

## **FOURTEEN LAMBS by Raphael Shevelev**

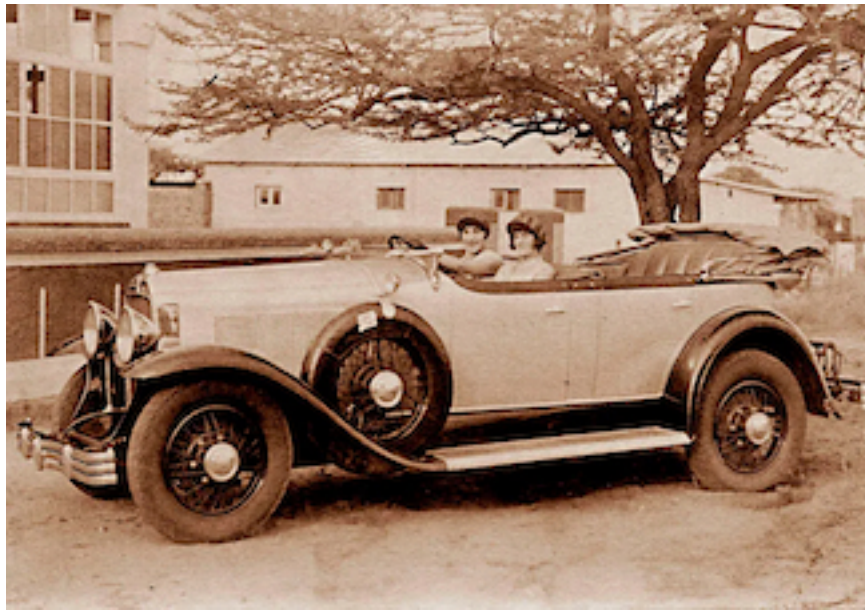
On a unique occasion, before I entered elementary school, my mother spoke of her birthplace. She called it Yelok, the Yiddish form of Ylakai. It was then a tiny village, a *shtetl*, in northwest Lithuania, with a population of less than one thousand. About half of them were Jewish. My mother's family name was Abramson, her father's name was Simon. I don't recall her mother's name, and mother quietly refused any further inquiry. By the time I was a teenager, I realized that she was taking refuge from intense pain, and I didn't pursue the subject. I know nothing about my maternal grandparents.

My mother, Dora, was orphaned early in her life. I believe there were five children, four girls, one boy. The eldest, a teenager named Esther, struggled to hold the remnants of the family together, and must have had help from the community. Eventually, as I've searched whatever traces of my childhood memory are available to piece the story together, the children were farmed out to foster parents. My mother somehow found her way across the nearby Latvian border to the coastal town of Libau (Liepaja), and found a home in the Shevelew family, whose second son Jacob, my mother's age, later became my father.

To my mother, the name Esther was sacred, and in recognition of this, it became part of my older daughter's identity. Of the family of five children, three survived the Holocaust: my mother, her older sister Tzila, and their brother Hershel, known for the rest of his life as Abe, his foreshortened surname. The others were murdered, though where and how I cannot say.

Uncle Abe was my favorite. He laughed a lot, and seemed to take a greater proportion of pleasure out of life than the other adults in my family. For a relatively recent immigrant to an obscure part of the African continent, he had done quite well for himself. He acquired an automobile dealership, a pleasant

home in Windhoek, the capital of South West Africa (now Namibia) and a small sheep farm near Otjiwarongo. Of the few pictures I have of my mother, one has her seated behind the wheel of Uncle Abe's Buick convertible, with my Aunt Tzila in the passenger seat, ca. 1930. I'm sure Abe must have taken this picture of his sisters. I believe he was interested in photography. He gave my mother the gift of a Voigtländer bellows camera, which, many years later, still unused, became my first.



Dora and Tzila Abramson in Buick, South West Africa ca. 1930 (family photograph)

As I sift through my memories of his adventurous life, and of his appearance, I see a man whom I resembled in my forties and fifties. He listened to me, and engaged me much more than the others did. We were not only relatives. He was my first adult friend. Abe was a free spirit, a Freemason who married “out of the faith” – as I have – and couldn't have cared less about what the rabbis might have thought of his eating bacon.

His visits to Cape Town were happily anticipated, and he stayed with us except when on business. Then, he would find accommodation at the Assembly Hotel on Queen Victoria Street, not far from the House of Assembly, the lower

chamber of Parliament. An invitation to dine at the hotel was my favorite treat (menus! choices!) and a real challenge for my kosher-observing parents. A shock greeted us on the first occasion. On a table, just beyond the entrance to the dining room, was a heavily decorated suckling pig. It was my first sight of a dead quadruped sucking an apple. Dad and mom sidled past, averting their eyes. As I followed behind, Abe whispered "It's quite delicious!"

Uncle Abe became a special hero of mine on the only occasion I visited his home. That took a long overnight train journey north from Cape Town, to the town of Upington, on the banks of the Orange River. He and his African driver Jonathan came to fetch us in a grey Buick sedan.

The five of us set out westward across dirt tracks and the desert, where the car bogged down in the sand. Not another soul in sight, as the adults all tried to free the car from the obstinate earth. But the wheels just spun, and we were trapped. I didn't realize until later that being without food, water or blankets for the desert night could be problematical. After a brief consultation, Abe set off alone on foot, with a reassuringly firm stride. An anxious time passed before we saw a distant mirage, figures far away. As they got closer, we could make out Abe, an older bearded Herero tribesman, and two donkeys spanned together. I remember running toward them, and being lifted in Abe's arms.

Jonathan tied the donkeys to the front bumper and, with them pulling, and all the adults pushing, the car was moved onto firmer ground. Uncle Abe gave the Herero some money, and I witnessed, for the first time, I believe, the lovely African politeness in which all gifts are accepted with both hands cupped, as though one hand were insufficient to bear the weight of the generosity.

The journey continued, until we encountered a barbed wire fence, interrupted by a wide metal gate across our track. On the other side, in our path, was a very

large bovine, an enormous creature, staring at us. I, the city kid, assumed a bull, but in retrospect it may have been a cow. How would we negotiate our passage? Abe got out of the car, opened the gate, grabbed hold of the horns, and shoved the bull/cow out of the way. My uncle, my hero, twice on the same day.

More than sixty years later, in the Indian hilltop fortress of Chittorgarh in Rajasthan, a rather less fearsome Indian cow stood blocking my way. The needed solution was now part of family lore, so I grabbed its painted green horns and pushed. We Abramson–Shevelevs know what to do when faced by large beasts.



Cow and Girls in Chittorgarh, Rajasthan (photograph by Raphael Shevelev)

Late that night in Windhoek, my first encounter with Aunt Greta was less than pleasant, as were my second, third and fourth. It didn't improve for the week we stayed there. She was tall, lean, dressed in clothes that matched her severity, brown hair pulled back in a bun. Their daughter, my cousin Lola, a year or two older than I, was much more fun, part of it the game of avoiding her mother's ire.

On my second day, we children were served canned plums. I hated their taste, and said so, whereupon Aunt Greta insisted I eat them, invoking "the starving children of Europe". I didn't obey, wondering how my food consumption could possibly help or hurt others, but the thought of starving children shocked me. Lola and I found a waxed paper bag, inserted the plums, addressed it in crayon to the starving children of Europe, walked down the block, and put it in the mailbox.

In the winter of 1949, I came home from school one day and found mother carving up a large fish in the kitchen. She was red-eyed with tears, struggling to control her sobbing, and the large blade in her hand. "Uncle Abe is very, very sick," she said, trying to deny to herself as much as to me the truth of his death. Dad had left an hour before my arrival. He caught a flight to Windhoek on a South African Airways DC-3, and returned two or three days later, after the Masonic funeral.

In his will, Uncle Abe mentioned me. He left me fourteen lambs.

The only place we could put them was on the concrete yard at the back of our flat, under the washing lines. I found string with which to secure the gate, then told Anita and Alice, the children of German Jewish refugees next door, that they could play with and feed the lambs. For a few weeks, whenever I heard the

approach of a heavy vehicle, I'd rush to the window to see if my lambs were arriving. They never did.

So I didn't benefit from Uncle Abe's death. But all my life I have greatly benefited from his.

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A word about the author:

Raphael Shevelev (1938–2021) was born in Cape Town, the son of Jack and Doris Shevelew. He attended SACS, UCT and WITS, then taught Political Science and Public Administration at UNISA in Pretoria for three years before immigrating to the United States in 1964 and settling in California. In 1989, after careers in academia and business, he decided to devote himself full-time to photography and writing. His art and some of his essays can be seen on his website [www.raphaelshevelev.com](http://www.raphaelshevelev.com). Though he only returned twice to South Africa, his formative experiences there nourished his imagination and ideals throughout his life. *"Fourteen Lambs"* was originally posted in "[Raphael Shevelev's Voice](#)" – his blog. Along with several other such essays Raphael wrote over the years, it will appear in a posthumous book under preparation. (Karine Schomer, wife of Raphael Shevelev, El Cerrito CA, USA)

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