

The Samovar by Beulah Gross

The gleaming brass samovar was always there, on top of the glass display cabinet in our lounge cum dining room. I was never allowed to touch it and as it was out of reach, I didn't pay much attention to it; I just knew it was there. As I grew older, I learned, more through a process of osmosis rather than being told, that it had come from Dad's childhood home in Oudtshoorn. Later, by the same process, I learned that the samovar had belonged to Dad's mother, Boona, after whom I am named. How she obtained it and when and where, was never discussed nor did I ever find out how Dad came to have it. It was clearly very old, borne out by the faint date, 1785-1885, engraved under a just as faint coat of arms. The only thing I was ever told was that it was extremely valuable.

I grew up without any knowledge about my paternal antecedents before their life in Oudtshoorn. When Dad spoke about his childhood there, he concentrated more on how they combated poverty than on anything else. I therefore didn't bother with finding out about their history. In any case my maternal grandmother, who lived with us, captured my attention and imagination with tales of her rich childhood in Courland, her journey to South Africa with her mother and brothers and her life in Port Elizabeth. Her stories, peppered with many wonderful characters, family and friends and told with love and humour, filled my mind to the exclusion of all else. She was a tiny, feisty woman who was my best friend and I still miss her although she's passed away many years ago. In 1993, after working at it for seven years, I completed my maternal family history based on her and my mother's tales of their lives.

In 1975 we emigrated to Australia. Some years later my parents joined us, bringing the samovar but it still didn't excite my curiosity; it was just there as it had always been.

I can't remember when the samovar was given to me or why, but probably because I am their eldest child and because of my Hebrew name, Boona. I was pleased to have it, but like Dad, put it on a high shelf and more or less forgot about it.

In 2005, my husband, Rachi, and I visited my paternal cousins in Helsinki, Eva Wardi and her father, Rafael Wardi. From Eva, I learned a lot about my paternal family history but I learned much more from a family history compiled by another paternal cousin, David Katzman, who lived in San Diego. It was wonderful to discover where the relationships fitted in especially those of family in Oudtshoorn and Cape Town who had always been just names to me. I also know at last why one of my cousins was named Brena.

My paternal great-grandparents were born in Mogilev, Belarus, in the early 1800s. His name was Moishe Katzman and hers was Breina, daughter of Josif (surname unknown). They married and settled in Mogilev-on-Dnepr sometime during the mid- to late 1840s. They had four children, a son named Peretz, born 1850, and three daughters, Ester, born 1862, Chasha born 1865 and Berta (known as Boona) born 1868. Rafael Wardi's father was Isak, one of Ester and David Weprinski's ten children. The surname was changed to Wardi in the early 1940s.

Peretz moved to Helsinki where he opened a hat or cap factory. He married Rachel Chaya (surname unknown) and they had one son, Moje, who moved to Sweden. After Peretz's death in 1904, Rachel joined Moje in Stockholm.

Around 1878, Ester, aged 16, married David Faibash Girschoff Weprinski, a tailor, probably in the Bolshaya Grazhdanskaya Synagogue in Mogilev. They joined Peretz in Helsinki in 1880 when she was 18 and he 24 and had six sons and four daughters.

Chasha married David Ephraimov Oscher Katzman (no relative) on 14 January 1888 in the same synagogue with Rabbi Kagan officiating. She was 23 and he 25. By 1903 they had produced eight children, losing the eldest son as a child. On the Easter weekend in 1903 the family fled pogroms, going to Saratov in Russia to join David's brother, Reuben and his family.

Boona, the youngest, was my paternal grandmother. She left Mogilev in 1884, aged 16, to join Peretz and Ester in Helsinki. Soon after this she met Yekusiel (known as Kasreel) Baetz. He was born in Shovel (now Siauliai) and lived for a time in Libau (now Liepaja) before moving to Helsinki where, according to family legend, he had an uncle who owned a hat factory. This was Peretz.

Kasreel, aged 25, and Boona, aged 16, married around 1884 or 1885. They lived in Helsinki till 1891 when they returned to Libau from where they sailed to the Cape of Good Hope Colony in South Africa. They settled in Oudtshoorn and he was naturalised in 1892.

In 1893, because they were childless, they adopted an orphan girl. In 1899, 14 years after their marriage, they had a son who died early on. Soon after this they produced five daughters followed by two sons. The oldest one, Isaac, was my father.

In April 1906 Chasha and David joined Boona and Kasreel in Oudtshoorn. David Katzman in San Diego was their grandson.

Recently I decided to give the samovar to my brother, Keith, as he and his son are the only ones who bear the Baetz surname. Before I did this, I investigated the inscription. It took some time but eventually I discovered, from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* on the Internet and my local library, that the date, 1785-1885, commemorates the centenary of Catherine the Great's Charter to the Gentry.

I mentioned giving the samovar to a cousin in Cape Town whose mother was Dad's sister. He replied at once to say that another cousin, Chasha's grand-daughter, also has a samovar and commented that the family is blessed to have two such treasures. I mentioned this in an email to Eva in Helsinki. She also replied at once to say that her father had also had a samovar which had belonged to his mother, Ester. Sad to say, this was loaned or given to someone else and no one knows where it is now.

I don't know why my great-grandparents, Moishe and Breina, bought these samovars as I am sure they didn't have much spare money. They could have bought them as part of their three daughters' wedding portions but if so, this would have been in advance as Chasha married in 1888, three years after the centenary. Or, perhaps, Moishe and Breina foresaw that their children would leave Mogilev in search of a better, safer life. It's possible they even encouraged this. I'll never know.

Moishe and Breina remained in Mogilev for some years after their four children had left. Breina went to Helsinki around 1903 or 1904, probably after Moishe died but his date of death is not known. It is highly unlikely that she would have left him and travelled alone to another country at the age of 70. Breina died on 6 May 1905 and is buried in the Jewish Cemetery in Helsinki.

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