannesburg. We did our anatomy practical classes together with the medical students – six at each dissecting table. And that is where I met Roy. He was a bright medical student, full of fun who brought laughter and humour to the rather grim task of anatomical dissections. Strangely enough, although fair-haired, he somewhat resembled my father. He boasted round Baltic features, a broad flattish nose and small almost-lobe-less ears.

He mentioned on one occasion that his mother was Jewish. She came with her family from Riga in Latvia to Johannesburg early in the century and that she was of the Thal family. I was dumbstruck. Of course, we both took this new revelation to our parents. From my dad I learned the story of this new-found cousin.

My dad knew of this Johannesburg family and thought he might have met them once or twice. He told me that Roy's mother had been married to a young Jewish soldier who served in the South African army during the Second World War. He was away in North Africa and Italy for those many long war years. She like so many others, remained in Johannesburg on her own. She met, fell in love and married another man, after divorcing her soldier. Their son, Roy was therefore a somewhat distant cousin.

My dad told me that his family had judged her rather harshly for leaving her soldier hero and for remarrying. In addition, the family frowned on intermarriage and ever since had cut off all contact with her. My father said that in time he sympathized with the women left behind and had become far more tolerant towards intermarriage. Times had changed and he was less judgmental than in earlier years. Sometime later I introduced him to our cousin Roy, who remained a good friend throughout my student years. I wonder where he is today.

Today there are surely many more newer generations on this tree. I have gathered that most are today in America, South Africa and Israel. To the best of my knowledge, there are only few if any left in Eastern Europe. After World War II, my father attempted, with the aid of the Red Cross, to trace surviving members of Doris' family in Europe. Sadly, none were found and we believe that most of them did not survive the Holocaust.

More branches may open up in time but I, for lack of further knowledge, will regretfully climb down from this fascinating tree.

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