

Finding Olga, by Beulah Gross

While compiling my maternal family history I decided to search for Olga Ryss. Olga's mother, Johanna Mau and my maternal great-grandmother, Mariana Mau, were sisters. The Mau family came from Libau (now Liepaja) in Latvia.

Mariana's daughter, my maternal granny, told me that Olga had been a famous opera star in Russia. She also told me that Olga had lived in South Africa for many years and had been involved in opera there before emigrating to America with her son, Yuri. My mother and her siblings clearly remembered Olga who is in a family photograph commemorating Mariana's silver wedding anniversary in Port Elizabeth, South Africa.

The first thing I did was write to the Johannesburg Reference Library asking for information about Olga and her involvement with opera in South Africa. They sent me a photocopy of an article about her from the *South African Encyclopaedia of Music*. They also sent a copy of the programme of a concert held in Johannesburg in which Olga was the leading soprano.

The article gave me her proper first name, Golda Olga, and her date of birth, 18 October 1893. She had emigrated to America in 1935 and from 1956 had been the voice coach in New York for famous opera stars such as Paul Sperry, Martha Schlamme, Vivien Thomas, Mike Trimble, Yoriko Abe and Jennie Tourel, her lifelong friend. She had also been active in the annual Summer Music Festivals in Aspen, Colorado for many years. The article mentioned nothing about Olga's husband or her son.

I then wrote to the librarian in Aspen and waited months for a reply. When it arrived, it was just a note from the Pitkin County Library signed 'Helen Palmer'. Scrawled in pencil at the end of my letter was an apology for taking so long and the suggestion that I write to one of the professional researchers on the list she supplied.

She included a photocopied page from an un-named and undated newspaper featuring a short article about Olga's death in New York on 7 May 1980 plus an obituary notice from the *New York Times* which stated that Olga was mourned by George, Genia and Raissa in Freeport, New York.

Bingo! I now had a date and place of death and George had to be her son, Yuri!. Granny, had said that two of Olga's sisters were named Jenny and Rosa. Could Genia and Raissa be these sisters?

Was it possible that they, and perhaps their families, had been living in New York at the time of Olga's death? We had believed that everyone except Olga and Yuri had perished during the Shoah.

I then wrote to the New York Public Library who could not help, but passed my request on to their Music Division. They couldn't help either, but they did mention a letter from an official of the Aspen Music Festival requesting support for the Olga Ryss Scholarship Fund.

I wrote again to Aspen, telling Helen what I had learned and asking her to dig a bit deeper.

In the meantime, we visited America and I contacted one of Helen's recommended Jewish genealogy researchers. Within a few days she informed me that Genia and Raissa had died in New York. Raissa had been unmarried and as her surname was Ryss, they were definitely the family I was looking for. I asked her to continue searching.

Back at home I found another pencilled note from Helen on my last letter to her - 'Hello, All I can find is this man (son?) - George Ryss in Freeport, Long Island, New York. He sent the money for the Scholarship but it no longer exists. This was given by the Music Associates, Ossia. Hope this helps, Helen'.

Bingo again! I wrote to the George in Freeport at once and, by return post, received an ecstatic reply. He had been about to discard my letter but the South African stamp on the envelope intrigued him so he opened the letter.

George and I enjoyed a wonderful correspondence. He proved to be a mine of information and solved many puzzles about the family. He also sent me original family photographs and newspaper articles about Olga's career as a world-famous voice coach in New York.

He told me that his mother, Golda Olga Gutman, had a wonderful operatic voice and was trained at the St. Petersburg (then Leningrad) Conservatoire in Russia at the same time as Jascha Heifetz studied the violin there. She finished at the Conservatoire as a Laureate and received a gold medal which has since been lost.

She married Ilya Ryss in Tbilisi, Georgia, Russia, in the house of friends, the Zilberschmidt family.

Note: 'Ryss' means 'lynx' in Russian.

Ilya was one of sixteen children of a rabbinical family from Rostov-na-Donu (Rostov on the River Don, now Rostov) and trained as a lawyer. He was an accomplished horseman and joined the Cossacks in Rostov. 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.

George J. Ryss, known to the family as 'Yuri' was the only child of Ilya and Olga. He was born in Riga on 3 April 1922.

Ilya and Olga were divorced during the 1930s and Ilya then went to Berlin. He joined Max Perlman's Yiddish Company as manager and died in Buenos Aires in January 1934, still in his 40s. George saw his father for the last time in 1930.

In 1935, when it became obvious that war in Europe was inevitable, Olga and George emigrated to South Africa where her cousin, my granny, were. She relinquished her stage career, dedicated the next twenty years to the development and production of opera in Johannesburg and became a much sought-after singing teacher. Many of her pupils became well-known, notably soprano Hanna van Niekerk. I have a letter from Hanna, aka Hanlie, to Olga.

In 1956, after the world-famous soprano, Jennie Tourel's, concert tour of South Africa, Olga went to America where she lived with her sisters in New York City. Their homes were a haven for many Jews newly-arrived in America, seeking a new home. Hot tea, a meal, advice about life in the 'goldene medina' and a lot of friendship were always available.

Olga established a voice-coaching school in New York City and became Jennie Tourel's voice consultant. She also gave free voice lessons to aspiring opera singers from the old country. She was considered the greatest voice coach in New York City. During the summer months Olga and Jennie taught at the annual Music Festivals in Aspen, Colorado.

Olga continuing working until shortly before her death in New York. 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 in 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.

George gave me the names and addresses of Sarah Mau's grandson, Herbert Goodman, in Boston, Massachusetts and Benjamin Mau's daughters, Asia and Henny, San Diego. Needless to say, I wrote to them at once. There was no reply from Massachusetts but Asia and Henny were most helpful.

Our flourishing correspondence culminated in another visit to America in June 1995. We arranged our itinerary so that we could spend time with George in Freeport and Asia and Henny in San Diego. Unfortunately, we weren't able to visit Boston to see Herbert but he and I conversed at length on the telephone.

As promised during one of our telephone conversations, Herbert sent me information and documents about his branch of the family. He added fascinating details about Olga, Raissa and Genia whom he often visited as a small boy with his father. They lived in adjoining apartments in New York, Olga and George in one and Raissa, who was unmarried, with Genia and her husband, Vladimir Fortunato a renowned sculptor, in the other. Vladimir also made death masks of famous people and Herbert clearly remembered one of US president Woodrow Wilson which lay in a corner gathering dust.

George was charming and informative. He supplied a lot of information about himself, his family and especially his mother to whom he was still devoted. Many photos of Olga, the opera stars she coached and framed cuttings from newspapers about her adorned the walls of his tiny house. Interspersed were old photos of family, including one of his grandparents.

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 studies, 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 unknown) and they had no children. Anna died in about 1993.

He told us that he was still in touch with his mother's pupils particularly Yuriko Abe, Vivienne Thomas and Mike Trimble. He showed us his three guitars - flamenco, classical and ten-string – but couldn't play anymore due to advanced Parkinson's Disease. He'd been a regular columnist in the *Flamenco Magazine* since 1982 as a Spanish music critic and still received civil engineering

consultancy jobs. George gave me a treasured Russian doll/tea-cosy which had belonged to Olga. She is of course named 'Olga' and, being fragile, resides in an airtight box to preserve her.

In San Diego, we spent a fascinating afternoon with Asia and Henny. I burst into tears when I saw Henny as she looked exactly like her first cousin and namesake, my late, beloved granny, Henny Ausbruch. I showed them copies of old postcards of Libau (Liepaja) which had been sent to granny in South Africa. They were entranced, but wouldn't keep them as they brought back too many memories.

Asia and Henny made many corrections to my notes and filled in names of family members and explained their relationships to each other. They also supplied the names, dates of birth, marriage and death of all these people. At least 15 members of the family had died on December 15, 1941 including Asia and Henny's father and sister. When I returned home, I checked Simon Wiesenthal's excellent book *Every Day, Remembrance Day* to find that on December 14 and 15, 1941, the Nazis and their Latvian collaborators, had massacred 3500 Jews in Libau.

Henny's story must be told here. She had married a non-Jewish German who had refused to divorce her when ordered to by the Nazis. They were immediately sent to different concentration camps. Henny was sterilised, purportedly without anaesthetic, when she was barely twenty years old. After the liberation of the camps, Henny went back to Riga where all attempts to find her husband proved futile. She remarried and they went to live near Asia in San Diego. One day her first husband appeared at her front door, ill and weak, so she and her second husband took him in and nursed him until he died. After her second husband died Henny went to live with Asia and her husband. Asia had escaped because she was already married and living in Israel.

George died unexpectedly from a heart attack in his home on 30 November 1995. He is buried in Westchester Cemetery next to his mother.

Much of what I discovered was sad, even painful, but one thing heartens me still. Although too many members of my family died, Hitler and his cronies did not win. My family, and that of many others, is alive and well, flourishing and increasing in numbers all over the world especially in Israel.

Finding Olga by Beulah Gross Written in 2023

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