Shoes: Collection of Writings By Zelda Alexander

Volume 3: Family History

Chapter 1: BERLIN SUNDAY 10 DECEMBER 2006 Journal Extract

We are standing at the Spiegelwand, the Mirror Wall Monument. This is day four, and the last stop on our tour of Jewish Berlin, past and present, to which our guides Jeremy Leigh and Julian Resnick have taken us. We have visited the Bebelplatz, site of book burning, commemorated by empty library shelves – underground and visible through thick glass. We have seen remnants of the Wall, walked around the old Jewish quarter, visited the Oranienburgerstrasse Synagogue and been to services there, spent time exploring the Jewish Museum and had a tour of the Bundestag.

From there we went to Grunwald Station, a site of deportation, to see the Memorial on the platform recording the destinations, numbers and dates of deportation of Berlin Jews. There we (or some of us) recited a psalm of hope in the future, although my heart, at least, was not very hopeful for the future.

And now we are in a residential district of Berlin, in the middle of a large, busy and noisy street market. The coach dropped us at one end, and we walked through the market which had stalls offering all the things usually sold by street markets everywhere: clothing, foodstuffs, books, entertainment in the form of DVDs, CDs and tapes as well as bric a brac and household goods. It was crowded with weekend and Christmas customers and the atmosphere was jolly and lively.

And there, right in the middle of this ordinary market which itself is in the middle of an ordinary residential area, stands the Mirror Monument. It is a very large mirrored wall, too high to see over. Engraved on the surface are dates and destinations of transportations. Underneath each date, there is a list of the names, addresses and dates of birth of the people who left Berlin on those transports. These were the people who lived in this area until they were taken away to be murdered.

And of course, when you look at the wall, you see yourself – as one of the deportees or one of the murderers or one of the bystanders – take your pick. I cannot imagine what it must be to live today in an apartment from which a previous resident was taken away to be murdered. Perhaps people do not imagine, perhaps they simply close their minds to this.

We attracted attention, being a group of more than thirty people standing at the wall, but the wall itself did not seem to be attracting attention. The people around were simply

enjoying their Sunday morning at a street market – perhaps picking up a bargain, or buying Christmas gifts.

It made me think of the women in Libau, the women we saw on photograph and film, who were taken out of daily life, perhaps by their neighbours or at least observed by their neighbours – to be shot on the beach. How do people live with themselves after they have witnessed such events? How do we live with ourselves knowing about the atrocities in so many parts of the world?

And it made me think about the house where my mother grew up and where after the war, Jessie had just one room of the house which had been hers and had to share her home with strangers while her own children who should have lived there and brought their own children to visit, had been murdered.

Chapter 2: BERLIN MONDAY 11 DECEMBER 2006 Journal Extract

Today, our 'extra' day in Berlin after the rest of the tour group has departed. For the last four days our guides Jeremy Leigh and Julian Resnick have given us a thought-provoking, illuminating but also disturbing perspective on Germany, the Holocaust and Jewish experience past and present.

Yesterday morning we paid a brief visit to Wannsee House where Jeremy pointed out that the purpose of that notorious Conference of 20 January 1942 was not, as is often thought, to reach a decision about the 'Final Solution', but rather to work out the step by step detailed logistics of how to murder such a large number of people from all over Europe. Details were discussed such as the problem of transferring people across national boundaries when the rail gauges differed. It was about the mechanics of destruction, rather than the intention.

My husband and I decided to visit Wannsee House again. We travelled by the ever-efficient Berlin public transport system, and I reflected again on what a two-edged sword efficiency can be. Give me English muddle or African 'manyana' any time, however irritating we find it.

The Conference, held in a villa on Lake Wannsee was attended by fifteen high-ranking Nazi party and German government officials. They included, for example, key members of the Foreign and Justice Ministries. I took special note of anything relevant to Latvia, so I was interested in the fact that Dr Rudolf Lange was present. At the time of the Wannsee Conference he was Deputy Head of Task Forces in Latvia. He was called to the Conference because – having already carried out mass killings in Latvia – he was 'an experienced practitioner'. He was in charge of the mass killings in the forests around Riga where as many as 35,000 people (including several members of my family) were murdered in the space of two days.

I examined the large map of Europe on the wall displaying statistics relating to the number of Jews in each country at the time of the Conference. By January 1942 Estonia had already been

declared 'judenfrei' – free of Jews. In Latvia, which had had a pre-war Jewish population of 100,000 – 5% of the total population of Latvia – there were by then only 3,500 Jews. When we recall that the Nazi invasion took place in the summer of 1941, only six months earlier, these statistics are truly horrifying. No wonder Dr Lange was regarded as 'an experienced practitioner' of mass murder.

And yet, and yet – there is still a tendency for people to believe that the mass killings only began after the Wannsee Conference. I also know that other parts of Europe, which had been annexed by the Soviet Union prior to the Nazi invasion of summer 1941, suffered as badly as Latvia.

There were four Einsatzgruppen (killing squads) and there were mass killings in many towns in what was then the Soviet Union. Yet somehow these killings, and the deaths of so many millions before the building of the gas chambers seem to take back stage. We hear about Auschwitz and we hear about ghettos far more frequently than about the forest and beach sites of mass murder in Eastern Europe. I focus on Latvia because this is my lost homeland, but this general picture applies to many parts of the former Soviet Union.

The devastation and destruction of the Latvian Jewish community took place on a far greater scale than that of German Jewry. About half of the Jews living in Germany before the war survived. Many had left while emigration was possible in the years after the proclamation of the Nuremberg Laws; others survived in Germany. In contrast, Latvian Jewry was utterly devastated. Only those of us who are descendants of the people who emigrated long before the war - primarily for economic reasons - carry anything of the spirit of that community.

Post Script 2012

And even this tenuous hold on a culture is being gradually eroded. We grow old while new generations grow up in different countries and with different languages. I have been a witness to the loss of an entire culture and way of life.

Chapter 3: THE THIRTEENTH CHILD

Lara's Elegy on Her Mother's Childhood

The thirteenth child, a girl with dark, curly hair, was born shortly after mid-summer when the days in her northern town were long and warm. Her mother was exhausted from thirteen pregnancies in not many more years, and she had a business to run. Her father, a pious Jew, a Hasid, devoted himself to prayer. Unlike their mother, though, who had married at the age of sixteen, Leonora's task was to look after the small children in the family. She was not destined for marriage and children of her own – and observing her mother's life, she had no regrets about this. Leonora played with her youngest sister, taught her songs and poems, and took her to the beach. The thirteenth child enjoyed the games and stories and especially the beach. She loved the sea from babyhood, and the times she went to the beach with Leonora were happy times. But Leonora also had to look after the two little girls who were just a bit older than the thirteenth child. As the three small girls grew, people often thought they were triplets, or that at least two of them were twins, they were so close in age to one another.

The thirteenth child loved Leonora, but she missed her mother. Her mother was always busy. The older children needed attention, and so did the shop which was the family's only source of income.

Mother also did charitable work. She collected money and household goods for the poor girls in the community and made sure that every poor girl had a sufficient dowry to be able to marry. She was a good woman, a woman who cared about other people and their needs, but she had no time for her three youngest daughters, and least of all for the last-born. No doubt she thought about them occasionally, but mostly she was preoccupied and distracted. She trusted Leonora to take good care of them.

In the midst of this busy household the thirteenth child was lonely. Lonely for her mother, and for her father who spent his days in study and prayer; lonely and sad but too young to understand why. When she was old enough she went to school, which she enjoyed. She learned to play the piano. She loved reading and music and being by the sea, but despite these solaces she always felt lonely, and was often sad.

Then her mother became ill. Very ill. She had to be nursed day and night, and inevitably the main burden fell on Leonora, the eldest daughter who also had to run the household and manage the servants. Two of the older boys who were still at home took on more responsibility for the family business; while the thirteenth child, by now six or seven years old and able to amuse herself with books and music, was expected to take care of herself. No-one realised how frightened she was when she heard mother's cries of pain. No-one saw how she crept into a corner and hid behind a book or put her hands over her ears. No-one noticed that the piano piece she was playing got louder during bad times.

With Leonora now constantly anxious and preoccupied, and often very tired, the thirteenth child sank into herself. Her loneliness was overwhelming, and her sadness was like a bottomless well. But no-one noticed. They saw her reading, they heard the piano, and if they had a moment even to think about her, they thought, Well, *she's* alright, *she's* got her books and her music. *She* won't miss mother, Leonora's always looked after *her*. And although someone might have noticed her sadness and her terror, they could not have known that the thirteenth child's fear of cancer remained with her for the rest of her life, matched only by her fear of ending up in an asylum for the mentally ill.

After mother's death the family sat *shiva* (traditional Jewish mourning practice). For a week Father and the older children sat on low stools and people came to the house to mourn with them and to say prayers. At the end of the week, Father returned to his devotions and his studies. Leonora continued to run the household and look after the younger children, and the older boys looked after the family business. By then the oldest son, Israel, had married and had his own business which was doing well. He and his wife Jessie had two children, David and Pupchen (Dolly) who were only a few years younger than their aunt, the thirteenth child.

This sad and lonely child, who had been terrified by witnessing her mother's pain and distress, was now even more desperately lonely and sad. She had not only lost her mother, she had also to all intents and purposes lost Leonora. Although Leonora no longer had nursing duties, she had no time or inclination to play games with the lonely child, tell her stories or take her to the beach. She had too much responsibility at home and was grieving for her mother, to whom she had been very attached and was missing dreadfully. The thirteenth child felt Leonora's sorrow deeply and this intensified her own sadness.

Both emotionally and financially things were difficult in the family after Mother died. Father continued to devote himself to his prayer and studies. Leonora and her brothers did their best, but without their mother's guidance the business was less successful than before. So Israel's offer to take the thirteenth child into his own home, and educate her at his expense, was eagerly embraced. The thirteenth child would benefit from many advantages that the other children didn't have. Israel and Jessie (Gela) had a beautiful home with a large garden. They could afford servants and lovely furniture. Israel had even bought a good piano, much better than the old upright at home, as he wanted it for his own children. He knew the thirteenth child loved music, and was glad she would also benefit. He was a kind man, and having taken on responsibility for the thirteenth child, he paid for her to have private piano lessons and to go to a good school. Unlike her sisters, she attended German language schools, first an excellent

elementary school and then a gymnasium where German history, culture and literature were taught.

Unfortunately, the benefits of a comfortable home and good education were somewhat negated because Jessie, Israel's young, beautiful and elegant wife, was neither kind nor loving. The thirteenth child was well aware that Jessie didn't love her and didn't want her. She knew that she was tolerated for Israel's sake, and she understood that Jessie expected her to earn her keep by helping to look after David and Dolly. She understood that just as it had been at home when her mother was dying, she had to be good and not demand anything for herself. Jessie was a good mother to her own children, but would a young wife and mother with her own little ones want an extra child to take care of? Naturally, she wanted some return for the sacrifice she had made in taking in her husband's youngest sister. The thirteenth child knew this and was in turn unable to love Jessie. In later years she often remarked that although she was fond of her niece and nephew, and enjoyed playing with them, she didn't want to be their unpaid nursemaid. She seldom saw Leonora, the only person in her life whom she loved and knew loved her. So despite her advantages of education and comfort she remained sad, lonely and unseen.

She went for long solitary walks by the sea. Libau, fed by the Gulf Stream and ice-free in the winter, was an important Baltic port. At the harbour you could watch the big ships going to the West being loaded with timber, grain and butter. She liked going there, enjoying the smell of the Atlantic herrings which were stored in warehouses along the harbour. She loved herrings, fresh or salted, served with boiled potatoes; and many years later she would choose this dish for her wedding breakfast in a far-away and as yet unthought-of city on the South Atlantic coast.

She studied hard at school and as time went on she retreated further into her music and books. She loved languages and studied German, Russian and Latvian. A special favourite was German

poetry, particularly the poetry of Goethe, Heine and Schiller . These were the only things which gave her any comfort - music, poetry and the sea.

Visits home were difficult. Father was always studying, or praying. He often looked very tired.
"Why don't you rest, Papa?" she sometimes asked.
"There will be plenty of time to rest in the next world, my child" was his invariable reply "here in this world I must study."

In addition, she didn't have much in common with the two young sisters who had remained at home, they attended the Yiddish medium school for poorer Jewish girls, and didn't have private piano lessons. Only the daughters of the more affluent and cultured Jewish families went to German language schools. So the thirteenth child felt an outsider even in the family home.

She sometimes returned home for the Jewish holidays, and went to synagogue, as was expected. But she could not believe in a God who was so cruel as to cause her mother to die in such agony. All her life she railed against the possibility of a merciful and powerful Being who could permit such suffering and do nothing to alleviate it. Once a year, however, she enjoyed the synagogue. This was on Simchat Torah – the day for rejoicing in the Law – when she watched in delight as her father danced with the scroll, and then passed it to the next worshipper. She was happy to see how joyous her father was, and she enjoyed the songs everyone sang on that day.

Apart from her brother Israel, the only people who were kind to her were Leonora and her brother Joseph. Inevitably, she had mixed feelings about Leonora - she loved her, but also felt betrayed. She felt that Leonora hadn't loved her enough to find a way to keep her at home and – even more important – to spend time with her. For Joseph her feelings were unambiguous. She adored this big brother. He married, when she was about eleven or twelve years old and Joseph's young wife, Sara, opened her heart to the motherless girl. The thirteenth child blossomed in her new sister-in-law's company and soon grew to love her as much as she

already loved Joseph. Joseph and Sara were interested in the same sorts of things that she enjoyed. Like her, they rejected the traditional religious practices of their families. They embraced communism, and wanted to work to create a better and fairer world order.

The thirteenth child, having turned her back on religion, was eager to learn about other ways of understanding the world, and felt herself naturally inclined towards humanism and socialism. Her reading of Heine and Schiller encouraged this direction, and opportunities to read and discuss with Joseph and Sara were precious. But, sadly for her, Joseph and Sara spent most of the year away from Libau. They lived in Riga where they were politically and culturally active, and where Sara was a teacher in an elementary Yiddish language school. They came home to Libau each summer and these were wonderful times for the thirteenth child. She felt happier when Joseph and Sara were in Libau than at any other time. They had picnics on the beach, went paddling in the sea, and had long discussions about literature, history, music and politics. Those summer holidays were a magical, happy time. There was a lot to do in Libau during the summer. There was a belt of parks between the town and the sea with its clean and orderly beach where you could hunt for amber and then stroll along Linden Strasse, which ran next to the park, or Lilienfeld one street away. Or you could walk along Bade Strasse to the Kurhaus Gardens where concerts were given all through the summer. The thirteenth child felt loved and wanted as well as intellectually and culturally stimulated and nourished.

She adored this sister-in-law, and looked forward to her rare visits to them in Riga. There too, although it was not holiday time – both Joseph and Sara were working hard – she felt welcomed and loved. In the evenings and at weekends she was able to share the cultural life of Riga with them. They went to lectures, concerts, theatre, museums and art galleries, and strolled along the boulevards, enjoying the architecture. Riga is renowned for its beautiful Art Nouveau buildings dating from the beginning of the 20th century. It is justifiably claimed to be the capital of Art Nouveau in Europe - the Paris of the North, as it was called. During the day, while Joseph and Sara they were at work she explored Riga on her own, and sat in cafes drinking delicious coffee and reading – perhaps a volume of poetry. But these happy memories

of Libau and of Riga - memories she treasured for the rest of her life - were washed with sadness because of what had happened to the Jewish people in Latvia[1] during the War.

She was thrilled when she learned that Sara was expecting a baby. She felt confident that this niece or nephew would be another person for her to love, rather than an obstacle as in the case of Jessie's attitude towards her. And indeed, when a little girl was born, named after her dead grandmother, she loved her dearly. A precious, close and loving relationship was established which lasted until the end of her days.

The years went on, and the thirteenth child was nearly grown up. Music was her passion, and her brother Israel paid for her to attend the Libau Conservatoire of Music. On long summer evenings she would promenade along Kurhaus Prospect,
or sit in a cafe or on a bench beneath the trees with her friends and fellow students, putting the world to rights. She so enjoyed those walks and talks, discussing different composers, sharing observations about their teachers at the College and the musicians who performed in the little concert hall in Libau.

Latvia was an independent state, but had not been long so. The young people were conscious of Latvia's vulnerability to both Germany and the Soviet Union, as well as the lack of work opportunities. Some of the Jewish youth were talking about emigrating, and there was an active Zionist group in Libau whose members hoped to settle in Palestine and help build up a national home for the Jews. Others were more inclined to look towards communism – as she, Joseph and Sara were - and the Soviet Union. The possibility of emigrating to the West was very limited. But the thirteenth child didn't seriously consider moving away from Libau, so it was a shock to her when the two sisters nearest to her in age, Shana and Riva, and her beloved Joseph and Sara started talking about emigrating.

Years before, three of their brothers had emigrated to America. One of them had left before the thirteenth child was born, and her memories of the second, who had left when she was very small, were hazy. Only the third brother was someone whom she actually remembered. He had left when she was about six, not long before their mother became ill. With three brothers in America, Shana, Riva and Joseph naturally thought about joining them. But when they made enquiries, they found out that America wasn't accepting any more Jewish immigrants, even if they had family to go to. Then they discovered that South Africa was encouraging Jewish immigration from Europe, and even offering subsidised passages. Many other young Latvian Jews were going there. Joseph and Sara, Riva and her husband Abrashke and Shana all decided they would emigrate to South Africa. They invited her to go with them.

South Africa! Imagine going to live in darkest Africa! It was thousands and thousands of miles away, on the other side of the globe, much further even than America. Many primitive people lived there. Would there be theatres, music and concerts? What about her incomplete music studies? Would anyone be interested in German high culture – poetry, philosophy and literature?

This was agonising. What was she to do? She could stay with Israel and Jessie and lose all her siblings who were closest in age to her. Or she could take the plunge and go to South Africa. She would have to leave her piano studies, her books, her beaches, David and Dolly, her father, her college friends, her older brothers ... and Leonora.
Sara encouraged her to join them, told her she could live with them and that she and Joseph would take care of her. Sara promised that if it was possible she could continue to study music in Cape Town. By now her little niece, to whom she was very attached, was two years old. The appeal of living in a loving family with a child she adored was a great incentive. For the first time in her life since her mother's illness took Leonora away from her, she felt someone wanted her and cared for her. She decided to go.

And so begins Lara's story.

Chapter 4: VARAKLAN (1): THE ONLY SON

Joy and jubilation greeted the arrival of Shimon and Dobe Liebe's only son. He was born on the day after the Passover festival ended when the buds on the cherry tree in the back yard were swelling and getting ready to burst into blossom.

The only son was born into a family which already had three daughters: two half-sisters who were the children of his Shimon's first marriage and a sister, born just a year before him. Of course, no-one could have known then that he would be an only son and an only brother to so many girls. As the years went on his mother bore four more children, all girls.

How precious is an only son, and especially in a traditionally orthodox Jewish family in Eastern Europe! A son will say Kaddish[2] for his parents, will look out for his sisters and help them find good husbands. He will be responsible for his parents in their old age and although every member of the family is expected to contribute to its material needs, he will be first call to provide for them all.

It's a heavy load for an only son in a large family.

The family lived a semi-rural life in Varaklan, a small town in the east of Latvia not far from the border with Russia. They had their own house on a small plot of land, kept a cow, grew and preserved their own vegetables, and every summer made cherry jam from their own fruit. Those years when their tree produced more cherries than they needed for themselves they gave the surplus as gifts to neighbours - often receiving plums in exchange. Plum jam and cherry jam enlivened an often limited winter diet and plums could also be dried and used through the winter. If there were enough plums, it was possible to ferment the juice into wine, and even distil it to produce a brandy known as Slivovitz. But this didn't happen

[2] Kaddish is the prayer said on the death of a parent, initially every day for a year, and thereafter annually on the anniversary of the death.

very often. Usually there were only enough plums to make a batch or two of jam. Cherry jam was particularly welcome as it was used to sweeten tea. Just one or two preserved cherries and a spoonful of the syrup were enough to transform an ordinary glass of tea into a Sabbath treat.

When the garden crops ripened in the summer and autumn Mother insisted that the children eat raw vegetables straight from the garden. They grew cabbages, potatoes, beetroot, carrots, onions, cucumbers and beans. A delightful summer pastime was picking berries, and in the autumn there were mushrooms in the nearby woods. These too could be preserved or dried for winter use. Mother and the girls also made *imberlach*, a sweetmeat of grated carrots stewed with ginger and sugar. Some was put aside each year and brought out months later, as this was a favourite Passover treat. [3]

In the winter they made soups from root vegetables which had been packed in earth to preserve them. Other vegetables were pickled in barrels filled with brine. Meat too, relatively plentiful in summer, was salted and preserved to help see them through the long, cold, northern winter. Their cow gave them plenty of milk from which they made cheese and a little butter. A family legend has it that when the first of Mother's children was born a year before the only son, the new baby was bathed in the spare milk. It was claimed that this sister had exceptionally beautiful skin all her life because of this. By the time the remaining babies had come along all the milk was needed for the children's diet.

But it was not a wholly rural life. Shimon was unusual in that his father, although a rabbi, had sent him to a secular academy where he had studied history and Russian as well as elementary science and mathematics.

Later, Shimon became a flax merchant. He also taught children at the Talmud Torah and prepared boys for their Bar Mitzvah. Despite this being a traditionally observant family,

[3] During Passover, only foods prepared without flour or leavening could be eaten.

Father encouraged all his children to read widely and study across a broad range of subjects. There were books at home – some great works of literature in Russian, Yiddish translations of the classics of many languages and a sprinkling of history and politics as well as Jewish religious books. The only son and his sister Rochele, about ten years his junior, were considered to be particularly good at mathematics. She was especially interested in politics as well as medicine and art. Varaklan also had a communal library, drama circle and orchestra providing further opportunities for the children's cultural development – when they could be spared from the essential work of maintaining the family.

The children were fortunate in having such forward looking and liberal parents. Their mother, although devout in her practice of Judaism and the maintenance of a Jewish home, was more open-minded than many of the young women in that eastern part of Latvia where the influence of Russia and a backward peasantry predominated. Before her marriage she had spent several years working in England using her skills as a seamstress to earn a living in a factory in Leeds. Exposure to life in England had broadened her view of the world and when seeking a husband had told the matchmaker that she wanted an intelligent and educated man with whom she could have interesting conversations. Shimon was the perfect match for her. She didn't mind that he was a widower and she was very willing to help bring up his two daughters.

When Shimon proposed sending their only son to a secular academy for his schooling, there was no opposition from his wife. He would continue to teach the only son Bible and Talmud at home. All the children knew a little Latvian, but did not devote much time to the study of the language. However, they were literate in Yiddish and Russian, had some skill with mathematics and were to varying degrees familiar with biblical Hebrew.
But times were hard, and with the First World War raging, the only son had to leave school to help his father with his work in the flax trade at the age of twelve.

This was a time of political and social upheaval throughout both Europe and the Russian Empire. One of Shimon's closest friends was a teacher at the secular Yiddish language school which the girls attended. He was a communist and deeply influential in the political path subsequently taken by Rochele and her next oldest sister Dverele. Not surprisingly politics and current affairs featured regularly in the conversation at home.

The only son's Bar Mitzvah year coincided with the Russian revolutions of 1917 culminating in the October revolution, the effects of which reverberated in Varaklan as throughout the Russian Empire. The Latgale region of Latvia, where Varklan is situated, had been part of the Russian empire since 1772. The nearest big town, Rezekne, was a stop on the main railway route from Riga to Moscow and just 63 kilometres from the Russian border. News travelled fast and the people of Varaklan were well informed about unrest and political movements in Moscow and elsewhere in the empire. At the same time independence movements were gaining momentum in Latvia. Latgale only became free of Russia and part of a unified Latvia after a bitter war of independence fought in the years 1917 to 1920.[4]

Within this volatile environment, which lasted throughout the 1920s, Shimon continued his work as a flax merchant, and earned a little extra through his teaching. Every penny was needed for a growing family. Increasingly, with work in Varaklan very limited, young people were migrating to the cities, particularly to Riga.

Shimon's two daughters from his first marriage had grown up and moved to Riga some years earlier. Anna, who at the time was unmarried, travelled between Germany and Latvia as a flax merchant. Tanya and her husband, Joseph, had children of their own and ran a butchery business. They were able to offer a home and a job in their shop to Gessie, the oldest of Tanya's half-sisters; and later the next half-sister, Keila Mary, about a year younger than the

[4] As the First World War drew to a close, Latvia fought a war of independence against Russia and Sweden. It was a declared an independent state after the Russian revolution and accepted into the League of Nations in 1921. Conscription into military service continued thereafter.

only son, found work in a factory in Riga. Like her mother, she earned a living as a seamstress.

Both girls sent home as much as they could spare of their wages, sometimes as cash, and sometimes in the form of shoes and clothing.

However, there was no work in Riga for a young man without a trade – and not much even if you were a tailor or shoemaker. So the plan for the only son was that he would learn the flax trade and eventually take over this business from his father. But once he was of military age, and before there had been time for him to be properly trained, he was called up to serve in the Latvian army.

And then disaster struck.

Chapter 5: VARAKLAN (2): DISASTERS AND DECISIONS

One day in the late autumn of 1925, Shimon – who had been looking rather grey and tired in recent weeks – came home from an evening's teaching complaining of chest pain. Mother insisted that he go straight to bed and rest. She helped him undress while Rochele prepared a glass of weak tea sweetened with cherry jam. He had no appetite but sipped a little of the hot tea

Only mother and the three youngest girls were at home. The only son was on military service in the Latvian army - Latvia's independence and its acceptance into the League of Nations in 1921 was very recent and the fledgling democratic republic had to protect its borders from predatory neighbours, especially the Soviet Union. The two older girls were living and

working in Riga, as were Shimon's two daughters from his first marriage. With mother needing to give her care and attention to him, fifteen year old Dverele - who loved cooking – offered to make supper and Rochele, by now a bright and responsible eleven year old, said she would look after little Minnele who was only seven.

Mother thanked her girls and went back to Shimon. She suggested sending Dverele to fetch the doctor, but Shimon insisted that he just needed to rest and would be quite recovered by the morning. After an anxious and restless night for the whole family, especially mother who hardly slept, Shimon said that he had no more pain and would go to work as usual. mother and the girls begged him to stay home and rest, but he refused and got up and dressed. He told the girls to go to school and sat down to prepare for his teaching. But he was clearly still tired and did not have his usual good colour. Mother was anxious but helpless. At least, the room above the synagogue where he did his teaching was just across the road, so he wouldn't have to be out in the cold for long.

Gradually, over the next few days, as Shimon seemed to be more his usual self, the family relaxed. But later that week, two of the boys in his Bar Mitzvah class, looking really frightened, came running across the road calling out "come quickly!" Mother ran back with them, but it was too late. Shimon was sitting in his chair, with his hand on his chest, not breathing. Later the boys were questioned and explained that the Rov had been angry and lost his temper, and then suddenly sat down moaning with pain. Shmuel and Yitzchak had immediately run to fetch Mother while the other boys had stayed with their teacher. They reported that after the first few moments he had become very still and silent.

The family gathered for the funeral. The older girls came home from Riga and the only son was given compassionate leave from the army. Father was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Varaklan and for a week the whole family sat in mourning while friends and relatives came to bring food and sit and pray with the mourners. The daily ritual of the only son saying *Kaddish* for a year began.

After the *Shiva* week, the family sat down to discuss their situation, and think about how they would cope financially with their main bread-winner gone, and the only son away on military service. Each was determined to do what they could for the good of all. This was a time of decisions which would determine the fate of every person in the family - and their children and children's children - in the ensuing decades.

Dverele offered to follow her sisters to Riga and try to find work. She, like her mother was a skilled seamstress, and Keila Mary thought there was a good chance of her getting a job in the factory where she worked. If successful, there would be one less mouth to feed at home, and she could also send home as much as she could spare from her wages.

With more than a year of the only son's military service still to run, this left Mother and the two youngest girls at home. Mother, it turned out, had a plan. She called together friends, relatives and neighbours and told them of her intention to open a bakery to provide for her family. She asked for their support, but explained that she did not want charity. All she wanted was an undertaking – and only for the first week or two – that they would buy her bread and rolls. Rochele said she would do the books for the new business, help in any way she could, and would also help Mother by taking over as much as possible of the housework and the care of Minnele.

The only son felt his responsibility towards his mother and sisters very keenly and was immensely distressed by his inability to do anything for them. It was not just that he had to return to his military duties - he was even more concerned that after discharge he would still not be able to provide enough help. His father's death had left the only son without an economic future. He was too inexperienced to carry on in the flax trade on his own, and in any case, the long gap from the time of the death until his army discharge meant that vital trade connections would be lost. Shimon had earned a substantial part of his income as a

teacher of both children and adults. This work, however, was not available to the only son whose own education had been prematurely interrupted.

But mother – who was nothing if not resourceful - had another idea. Two of her older sisters had moved to England many years before to marry two English Jewish brothers who had come to Varaklan to meet them – a meeting arranged by a match-maker. Mother had lived with them for a while, working as a seamstress in a factory in Leeds, before returning to Varaklan to marry Shimon. She had enjoyed living in England, and always treasured a hope of relocating with her family to an English speaking country. By the mid 1920s, most English speaking countries – the USA and Great Britain for example – had closed their doors to Jewish immigration.

So it was the good fortune of the whole family that mother's English brothers-in-law had fought in the Boer War. After the war, early in the 20th century, when ex-servicemen were offered tracts of land in South Africa, her sisters' husbands had taken up this offer and the two couples had emigrated to South Africa where they were doing well. During the 1920s South Africa wanted to increase the proportion of white people in the population. European immigration was encouraged and even Jews were welcomed. Mother suggested she should write to her sisters to enquire whether they and their husbands could help the only son get started in a new country. Her hope was that he would be able to send money back, they too would save what they could, and little by little they would all join him there. The only son, feeling a desperate lack of other opportunities, said he would think about it.

He was a gentle and rather shy young man who greatly loved his mother and sisters, and feared for their safety in an increasingly difficult situation in Latvia. At a time when economic pressures were contributing to political volatility, the family would be left without a single man to look out for them. He knew he was a willing worker and intelligent enough, but not a go-getter and without particular skills, so he worried about whether he'd be able to get enough – or well-enough paid – work to be able to send money home. He feared that

he'd be stuck in a foreign country without any of his closest family, and that if he was unable to help bring them out they would suffer in Latvia because of his absence. So he was not enthusiastic about leaving home. On the other hand, he could see that this plan at least provided some hope for the future of the family.

After all, what else could he consider doing? He knew there would be no work for him in Latvia. Even if the bakery did well, it couldn't make much – certainly not enough to justify him staying home and helping to build up that business. Mother and the two youngest girls Rochele and Minnele would manage with a little help from the older girls, and perhaps they would be able to save a little but it was unlikely that they would be able to save enough for everyone's fares.

It was an agonising decision, but eventually, encouraged by mother, the only son agreed that she should write and added a paragraph saying how much he would appreciate his aunts' and uncles' help. He promised to be a good and reliable worker. From Latvia to South Africa was a long journey by rail and sea so letters took three or four weeks each way. It was nearly two months before a reply arrived, with good news. Their relatives were willing to help, and gave some advice about the papers the only son would need. They also offered to contribute to the cost of his passage, saying he could pay the loan off once he was earning in the new country.

As soon as the only son was discharged from the army in early 1927, about fifteen months after his father's death, he set off, amidst tears and hugs, desperately hoping he'd be able to earn enough to keep himself, pay back the debt to his aunts, and send money home. Rochele, although she approved of the decision, was distraught. For nearly two years her beloved older brother had been away from home in the army, and now she was to be deprived of his company for heavens knows how many years, and at such a distance as to make visits impossible. Both promised to write regularly, but were fully aware that letters took a long time to arrive. Rochele, although very young, was already becoming politically

active in the Communist Party, and wasn't sure she'd want to leave her friends and comrades to go to a new country. The future was very uncertain.

And very soon another tragedy struck the family. Not long after the only son had left and just a few weeks before her wedding day Keila Mary had an appendix operation, got an infection and died. 1927 had turned out to be a traumatic year in the life of the family, and there were many times in that year and subsequently when both the only son and his loved ones at home regretted his departure.

Chapter 6: THE BLACK BOOK: LOST CHILDREN – DEATH OF THE UNBORN

How, thought Lara, do you lose a child? The cry goes up 'where's Rosie? – or Johnny?' Anxiously, you listen to the Public Address System, and ask where inquiries are made for lost children. Relief when you find Rosie or Johnny, tearful but unharmed, being entertained by a member of staff. Panic when no-one can find them and all the horrors begin to play themselves out in your imagination. Because there are terrible cases, the cases which hit the headlines, when a lost child is never found, or not found alive.

There are many ways to lose children. In every war and every disaster there are lost children. These are not children who have slipped their hand from yours and wandered off. These are not children whom we have, for just a moment, a little moment, stopped watching, distracted by a choice to be made, or the baby crying. These are not children who have – tragically - been abducted and harmed. These children have different stories.

Many are the ways in which children are lost: those who are killed by a bomb or a rocket; those who are swept away by a flood or tsunami – perhaps pulled out of a parent's grasp by a force too powerful for them to withstand; those who are trapped in a house when fire breaks out, or crushed when a building collapses, or die of malnutrition or starvation. There are all too many ways in which children can be lost, and all of them are tragic. When we hear about children lost in so terrible a way, our hearts go out to those who love them – their parents, siblings, grandparents, friends. And we feel guilty that we (whoever the 'we' may be) did not, could not, save them. I hear the voices of these children crying out, thought Lara.

But there are other children who are lost before they even have voices with which to call out. This may be because of state policy as, for example, in China. The Chinese 'one child' policy, aimed at limiting population growth resulted in many abortions, especially of girls. In India too, thousands of girl foetuses have been aborted by parents who desperately want sons.

The children who are lost before they have voices with which to cry out are different from the tragic children. The faces of these lost children were never seen, their voices never heard. But their mothers and fathers, their sisters and brothers, their grandparents are bereft of these children for the rest of their lives. The Chinese and Indian men who might have married one of those lost girls once grown up cannot find a partner because there are too few women in their societies.

Lara paused in her reflections. That's all true, she thought, but how could she convey the particular tragedy, the horror of the lost children she had read about in The Black Book? Most people know about the children lost in war or natural disaster. Most people are familiar with the loss of so many Chinese girls. But very few know about the lost children of Shavel, the children who were murdered before they were

born. She re-read the passage in The Black Book. The heading, after the place name ***SHAVEL*** was *'Murder of the Yet Unborn'*. All right, she thought, "I'll just tell the story. That will be enough. The story speaks for itself.

The story begins in 1942 when the occupying Nazis issued an order to the Judenrat, the Jewish Council, of the Shavel ghetto. This was the administrative body that the Nazis required Jews to form in each ghetto. As was Nazi practice throughout occupied Eastern Europe, the ghetto in Shavel had been set up in June 1941, soon after the invasion. The purpose was control of the Jewish people, and, as later became apparent, their eventual murder. To this end, every ghetto had to create a Judenrat. Members of the Judenrat were often selected by the Nazis. They picked people of standing in the community in order to put the responsibility for implementing Nazi orders onto them. The day to day management of ghetto affairs was in their hands, but its actions were constrained by Nazi orders. So, although nominally in charge of the ghetto, the Judenrat was in fact just the enforcement body. Lack of compliance would result in severe reprisals such as reduction of the entire community's already inadequate rations, transportation to hard labour camps, and even executions.

By now the Nazis had been in control of Lithuania for about nine months, unilaterally breaking their non-aggression treaty with the Soviet Union. In the summer of 1941 they mounted Operation Barbarossa – the invasion of Eastern Europe. As this story unfolds in the spring of 1942, the Nazis were in control of the Baltic States and Ukraine, and were advancing into Russia.

Lara tried to imagine herself as a member of the Shavel Council, faced with the Order of 5th March 1942 stating that the latest date for authorised births in the ghetto was 5 August 1942. In the ghetto, she

thought, we have a pretty fair idea of the danger our entire community is facing. We have heard what happened to the Jews of Riga in neighbouring Latvia, and in other ghettos in Lithuania. When the Nazis took Lithuania some of our young people escaped into the forests and are partisans. Occasionally a bit of news reaches us from them. We know the Nazi threats are very real. The Nazi guards taunt us by revealing some of the atrocities committed elsewhere, laughing and telling us that our turn will come next. So, Lara continued, let us examine this order. What is going to be required of the Judenrat?"

Lara calculated that as this date was just five months away, it meant that every woman who was less than four months pregnant at the time of the Order would not be permitted to carry her child to term. Presumably she would be forced or coerced into having an abortion. The date was later extended by ten days to 15 August 1942. I wonder why, thought Lara. What difference could ten days make?

The order also stated that in the event of a birth taking place in a Jewish family after this date the whole family would be 'removed' and the responsibility would rest with the Jewish Council members.

It's stark, thought Lara. Have an abortion or put your whole family, and potentially the whole community, at risk.

Lara had read about the events referred to in an extract from a diary kept by a member of the Judenrat, a Mr E Yerushalmi. He had amazingly in light of the scale of destruction, been able to keep the diary hidden and safe until the end of the war. An entry on 4 July 1942 states that Dr Charney, a senior member of the Council, had reminded members of the Order concerning births. Just over a week later, on July 13 - by which time the last date for 'authorised' births was only a month away - Mr Yerushalmi recorded a meeting of the Council where the implications of the order were laid out, and the Council agreed to warn the community

again. They issued a statement which included the following:

"Births are permitted in the ghetto only up to 15 August 1942; after this date it is forbidden to give birth to Jewish children either in the hospitals or in the homes of the pregnant women; and - it is permitted to interrupt pregnancies by means of abortions."

The statement emphasised the great responsibility which rested on the pregnant women, and stated bluntly that they and their families risked execution. It concluded by saying that the Council members were making this matter widely known and that they believed that the women concerned would 'take the necessary measures'.

I'll bet they did make this widely known, thought Lara, pausing for a few moments. And how fervently will they have hoped that the women would 'take the necessary measures', and not force the situation back onto the Council. They'd be terrified about their own safety and that of their families – and indeed of the entire community.

Some months went by. In early spring of the following year the diarist records the minutes of a Council meeting of 24th March 1943, at which the situation with pregnant women was again discussed. By now it was seven months since the August 1942 deadline had passed. An account taken from these minutes was published in 'The Black Book' of 1946 under the heading "Murder of the Yet Unborn". On the order of business that day appeared an item: "How to avoid childbirth in the ghetto". The minutes record the names of those present and chronicle the ensuing discussion. The participants appear to be all men, and include several doctors.

Mr Lejbowicz, clearly a senior member of the Judenrat, starts the discussion by reminding those present that the ban on births of Jewish children applies 'with the utmost severity' to all the ghettos. He cites a recent case of a birth in Kovno following which all members of the family were shot and killed. He states that here in Shavel, 'people are

behaving most irresponsibly'. Several of the doctors speak. One enquires about the numbers of pregnant women, and also asks whether the women can be forced to have abortions. The response is that there had been three births since the previous August, and that there are at present about 20 pregnant women in the ghetto. "Some of these" adds Mr Lejbowicz, "are at an early stage of pregnancy, but several are further advanced and one is in the eighth month. Only two women refuse to have an abortion. One of these is the woman in the eighth month. The other has already had two abortions and fears childlessness if she submits to another one."

Lara wondered what the members, faced with this situation and terrified for themselves, their own families and the community, would do. She continued reading, and learned that one of the doctors thought that the two women must be persuaded – forced, perhaps, thought Lara - and must be told about what had happened in Kovno and Riga.

The minutes make it clear that the Council members were enormously exercised by the moral dilemma in which they found themselves, particularly with regard to the woman who was very advanced in pregnancy. The key questions were: what would happen to the infant if they caused a premature birth... and what would happen if despite everything the child is born alive? Should they kill it? The doctor who posed this question continues, 'I cannot accept such a responsibility on my conscience'. Another comments that no doctor would take such a responsibility – it would be murder. Someone suggests allowing the child to be born and then giving it to a gentile. But even this possibility is blocked because, as another member reminds them, every case of a birth has to be reported.

I wonder, thought Lara, why were they so concerned to obey such a rule? Couldn't they have hidden the birth and not reported it? Perhaps they were simply terrified of the consequences if it was found out.

Someone suggests that putting the child to death can be done by a nurse with an injection, as long as the nurse does not know what is in the needle. Mr Yerushalmi's diary – at least the part of it recorded in The Black Book – does not tell us how the members respond to that idea.

There is further debate and the Council members conclude that it was essential either to abort or to induce a premature birth on every pregnant woman. The women had to be persuaded, if necessary by threatening to inform the security police. The alternative, which is that the entire ghetto community were to be put into grave danger, is too terrible to contemplate.

Lara read on to the end of the account. The final sentence, which had clearly been added by the editor of The Black Book, said: 'We now know that all these tragic arguments were futile'.

Yes, thought Lara. Suppose they had known that the end would be destruction, regardless of their actions. She wondered whether they would have made the same decision. Might they have chosen defiance and the risk of dying together? After all, there is the example in Jewish history of Masada. But it must have been almost impossible for them to conceive of such wholesale destruction as ensued. She imagined many would have clung on to the hope of survival. And others might have been motivated to try to stay alive in the most hellish of situations in order to bear witness. By now they may also have hoped that the soviet army would retake Lithuania in time to save at least a remnant of the community. This meeting of the Judenrat was taking place about a month after the battle of Stalingrad had been won by the Soviets and soviet forces had pushed the Nazis back. No doubt news of this had trickled through. People must have hoped that the Soviets would retake Ukraine and the Baltic States in time to prevent complete destruction.

She continued musing. We know that these discussions were taking place in March 1943, and with the benefit of history we now know that the Soviets reinvaded Lithuania in July 1944. A window of only about fifteen months separated these tragic discussions and the potential liberation of the ghetto. The Nazis were in control of the Baltic States for a relatively short time, from June 1941 until July 1944. But what havoc and destruction they perpetrated in those three years. Estonia was *Judenfrei* – clear of Jews - by the time of the Wannsee Conference in January 1942. In Latvia, by the time these events occurred in the Shavel ghetto, the Jewish community had already been pretty well obliterated. By December 1941, most of the Latvian Jews previously housed there had been shot in the forests outside Riga. By now the Riga ghetto housed German Jews who had been transported east from Berlin and other parts of Germany.

Lara paused, and tried again to imagine herself in the ghetto. It's so hard fully to put myself into the situation of those pregnant women, their families, and the Council members, she thought. It was so difficult to connect to what each person might have felt, to enter their world. She tried to imagine the agony of the pregnant women themselves, and what their husbands, sisters and brothers, and parents must have felt –those that had survived this long. She wondered whether any of those women already had children. There is so much about these individual lives, and individual tragedies which we will never know. But without Mr Yerushalmi's diary, and his courage and that of other chroniclers and diarists - knowing well the increased dangers they faced if their precious pages were found - and the dedicated scholarship after the war of those who put together the testimonies and journals, which make up the Black Books, we would have no knowledge at all. These lives would have been destroyed without a trace being left

We are also indebted, thought Lara, to those few who survived the

concentration camps and later wrote of their experience. Well known figures, generally men, like Primo Levi and Victor Frankl and lesser known people like Gisela Perls, a doctor in Auschwitz who in her memoir, first published in 1948, wrote:

> "I had to remain alive ... It was up to me to save the life of the mothers, if there was no other way, then by destroying the life of their unborn children."

Gisela Perls' memoir shows that there are more stories to be told about lost children, lost before they were born. The one million Jewish children murdered in the ghettos, forests and camps do not include these lost children. They are not counted.

[if !supportFootnotes]

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[if !supportFootnotes][1][endif] Shavel is the name used by its Jewish inhabitants. In Russian it is Shavli and it is modern day Siauliai and the fourth largest city in Lithuania. In 1939 one fifth of its population, about 6,000 people, was Jewish. By the end of the war the Jewish community had been reduced to 500 people. Despite the scale of the destruction of the Jewish community, destruction which is echoed throughout Eastern Europe – for example in Ukraine, in Latvia – we know what happened in Shavel because a diary kept by E Yerushalmi, a member of the Shavel Judenrat, survived.
[if !supportFootnotes][2][endif] Extracts from this diary were included in *'The Black Book'* published by the Jewish Black Book Committee in 1946. Much later, after the breakup of the Soviet Union, '*The Complete Black Book of Russian Jewry'* was published, first in Russian and then, in 1992, in English translation. This has further extracts from the diary.

Chapter 7: Poem

ALL THE CHILDREN

My child, your child, what difference?
All the children of the world
One flow of life, new life,
Hopeful. Not for long.

How comprehend, how quantify
The pain of children bereft
Afghanistan, Bosnia, Manhattan,
Gaza, Baghdad, Jerusalem
All one in their bewilderment?

Barefoot children, hungry children,
Children ill and children maimed,
Brother killed, father gone, mother disappeared.
Breathe into the pain, into your belly.
Sit with the pain, endure
What else is there to do?

Has the world gone mad? Is it a collective psychosis?

We know so much of what it takes to grow a child. How long it takes, what love, what care, what work.

We know how slow it is to cure deep early trauma. Often it can't be healed, just lived with and endured.

We know that psychic scars remain to haunt the children's children's children. We've seen it in second and third generation holocaust survivors' tales. the Chumash* knew - '...even unto the third and fourth generation...'

Each day brings death, hunger, separation, loss, wounds big and small. I ask again what madness seizes us?

I feel such dread for the children, dread for all the children everywhere.

Think of those whose lives are blighted,
Born with HIV, slaves on cocoa farms, in factories,
Caught up in war, in famine, in flight.

But remember - there are happy children, healthy children,
Children with rosebloom on their cheeks,
Yellow wellies on their feet,
Children with a mother and a father
Who splash in puddles, feed the ducks,
Read story books and play on swings.

And remember: each day of conflict, each day of bombs, each day without adequate medicine, each day of lack of food, brings more children into the arena of pain.

When will we stop?

Zelda Alexander, 2003

* The first five books of the Bible.

Chapter 8: LARA'S STORY: THE BOX

When Ben became ill, and he and Judith decided to downsize, he phoned Lara. "I'm clearing out our loft", he said "and I've come across a box of family papers I'd forgotten about. There are documents and photographs. I'm not sure what to do with them."

"Why don't we come and collect them, and store them here until you get back from Cape Town and are feeling better?" asked Lara. "Then you can come over and we'll go through them together."

"Good idea", he responded. But when Ben and Judith returned to London they were still in their old home because the sale had fallen through. And Ben's scans showed a recurrence of his cancer, which meant that he would need more surgery.

The box, unopened, began to gather dust.

The next two years were very difficult. For Ben and Judith, selling their house was a roller-coaster of hopes and disappointments. And although Ben recovered from the surgery, he started getting other, ominous symptoms. He was constantly busy and preoccupied - dealing with doctors, hospitals, estate agents, storage facilities and temporary rentals. Sorting through old family papers at Lara's house was not his top priority. Lara, in her turn, didn't have the heart to look through the box on her own. This was a task she had hoped to share with Ben, to reminisce with him about their parents, their relatives and their childhood.
The box lay unheeded, pushed into a corner where, after all this time, Lara scarcely noticed it.
Ben's death, although inevitable, had come sooner and more shockingly sudden than anyone had anticipated. Shortly afterwards Lara became ill. So more months went by, and the box stayed untouched, and by this time almost invisible, just 'part of the furniture'. Once or twice she glanced at it, registered what it was and quickly turned away. Noticing it brought back her grief, the feelings of profound loss that Ben's death had evoked. It was more than the loss of Ben, huge though this was; she had realised it was, also, the loss of much of her childhood, the loss of much of her history. It felt as if with Ben's death a great chunk of her had also died. All the things they, and by now

only they, both remembered and had shared – family suppers, the flat they'd lived in, visits to relatives, holidays, beach picnics - all this was gone.

Gone too were the shared memories of the Black Book of their childhood home in Cape Town; the Black Book they had seen their father read with a grim, grey face. The Black Book which both of them – despite parental injunctions - had read. The book which chronicled Nazi atrocities during the Holocaust. The book which disappeared somewhere in the process of their family, over a period of five or six years relocating from South Africa, to London. The Black Book they had tried to replace, searching libraries and on-line catalogues in vain. Lara recalled finding a Black Book in a London specialist library which was marked as 'Reference Only'. Although she was not confident it was 'their' Black Book, it was the first time she had found any book which just might be the one. It was the right size and thickness and colour and some of the contents seemed almost familiar. By special dispensation of the librarian she was allowed to borrow it for a few days. She wanted to show it to Ben, in case her memory was faulty and it really was 'their' Black Book. As he took it in his hand Ben said, eagerly – "That's it, that's *our* Black Book!" but then, on further examination, in a disappointed voice said "No, it isn't – I remember lots of things which aren't in this book".

Gone as well were the memories they shared from the time they were taking care of their mother in her last months, just the two of them going together to visit her in hospital. No-one else went – by then Dad was too ill himself, the children too young, and neither wanted to subject Jeff or Judith to the awful sight of mother demented and not knowing them. Although it was a very difficult period in their lives, it was also a time when they had become very close, supporting one another in enduring the ghastliness of mother's state but also having time, on the journey to and from the hospital, to talk about their lives - their families, their work, their hopes and fears.

Without Ben these memories were no longer solid realities which a glance, a brief reference, could bring to life. Without Ben, they were porous and crumbling, insubstantial. How could she possibly look at that box of papers without Ben there to challenge or confirm her own recollections of their shared past?

But the day came, five or six months after Ben had died, when the box caught her eye, and without conscious volition she found herself sitting on a stool pulling out files and folders. Some of the material was familiar, but there was much that was not. Lara's attention was caught by a file containing a collection of documents and a package of photographs. The documents seemed mostly to relate to

their aunt Gessie, their father's older sister. Amongst them was her Latvian passport which Lara put aside to look at properly later. The plastic package of photographs had a label – in Ben's handwriting - saying 'Rosen family'.

She picked up the pile of photographs and looked through them. She thought she remembered some of them from the memory stick which her cousin Alec had brought with him when he flew over for Ben's funeral. She had barely registered them at that time. Her attention then was wholly on Ben, writing the eulogy for his funeral and playing her part in the Shiva week that followed. During that week the photographs on the memory stick which had captured her attention were mostly those of Ben and herself as children and with their parents.
Now, at last, she felt able to look further back, to the lives of long lost family members, those who had remained in Latvia and had not survived the Holocaust. This was a project both she and Ben had been interested in, and it was Ben who had organised their visit to Latvia in 1997. He had drawn up family trees incorporating all the information that was then available, some from the recollections of family members and some from Latvian archives after they were opened up following independence. Lara knew that these family trees were not totally accurate – from her own knowledge she could pick out some errors - but they were a good guide to the past and the best that was available.

Lara knew that Ben very much wanted her to go on with her writing, with her attempts to put emotional flesh on the bones of the limited factual information that they had about the lives and fate of their aunts, uncles and cousins. And they were both keen to try and understand the lives of their parents before they emigrated to South Africa.

After visiting Latvia they had talked about how different the cultural backgrounds were of their mother and father. " And I wrote something up about that", she recalled. "These photographs may enhance my understanding. In any event I know Ben would be glad I am continuing with this project."

On their visit to Latvia they had begun to understand that the destruction of the Jewish community there was so swift and so comprehensive that an entire way of life, a distinct culture, had been wiped out. The continuity of time from one year to another was lost. During the long years of Soviet hegemony the archives were closed and wholly inaccessible. It was not until Latvia finally regained its independence in the 1990s - a full half century after the destruction - that the archives were opened up and made available to researchers. Even so, it was difficult to arrive at a proper appreciation and understanding of Latvian Jewish life in the first half of the 20th century. The hiatus in time was too great and to add to the difficulty only about 2% of the Jewish population had survived the war. This had two

profound effects. One is that little is known of those who were murdered. Even the names of many of these victims are unknown. They remain unseen: invisible and anonymous. The other effect is that most of the Jews living in Latvia at the time of renewed independence were not of original Latvian stock. The majority were Russian Jews who had moved there during the Soviet years. Although almost all lived in Riga they were culturally unlike the Riga Jews of pre-war Latvia. So, despite there being a (small) Jewish community in modern Latvia, it is true to say that the *Latvian* Jewish community was totally destroyed during the Holocaust

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Lara wondered what the photographs would tell her about day-to- day life before the destruction? She laid them out on the dining room table. Some had notes or messages on the back. Others were postcards with the name and address of the recipient as well as a photograph and brief message. Several languages were used: English, Yiddish, Russian and German. As she studied the contents of the package labelled 'Rosen family', she realised that what she was holding in her hands had the potential to open a window onto their lost family and their vanished way of life. With a selection of the photographs laid out in front of her she sat down and thought back to her childhood, and to the events which had alerted her to the existence of the Rosen family, their connection to her, and their ultimate fate.

A particularly vivid memory was the birth of her little cousin Tanya in 1948. Lara was then nine years old and she remembered it as a time of anxiety. The new baby, one of a twin, was very small and weak. Tanya's twin sister, Anna, died at birth and the family feared than Tanya too might not survive. Later, Aunt Ray explained that she had named her babies after her half-sisters, the daughters of her father's first marriage. As Lara knew that Jewish people did not name a child after a living relative, she understood that Tanya and Anna, her unknown half-aunts, must be dead. By this time she was aware that many family members had died during the war in Latvia. She remembered her mother and Aunt Riva packaging up shoes and warm clothing to send to Jessie, the only survivor of her mother's part of the family. Up until then she had thought that all her father's siblings had emigrated from Latvia to South Africa. Aunt Ray's explanation for her choice of names for her babies had told her that was not so. Now she knew that her father and his sisters had also lost close people. They had had half-sisters who had not emigrated, that those who had remained had not survived, and had probably been killed by the Nazis.

It was many decades later that she learned that one of those half-sisters, Tanya, had married and that she and her husband, Joseph Rosen, had had children, a boy and a girl.

None of them had survived the Holocaust. She still did not know how or where they had died. Knowledge of this part of her family remained very hazy in her mind even after the visit to Latvia. It was not until at least ten years after that visit and while working on the transcription and translation of Aunt Ray's girlhood diary that Lara came across entries which could have alerted her to the closeness and significance of the Riga branch of her family – but at the time these largely passed her by.

Aunt Ray, Rochele as she was then known, wrote her diary (in scrawled, almost illegible adolescent Yiddish) during the first part of 1928. It chronicles daily life in Varaklan, her interests, her friendships and family relationships. But the diary held so much of more immediate interest to Lara that the references to the family in Riga did not capture her imagination. There was information about Aunt Ray's life as a politically and culturally active young woman, about her relationships with her mother (Lara's grandmother), with her brother (Lara's father) and with her full sisters. These were people Lara had grown up with so it was all meaningful and interesting to her. Lara was gripped by the insights the diary provided into Aunt Ray's thoughts and feelings at this early stage of her life. Ray had always been her special aunt, and having this opportunity to get to know her – through her own words - as a very young woman was a great gift.

Lara chuckled over a colourful episode, in which Rochele describes the dull young man who hoped to marry Aunt Gessie, and the family's reaction to this suitor. People describe him as a 'steady young man'. But when Gessie encounters him she discovers that he has no conversation - everyone else is chatting but 'he sits there silently with his mouth open'. When invited to speak he responds "What is there to say?" The family invite him to eat – but he does not eat. Later Gessie, the suitor, her mother and the match-maker return from visiting his family – and he refuses to come in and sit down – he wants to go home. Tearfully, Gessie exclaims (in Russian) "He is not for me!" An uncle tries to persuade her to go ahead with the betrothal: "What matters is, he will be a good, devoted man, he will work day and night, a toiler" to which Gessie responds "No, I do not need a faithful slave! I need a life-companion with whom to go hand in hand in the struggle for life!!' Gessie had come home to Varaklan from Riga especially to meet this potential suitor and his family. When she arrived, she had regaled the rest of the family with accounts of her visits to the Russian theatre and cinema and Latvian opera. The contrast between her life in Riga and what would be in store for her if she agreed to this match could not be greater. But – a Jewish girl must get married and Gessie was already in her mid-twenties. Her mother was a widow with very limited financial resources, her only brother was many thousand miles away and there were younger sisters who also need to

be settled in life. Although there are comic elements, the episode is painful.

And mostly, the diary is serious. It describes Rochele's sorrow at the recent death of her sister Keila Mary and her distress at the absence of her brother, already by that time in South Africa. There are entries which give an account in a matter of fact way of the hardships of daily life. But the reader also learns about the books, journals and pamphlets which Rochele is reading and her reflections on these. In a different key there are entries which show the teenage romantic side of the young Rochele, such as when she describes herself with her closest girl-friend reading a romantic novel or discussing which boy and girl were showing interest in one another.
Rochele's story continued after the end of the diary entries which Lara read, as later in 1928 she went to Riga to study at the Ort School. In Riga she also worked underground for the Communist Party of Latvia. The following year, when the Latvian police arrested a number of her comrades including her boyfriend Etgar (who is mentioned in the diary in code), her mother hastily got papers and organised a passage to South Africa for her, and in 1929 Rochele left for Cape Town to join her brother and their sister Dora (Dverele in the diary). There Ray's life as a Trade Unionist and an activist in the South African freedom struggle began. She was just sixteen years old.

It is not entirely surprising, then, that until she started sorting out the papers and photographs in the box, the references to the family in Riga did not capture Lara's imagination. Except for Tanya and Anna, she had not even known their names. Even Gessie's comments about Russian theatre did not alert her to the significance of Riga and the family there. It was not until Lara started putting together material about her family's history, writing stories about their lives in Libau and Varaklan, and about their links with Riga that she found herself wanting to know more about her half-aunts and those connected to them. She wanted to know how they had died, but even more, she was curious about their lives. By then, her parents and all the aunts she had known from babyhood had died. Ben also knew hardly anything about them. Lara had lost her chance of finding out more about these people from those who had known them;

She read the previously overlooked material in the diary with attention, and also re-read her correspondence with Aunt Ray whose letters provided little snippets of information but there was not enough to bring them to life. They were hazy – names without personality. Now she did, at least, know their names. Tanya had married a businessman called Joseph Rosen. They had two children, Noah and Gitta.

Anna, Aunt Ray had told her in a letter, had a partner,

Abrashe. Both were communists and Ray was not sure whether they had married. She explained that it was not unusual amongst the communist comrades for people to have a partner but remain unmarried. She was certain, however, that Anna and Abrashe had not had children. While Rochele was writing her diary in early 1928, Gessie was living with the Rosens in Riga and working in Joseph's butcher's shop. Dverele was also in Riga, working in a clothing factory. Keila Mary had lived in Riga and also worked in a factory. So Riga was far more central to the lives of her family in the 1920s than Lara had previously appreciated. She could begin to imagine the four sisters, Gessie, Keila Mary, Dverele and Rochele in Riga and wonder whether her father had also spent time there. She read and translated an article Rochele had had published in an Ort student magazine in January 1929, in which she set out the ways in which students were exploited and their demands for better treatment. This gave Lara a sense of her life there as a student and activist.

And now, sitting at the dining room table with the photographs from Gessie's collection spread out in front of her, these previously unknown members of her family were becoming real people who led ordinary lives. There were photographs showing Tanya and Joseph's two children, Gitta and Noah, growing up from babyhood to young adulthood. She could see Tanya and Joseph themselves at

different stages of their life. She tried to identify which of the photos might show Anna and attempted to work out who the other people in the photos might be. Certainly one of the unnamed women must be Anna and another was probably Joseph's sister whose name she did not know. Looking at Tanya's benign expression she could imagine her as a kindly and loving mother, wife and sister. Joseph looks happy and settled. He is a well-to-do businessman and a devoted husband and father. The young Gitta has a mischievous smile and Noah looks eager and enthusiastic for life.

Amongst them, in the photos from the 1920s, Lara saw the familiar face of a young and attractive Aunt Gessie; She is pictured in the butcher's shop with Noah and Gitta; and in a family group on the beach at Jurmala, the resort near Riga. Of course she does not appear in the later photos, those from the 1930s, because by then she too had emigrated to South Africa, travelling with her mother and youngest sister Minnie. However, as some of the postcards had been sent to her from Riga in the period from 1930 to 1940, she is still part of the story. The postcards show that during those years – Noah and Gitta's growing up years - normal life for Jewish families had continued in Riga, and the close bond between the Riga and Cape Town (formerly Varaklan) branches of the family had been maintained, in large part because of Gessie's correspondence with them.

These photographs, this treasure which had been in Ben's loft for many years, and then in the dusty, neglected box she had been storing 'until Ben got better' had the potential to bring to life this almost hidden part of her family. She studied the photographs, deciphered messages written on the backs and began to piece together who the different people were. What was most striking about the photographs was the sheer ordinariness of the family life which they depicted. There was nothing strange or different about them and no hint of what was to come. These were moderately prosperous people who lived in a beautiful and cultured city and were able to take advantage of the amenities on offer. The photos could have been a record of a growing family living in an attractive city anywhere in the world.

As she gradually came to know the people in the photographs, Lara became more acutely aware of the depth of the tragedy that had engulfed them. She was also conscious of looking at the photos in two different ways. On the one hand she was trying to look behind the photographs to *see* the persons depicted as living beings, not just images, and trying to connect what she saw to what she had learned of Latvian Jewish life during this period. On the other hand she held in awareness what had happened to them. As she sat absorbed by this task she felt a shiver of excitement and a growing desire to write the story of Joseph Rosen and his

family - Joseph, an ordinary Jewish man, husband, father and business man - caught up in and destroyed by extraordinary, catastrophic events.

Of course, the story of Joseph Rosen can never be fully told, Lara reflected. There are too many gaps, too many unknowns. She was reminded of her seven year old sense of her family homeland and history being an old map with *Here Be Dragons* marking areas where no-one knows what's actually there. But whatever the gaps in the information I have about our family I must remember that there were so many other people who were destroyed without leaving a trace, where even their names are not known, she thought. At least we do know a little about our family members and we have the photographs. I can record something of their lives. There are so many other ordinary people: fathers, mothers, sons and daughters, sisters and brothers, friends, husbands and wives, lovers and sweethearts, whose stories will never be told.

Chapter 9: LAST REFLECTIONS: THE STORY OF JOSEPH ROSEN

JOURNAL ENTRY: SUMMER 2014

It is the summer of 2014, seventeen years since that journey to Latvia. Just three days – a life changing three days. I have been sitting at my desk staring at the blank computer screen, my mind full of images of Joseph and Tanya, Gitta and Noah in Riga as they appear in Gessie's collection of photographs from the 1920s and 1930s. Superimposed on these I see other images of Riga, the sinister, deeply disturbing images of 1941. There I see synagogues burning with people locked inside; an over-crowded ghetto where hunger, illness and death stalk the streets; and columns of exhausted and terrified people, the majority women, children and old people, being marched – no, driven with the aid of bayonets and guns - in the intense winter cold of November and December 1941 to the killing forest of Rumbula outside Riga. These two sets of images, such starkly different sets of images, contend with one another for dominance in my mind's eye.

How to deal with this? How can I grasp, and how can I convey what the Rosen family and so many others experienced in 1941, and begin to understand what they – and we – lost? Perhaps what I need to do is to focus first on the peaceful years. I have to go back; back before the destruction, back at least to their lives in the inter-war years. Only then will it be possible to begin to grasp the enormity of their trauma. To get even a glimmering – it can never be much more than this - we have to know who they were and what their lives were like before the destruction. So, despite the fact that there is only limited information I shall just have to do the best I can to tell their story with what I do know.

But first, an important statement – and that is that the most significant thing to say about Joseph Rosen is that he was a very ordinary man. He was not special in any way, other than the ways we are all special to ourselves and to those close to us. He was not a poet or a musician or a philosopher. He was not active in politics. He left no academic writings and he left no art works. He does not feature in the lists of Latvian Jews who made their mark on the world. He was simply a devoted husband and father and a small but successful business man. Had it not been for his connection to my family through his marriage to my half-aunt Tanya, I would have known nothing about him and he would have sunk into total obscurity along with tens of thousands of other Latvian Jewish men.

So now, to begin at the beginning - or at least at an arbitrarily chosen beginning. Or perhaps it is not entirely arbitrary. I begin at the point where I have some solid facts about several of the central people

in Joseph Rosen's life. I know, for example, that his future wife Tanya was born in 1895 and her older sister Anna – Joseph's future sister-in-law - in 1891. They were the daughters of my grandfather Shimon and his first wife Haya-Gitta. In the census of January 1897 (a Russian census, I believe) the residents of Varaklan include Haya-Gitta, then thirty-five years old and her two daughters, Tanya and Anna. Within the next few years Haya-Gitta died leaving Shimon a widower with two small motherless girls to bring up. Tanya by then was no more than five or six years old, Anna being about four years older. I have no information about the cause of Haya- Gitta's death but we can infer from the ages of her daughters at the time of the census that she probably did not die in childbirth. Perhaps it was cancer, like my mother's mother, or an infection. We will never know.

By 1902 Shimon had remarried, and with his second wife, Dobe Liebe, had six more children, one of whom was my father. Dobe Liebe took on the care of her husband's young daughters and brought them up with her own children. Her first child, Gessie, was born in April 1903. It is more than likely that as little girls at home in Varaklan, Tanya and Anna helped take care of Gessie, especially as another baby (my father) arrived just a year later. Certainly, as the photographs and post cards in Gessie's collection testify, there was a close bond between Gessie and Tanya, a bond forged in the Varaklan family's home, which survived Gessie's emigration from Latvia in 1930. It even survived the invasion of Latvia by the Red Army in 1940. Communication between Gessie and the Riga family only ceased - abruptly – when the Nazis invaded Latvia in 1941.

The next piece of factual information I have is that by the end of WW1 both Anna and Tanya were living in Riga. Anna was a flax trader and travelled between Germany and Latvia. She was also involved in communist activities. I have wondered whether she was influenced by the 1905 revolutionary fervour which swept across Russia and infiltrated swathes of the Russian Empire, including Latgale province in Latvia. Anna would have been 14 or 15 by that time, an impressionable and idealistic age. Her father had communist and socialist leanings and no doubt there were discussions at home - as well as journals, pamphlets and other writings. It seems that Anna never married, and certainly she did not have any children, but she had a partner, Abrashe, who was also a communist. Her younger half-sister, Ray, met Abrashe in Riga in 1928.

Tanya's life took a different trajectory. By the end of WW1 she had married Joseph Rosen, and their first child, Noah, was born in 1919. Joseph was the grandson of a Rabbi **(1)** of some repute, whose name he

shared. According to Ray, our family approved of the match as Tanya was herself the grandchild of a rabbi, and this meant that the two young people both came from families of good standing in the community. For this reason as well, it seems very likely, that Tanya's lack of a substantial dowry was not an obstacle to the marriage.

Towards the end of the First World War and for several years thereafter, Latvia experienced a chaotic period when the country struggled to attain its independence from both German and Russian hegemony. On the 18th of November 1918, one week after the armistice which brought WW1 to a close, and despite the fact that at that point most of the country was controlled by Germany, a Republic of Latvia was proclaimed in Riga. A fortnight later (on 1st December) the Red Army invaded. The conflict between Germany and Russia for control of Latvia did not cease with the end of the war, and it wasn't until 1920 that Latvia was able to assert its independence sufficiently to create a constitutional assembly that created a new democratic constitution. In 1921 Latvia was accepted as a member of The League of Nations endorsing the national longings of the Latvian people. Elections to its first Saeima (Parliament) were held in 1922.

The birth of an independent, democratic Latvia and the establishment of the new Rosen/Alexandrovitz family in Riga came about pretty well simultaneously.
Tanya and Joseph's first child Noah was born in the midst of the post-war chaotic situation, but by the time his sister Gitta – named in memory of her grandmother Haya-Gitta – arrived in 1921, Latvia was independent and a member of The League of Nations.

Close ties between the family in Riga and the family in Varaklan were maintained throughout the 1920s. These ties survived the emigration to South Africa – triggered by the death of Shimon in 1925

In 1927 my father had left for South Africa. Later that year Keila Mary, Dobe Liebe's third child, had died of natural causes. Rochele's 1928 diary chronicles her grief at the loss of her father and her beloved 'special' sister, and her sadness that her much loved only brother was so far away at such a difficult time. Then, in 1929, first Dverele (Dora) and later Rochele, fleeing from the Latvian police who wanted her for her underground communist activities, joined their brother in South Africa. The following year Dobe Liebe was able to obtain travel papers for and passage to South Africa for the remaining members

of the Varaklan family. This was no easy matter but she sold their house to raise the money for the fares, and travelled with her oldest daughter Gessie and the baby of the family, Minnele.

They were only just in time, as South Africa brought in an Immigration Quota Act in May 1930 which restricted immigration from several European countries, including Latvia, and was widely regarded as being an anti-Jewish measure. To grasp how easily the Varaklan family might have been split forever, we have only to look at Gessie's passport. This was issued in Riga on 14 March 1930 and was valid for just two months. Her visa for the Union of South Africa, issued by the British Passport Control Office in Riga on the 17th March states categorically that it "does not guarantee admission to South Africa and that the Union Immigrants Regulation Act will be rigidly enforced". Gessie, Dobe Liebe and Minnele reached Cape Town on 17th April 1930, just days before the new Quota Act came into force.

It was a close run thing, but the Varaklan branch of the family was able to stay together and build a new life in South Africa. Of the immediate family only Tanya and her husband Joseph, her children Noah and Gitta, her sister Anna and Anna's partner Abrashe remained in Latvia. There were, of course, many other family members – Joseph's sister and her family, aunts, uncles and cousins – but apart from a few photographs which I believe show Joseph's sister and family, I do not know anything about them. My father and aunts never spoke about the relatives left behind and it was only because Aunt Ray named her babies after Tanya and Anna that I had any idea of their existence.

Through the 1920s, while the Varaklan family was experiencing major loss and upheaval, Joseph and Tanya Rosen were living in Riga with their two small children. They were settled and comfortably off. Notwithstanding their rabbinical ancestry they were not a particularly observant family. All the evidence, including the photographs, points to a largely secular, although traditional, Jewish family. Tanya kept a kosher home; Noah had a Bar Mitzvah (there is a photograph of him wearing his prayer shawl); there were regular Friday night suppers at which other family members were welcome; they attended synagogue on the major festivals - but not much more was observed. The children's education and upbringing was aimed at fitting them for the modern, secular world rather than a life of pious devotion.

Both Joseph and Tanya were keen to ensure that the children had a good education. By this they meant an education based on languages, history, mathematics and science as well as music and the arts. They

were ambitious for their children and hoped that both would obtain professional qualifications in whatever fields of life interested them. They sent them to good schools and provided further enrichment at home in the form of music, languages and visits to the opera and ballet, all of which were costly but within Joseph's means.

Joseph was doubly fortunate in his ambitions for his son and daughter – not only did he have the financial resources to support his project but the timing was right. Riga was a modern, progressive city, and the children's growing up years coincided with Latvia's brief period of independence which ended with the Soviet invasion of June 1940.

The 1919 Latvian constitution was very liberal and, additionally, the Latvian National Council passed a general law on schools, and a law on the cultural autonomy of minorities. The Ministry of Education had special departments for the minorities and the Jewish department was well run. A broad network of free Hebrew and Yiddish medium schools was set up, and there were also fee paying Russian and German medium schools. Many Jews had German or Russian as their first language so this would be a natural choice for their children if the parents could afford it. But many Yiddish speaking families also chose to send their children to fee paying schools to give them the excellent start in life which a broad modern secular education could provide.

In addition to a choice of good schools for Jewish children, the liberal nature of the constitution meant that Jews were permitted to attend colleges and universities and to teach in these institutions. All Latvian citizens, men and women, Jews and non-Jews, enjoyed full enfranchisement – not just the vote, but also the right to stand for Parliament. In the first Latvian Saeima (parliament) of 1922 there were six Jewish delegates representing a number of Jewish parties of varying political persuasions. In many fields then from medicine and scholarship to engineering and politics there was no lack of opportunity for well-educated, talented young Jews.

The diversity of schools within the Jewish school system reflected the ongoing debate in the community about the best way to prepare the next generation for the future – a future which seemed assured in the new state. Some families looked towards tradition, and favoured Yiddish medium schools; others saw the future of the Jews as leaving old Europe and rebuilding their ancient homeland in Palestine.

Zionism was the Jewish equivalent of the Latvian nationalism which had inspired the fight for independence. The Zionist group wanted to revitalise Hebrew as a modern language and was the power behind the Hebrew medium schools.

But many, including the Rosens, were keen to provide their children with the means of entering and contributing to a modern European society. The German and Russian medium schools – gymnasia - which offered a more secular and assimilationist curriculum were popular with this group. Languages were emphasised. Regardless of the language of instruction all schools were required by the state to teach the Latvian language and history – an aspect of the Latvian nationalism in the new state - and most also taught Russian. In order to broaden their children's opportunities as much as possible, Joseph and Tanya chose to send their children to German medium schools where they also learned Latvian, Russian and French. At home they spoke Yiddish or German - German was Joseph's mother tongue while Tanya's was Yiddish. To further develop the children's facility with languages, during the long summer breaks they employed French or German speaking governesses.
Joseph was a devoted family man, committed absolutely to providing the best for his children. He was a modern man who believed that his daughter's education was as important as that of his son. He was also a kind and benevolent man who wished to be generous and helpful to his wife's relatives. Gessie's experience with his family and her fondness for them all are testimony to these qualities.

She was eighteen in 1921 by the time Noah and Gitta had arrived, and Joseph was affluent enough to be able to offer her a home with his family and a job in his shop. He knew that this would help everyone. The children were small and a close family member – a sister with whom Tanya shared a mutually affectionate relationship – would be a great help in caring for them. As the Rosens could afford to employ a nursemaid, Gessie's childcare responsibilities would not be onerous. The family in Varaklan, with their many children, needed financial help and a contribution from Gessie's wages would make a material difference to them. Gessie herself would benefit from living in a comfortable home in Riga, the 'Paris of the North', rather than in a small provincial town in the east of the country. She would meet many interesting people – perhaps even a marriage partner – and enjoy a much richer cultural life than that which was available in Varaklan. In Riga, the capital of Latvia with trade and cultural links to both Russia and Germany, concerts, opera, theatre and ballet were available. So the Varaklan family would be helped in a tactful way while Tanya and the children would also benefit.

Gessie was soon happily established as a member of the Rosen family, whilst gaining valuable experience in the shop. She remained a good business woman all her life. This was indeed a wonderful opportunity for a young woman. Gessie particularly enjoyed the Yiddish theatre, whose repertoire included classics such as Shakespeare and Chekhov translated into Yiddish. She earned enough to be able to dress well and to send money and gifts home to her mother and younger sisters in Varaklan. A photograph of Gessie taken in Riga in the early 1920s shows an attractive, well-dressed and assured young woman. Excellent rail and postal services which Latvia enjoyed, a legacy from Tsarist days, enabled her to visit her family regularly, as Varaklan was not far from a stop on the main rail line from Riga to Moscow. This was a straightforward journey, and the good postal service meant that keeping in touch by letter was also easy. A letter or parcel posted in Riga would reach its recipient in Varaklan the next day – and replies would arrive just as expeditiously.

One of the delights for Gessie of her new home was summer visits to Riga's beach resort in Yarmala (or Jurmala in Latvian). Most years Joseph and Tanya rented a dacha for the summer, and Tanya and the children spent many weeks there. When they were little, the nursemaid accompanied them. As they grew older the nursemaid was replaced by a governess, generally a French or German speaking young woman, and the children were expected to converse with her in her own language. Joseph joined them for part of the time, and Gessie too had time off from the shop to enjoy the sea air and the bathing. A love of the seaside remained with her all her life and visiting beaches was a delight she continued to enjoy until old age. A vivid childhood memory of mine is of going with her to one of the beaches of the Cape Peninsula and witnessing her pleasure in the bathing. And I remember her instructing me to breathe deeply of the fresh, health-giving salty air! But it was many decades before I realised that sea bathing had been one of her joys as a young woman in Latvia.

In the mid 1920s, some years after Gessie had become established with the Rosen family in Riga, her father, my grandfather Shimon, died, and the family were left without their primary bread-winner. By then, my father, who was the next oldest of my grandmother's family, was serving in the Latvian army. The two next oldest sisters, my aunt Keila Mary and my aunt Dora also left Varaklan and lived in Riga. Dora had a job as a seamstress in a clothing factory in Riga and lived with the family. She too helped with the children. Neither Gessie nor Dora ever had children of their own, but they were always interested in and devoted to their nieces and nephews – myself, my brother and our cousins. As a child and young person I did not realise that we were not the first nieces and nephews to benefit from their

love and devotion. Looking back, I am struck by the way they did not allow their inevitable sadness at these losses to get in the way of their pleasure in all of us.

Keila Mary, the sister who died in 1927 at the age of 21 following an appendix operation worked in a factory in Riga, but I don't know where she lived, or what her relationship was with the Rosen family. I only know that she lived and worked in Riga from a comment in Ray's diary about Keila Mary having been one of the exploited factory workers in Riga. She also told me that Keila Mary, about eight years her senior, had been her special sister, who cared for her when she was little.

In contrast to the troubled situation that the Varaklan family found itself in in the 1920s, life for the Rosens in Riga was good. They had a comfortable home and interesting cultural activities, the seaside and forest walks were all available. Noah and Gitta were growing up and were lively and full of fun. Although some of the photographs in Gessie's collection, especially the later ones from the 1930s, show quite serious young people, there are several early ones where the mischief – accompanied in the case of Gitta by dimples – is evident. The Rosen children were also developing skills and interests. Noah enjoyed his bicycle and loved building and making things – all good preparation for his future career as an engineer. Gitta was more interested in people, and declared her ambition of entering the medical profession early on. She also enjoyed languages and in 1930, when she would have been about nine or ten years old, sent a photograph of herself with an affectionate message (in German) on the back to Gessie by now in Cape Town. A good future for the children seemed assured.

Throughout these years Anna too was living in Riga, but we hear little about her. However, in 1928 Ray studied at the Ort Technical School in Riga and was in regular contact with her sisters and half-sisters. In a letter to me dated 1997 Ray says that Anna and her partner Abrashe (Ray commented that they may have been married, but she didn't know – comrades often just lived together) took her to concerts, but because they were communists they did not come to Tanya's Friday night Shabbat suppers. There, Ray often met Joseph's sister and brother-in-law – a statement which provides several pieces of information. It confirms that although Joseph and Tanya were secular Jews, Tanya kept a traditional home where Friday night gatherings were open to family members who wished to attend. It also tells us that Ray herself, despite being a communist, often went to those suppers. This may indicate some open-mindedness on Ray's part, or simply that she was studying and living away from home on very small

stipend and was glad to have a decent meal once a week! And it tells us that Joseph had a sister who was married.

Throughout the 1920s, therefore, Riga was a significant axis in the lives of my father's sisters. However, while the Varaklan family, one or two at a time, were relocating to South Africa primarily for economic reasons (my father couldn't get work) and also for political reasons (Aunt Ray was wanted by the Latvian police because of her Communist activities) for Joseph Rosen and his immediate family: wife, sister-in-law Anna, son, daughter, sister and brother-in-law – there was no reason to leave Latvia. Why leave Riga where they enjoyed a good standard of living with many cultural activities and where there were excellent educational opportunities for the children? They were not having economic difficulties nor did they have dangerous political affiliations.

Tanya and Joseph were sad to have to part with Tanya's half siblings and step mother – especially Gessie who was really integrated into their family. But they understood their reasons for leaving Latvia and promised to keep in touch by letter. Nonetheless it was a major separation. It is hard now to remember what it was like in an era before air travel and long before global communications. Letters were the only means of communicating – even telephones were a relative rarity and international calls were out of the reach of ordinary people. And because of the distance and the necessity of mail going by sea, it took about a month for letters between Riga and Cape Town to reach their destination.

After the Varaklan family had all left, the Riga family enjoyed ten more relatively peaceful and productive years. They had some concerns when in 1936 Karlis Ulmanis, a fiercely nationalistic leader, took control of the Latvian Saeima through a bloodless coup and declared himself President. But the Jews were not particularly threatened, anti-Semitism was not overt and Jews from other parts of Europe saw Latvia as a safe haven and sought refuge there. Besides, Noah and Gitta had ambitions to study and enter the professions - engineering and medicine respectively – and there was no bar to their admission onto suitable courses of study. Each began training for their chosen career towards the end of the 1930s.

Going back to 1930: by spring of that year the last of the Varaklan family had emigrated, and they and the Riga family were now separated, never to be reunited. But knowledge of the Riga family does not end there as Gessie maintained a correspondence with the Rosen family throughout the decade. Her

collection of photos includes some from this time, as well as those from the 1920s when Noah and Gitta were small and she was with them. And of course Gessie herself features in some of these earlier photos, whereas the later ones had been sent to her by members of the Rosen family. Some of these had affectionate greetings on the back, such as the one from Gitta, mentioned above.

This is a remarkable record of the family in the years leading up to their destruction. The most striking thing about these photographs is the sheer ordinariness of daily life which they chronicle. There are snapshots of the children playing or dressed up for a party. In one, Gitta has huge bows in her hair. And there are more formally composed groups, such as any family might take to record a special event.

There is a happy innocence in these photos and I believe that they are testimony to the family being completely unsuspecting of the horrors to come. The photographs show us elements of life in Riga and also chart Noah and Gitta growing up over these twenty years.
When war erupted in Europe in 1939, the family was still not unduly concerned. This was a European war, they thought, and Hitler's actions were targeted at the Jews of Germany, Austria and other central European countries. The Molotov-Ribbentrop mutual non-aggression pact, they believed, was simply a guarantee that the Soviets would not enter the war. Ordinary citizens, of course, did not know about the secret protocol which delineated Soviet and Nazi "spheres of influence" in Eastern Europe, with Latvia and the other Baltic States falling under the Soviet "sphere of influence". Nor did they have any idea that Hitler's murderous intentions towards the Jews stretched far beyond central Europe. After all, anti-Semitism was not a new phenomenon, and Jewish communities throughout Eastern Europe had survived such outbreaks before.

By the time of the last photos taken in Riga the Rosen children are young adults, coming ever closer to destruction but wholly oblivious of what their fate is to be. It is true that in the last photograph I have of Joseph with Tanya and their children, taken in October 1940, they look less happy than in earlier photographs. They may well have been conscious by then of the risks posed to their family by Soviet rule, but they could have had no idea that the Nazis would soon invade. On the contrary, the general view of the Jewish community was that Soviet control of the country, in conjunction with the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, would keep them safe from the Germans

It is indeed the case that things had begun to change in June 1940. While the eyes of the world were on the Nazi invasion of France, the Soviets invaded Latvia. The Soviet authorities immediately liquidated independent Latvian administration systems and replaced these with Soviet systems manned by trusted Soviet personnel. While they were in control, about 34,250 Latvian citizens, both Jews and non-Jews, were rounded up and sent into exile in Siberia. There were some families amongst the deportees, but in the main they were able-bodied men, who could be used as slave labour in the Gulag. Most of the deportations took place on the night of June 13-14, 1941, nearly a year after the Soviet invasion. On that one night in June about five thousand Latvian Jews were deported along with many thousands of non-Jewish Latvian citizens. This was just days before the Nazis broke their pact with the Soviets on 22 June 1941 by mounting Operation Barbarossa and invading across a wide front of Soviet occupied territory.

Many of the deportees were people who were deemed to be 'politically undesirable elements'. In the main these were small business people, members of the bourgeoisie, people who owned property and paid for private education for their children. Joseph Rosen, owner of a moderately prosperous shop, was an obvious target and he was one of the five thousand Jews who was arrested and sent to Siberia on this mass transport. Gessie claimed that the family had been betrayed by their German governess. We will never know whether or not this was true.

The deportations were a personal tragedy for the Rosen family and many other families. But to make matters worse for the Jewish community in particular, the Jewish group included many leaders of the community. Kaufman comments that "a considerable segment of the Jewish intelligentsia, among them the Jewish representatives in the Latvian Parliament", were on this transport. (Max Kaufman in *The Jews in Latvia*, p 352). Kaufman continues 'Most of these deportees died in Siberian camps on account of the sub-human conditions there ...' However, some survived and one of the ironies of the Second World War as it affected Latvia, is that a number of Jews were 'saved' from the Nazi genocide because the Soviet occupiers had sent them into exile just before the Nazi invasion.' This is what happened to Sylva Darel who recounts her and her family's experience of exile in her autobiography – 'A Sparrow in the Snow'.[5] It is also what happened to Joseph. Exile in Siberia was no picnic – as Kaufman comments although 'some survived most died'. Joseph was one of those who survived.

[5] 'A Sparrow in the Snow' 2002 (translated from Russian)

Just eight days after this transport had left Riga, the Nazis began their attack on the Soviet Union. By early July 1941 they were in full control of Latvia, and had already begun their programme of mass murder. The burnings of the synagogues in Riga took place on 4 July 1941, less than three weeks after the mass deportations. The Jewish community,
traumatised by having just lost a substantial number of its civic, religious, professional and business leaders, was ill prepared to respond to this catastrophic situation. Tanya, Noah and Gitta were amongst many caught up in this. Like many other families they had experienced the shock and distress of Joseph's arrest and deportation, and were now themselves at risk of imminent destruction. Their entire family, including Joseph's sister and brother-in-law, Anna and her partner Abrashe – who as Jews and Communists, were doubly targets for the Nazis - was threatened.

Some young people, including Noah, now an engineer, fled to the forests and joined up with retreating Soviet army units, hoping to be able to conduct guerrilla warfare against the invading and murderous Nazis. When, very quickly, the Jewish ghetto was set up in Riga, Gitta, already advanced in her medical training, was fully occupied trying to provide medical help for the Riga Jews who were deprived of their homes and possessions and forcibly housed in the grossly over-crowded ghetto.

In late November and early December 1941, two major *aktions* took place. Most of the Jews remaining in the ghetto, Tanya, Anna and Gitta among them, were marched to the Rumbula Forest. There they were amongst those made to strip and put their clothing, shoes and valuables in piles. They were then lined up in front of huge pits which had been dug by Russian prisoners of war and shot, line after line, so that the most recently shot fell onto the previous victims. It was known as the 'sardine method'. The December *aktion* was the second largest massacre in a single day in World War II. Noah too lost his life in the forest, but had perhaps been able to inflict some damage on the German army before being killed. I hope so. Abrashe's fate, and that of Joseph's sister and her family is unknown, beyond the fact that none survived.

The irony is that Joseph escaped the horror of Rumbula because of the action of the Soviet invaders. Remarkably, he survived the Gulag. From what is known about the conditions on the transports to the camp, and about life in the Gulag it is clear that survival must have required extraordinary resolution and fortitude. But the photograph of Joseph taken less than a year before his deportation shows a

middle-aged, plump, bespectacled man, a man who is accustomed to good food and good living. Looking at this photograph and trying to imagine the rigours and intense cold of a Gulag camp in Siberia, it is hard to conceive how he survived. I can only conjecture that he kept himself sane through memories of his family, and that it was his determination to survive - in the hope of one day being reunited with his beloved wife and children - that kept him going. From when he was taken from the family until after the end of the war there had been no communication with them, no letters or news to keep him going. Just silence – and hope.

Sometime after the war ended – I do not know the precise date - he was released from the camp and returned to Riga. I am told that on his return he 'ran about in Riga looking for them'. When he found out what had happened to all of them – Tanya, Gitta, Noah, Anna, Abrashe, his sister and brother-in-law - he 'lost his head' and died soon afterwards. There are two versions of how his life ended. One has him suffering a heart attack – perfectly plausible as the unbearable information must have broken his heart both literally and figuratively. The alternate, equally plausible, version is that he went mad and committed suicide.

The story of Joseph's death was conveyed to me in a letter from Ray, the same letter in which she told me about her meetings with members of the family in Riga in 1928. Ray was able to visit the Soviet Union in the mid 1960s during the years of her exile from South Africa, as a representative of the (banned) Communist Party of South Africa. In Riga she met some former comrades whom she knew from her days in the communist underground. They were people who had survived by fleeing across the Russian border with the retreating Soviet army and returned to Riga after the war.

She also met a family member - an aunt who was a sister-in-law of her mother; from her aunt Ray learned about Joseph's deportation and the fate of Tanya, Anna, Gitta and Noah. From her she also learned the tragic story of Joseph's death. She wrote this to me in response to my asking her – after our visit to Latvia in 1997 – if she knew anything about the fate of her two half-sisters and their families. From her former comrades she also learned something of the mood in Riga both during the Soviet occupation and after the Nazi invasion.

The story of Joseph Rosen, incomplete though it inevitably is, is both one of the saddest stories I know, and at the same time, just one out of tens of thousands of equally tragic stories. Before the summer of

1940 the Jewish community in Riga numbered approximately forty-four thousand and in Latvia as a whole about ninety- four thousand people. By the time of the Wannsee Conference in January 1942, the Nazi estimate of the number of Jews in Latvia was three thousand five hundred – some of whom may have been German Jews transported east after the Latvian Jews had been massacred. When the Soviets retook Latvia in 1944, the number of Jews in Riga was pitifully small, just one hundred and fifty people. These figures alone give us a sense of the huge number of untold tragic stories, and the scale and scope of the devastation of Latvian Jewish life.

The irony of Joseph's story is particularly heart-rending. Having been 'saved' from the Nazis by the Soviets, and having survived the Gulag, it was not possible for him to go on living with the knowledge of the terrible destruction wreaked on his own family and the whole of the Latvian Jewish community.

Chapter 10: ON THE SHIP

The last of the streamers tying them to land broke away, leaving tiny bright trails in the air and on the water, the hooters gradually died away, and the Union Castle liner, flanked by tugs, moved out into Table Bay and headed towards the South Atlantic ocean beyond.

Standing on deck with Mother, Lara clutched her handbag tightly, feeling a mixture of excitement and apprehension. In the bag, as well as their essential travel documents, were Mother's sleeping pills and a letter from her psychiatrist to a colleague in London. "Just in case you need help" he'd said. Mother's depression had struck again while they were preparing for the long-awaited trip, and she'd had to spend some time in a nursing home. She was better now, but not really well. Lara had wondered whether they'd have to cancel the trip, but Dad and Ben had persuaded her to carry on. "She'll cheer up once you're on the way" said Ben, hopefully. "It would be terrible for her not to be able to go now; she's been waiting and waiting to see her brothers in America for so long now."

So Lara, despite her trepidation, had carried on with all the preparations, packing for herself and Mother, making sure their travellers' cheques were ready for collection at the bank and then safely stowed in her handbag, together with their travel tickets and the hotel booking for the few days they'd be London, and checking and re-checking the precious passports. It was only a few years since Mum and Dad had been naturalised as South African citizens and entitled to passports, so no-one in their family took the possession of them for granted.

And now they were on the liner, on the first stage of their journey to New York, looking back at the coastline. The view was dominated by the bulk of Table Mountain, set in its surrounding supporting peaks with the city and suburbs filling the lower slopes. Lara could see Lion's Head and the Twelve Apostles stretching away in the distance. It was a breezy day in early Autumn, and the mountain had its characteristic 'tablecloth' of clouds wreathing its flat top. The ship began to gather momentum and movement as they met the South Atlantic rollers and it took some effort to stay balanced, It was late afternoon by now, and the breeze, heightened by the speed of the ship made it rather cool on deck.

"Shall we go to our cabin and unpack before supper?" Lara asked Mother, who agreed in rather a dull and unresponsive way. Lara's stomach churned. This did not auger well for Mother's state of mind. They made their way through the unfamiliar passageways, and after a few wrong turnings and having to ask a passing stewardess for help, located their tiny cabin. There was no porthole - they had the cheapest of the two-berth cabins - and Lara's upper bunk was reached via a little ladder. But there was space to hang a few things in the tiny wardrobe, and to put some underwear and a jumper in the little cupboard. There were hooks for coats and dressing gowns. They had their own washbasin, and there was a shower and toilet just along the corridor. They stowed their suitcases, still containing quite a lot of clothes, under the lower bunk, and put toothbrushes and soap on the shelf above the washbasin. There was a rail to stop things flying off when the ship pitched and rolled. They would have to take it in turn to wash and dress, as there wasn't enough floor space for both of them.

If it hadn't been for mother's subdued state, Lara would have enjoyed exploring the cabin, and seeing how beautifully it had been designed to make maximum use of every inch. There was no wasted space. Every nook and cranny was utilised for a purpose. There was even a little table which folded down when not in use, so you could spread out make-up, or write a letter, and then tuck it out of the way in order to get in or out of the bunks.

Lara was twenty and had never been out of South Africa, so going by ship to England and then to America was a big adventure. Dad and Ben had pointed out how lucky Lara was to have such an opportunity to travel and see something of the world at her age. But Lara felt weighed down by the responsibility of looking after Mother; there was no way she could have travelled on her own - this trip was possible only because Lara was going with her

And Lara knew just how important it was for her mother at last to see her three brothers, the brothers who had left 'home' - Latvia - early in the century – one before she was born and only one of whom she remembered at all. Lara's teenage years had been infused by her mother's longing, at least once in her life, to meet these mythical brothers.

Now there was no turning back. They were on the liner, the streamers tying them to land were coiled away or broken. Lara had sole responsibility, on board a ship, for a mother who had only recently been suicidally depressed. For the length of the voyage she had no-one to turn to for help or advice. She felt very alone and very burdened.

Things improved a little during supper. Mother cheered up a bit, and started talking to her next door neighbour at the table. Lara overheard her explaining that they were on their way to New York, via England, to visit her three brothers, and also a niece and nephew who had settled in North America. "What a wonderful thing" the woman exclaimed "and what a marvellous opportunity for your daughter to travel."

The knot of tension in Lara's stomach eased slightly and she too began to chat to her next door neighbour. Alice was a girl about Lara's age, also travelling with her mother, an Englishwoman who had married a South African, and they were taking the journey for Alice to meet her English family. "I'm really looking forward to the voyage" exclaimed Alice. She said there would be deck games, dancing, fancy dress competitions, and swimming in the pool on the top deck. " I hope there's some decent talent. I can't wait for mother to find herself a bridge set so I can go off and enjoy myself."

How marvellous it must be just to be thinking about having fun, thought Lara, while outwardly agreeing with Alice that there was a lot to look forward to on the voyage. Her own attention had been so taken up by Mother's needs, and her responsibility to organise and look after everything, that the possibility of having fun on the voyage hadn't actually occurred to her until now. But perhaps Mother would make friends, and that would ease her burden.

By the end of supper, the ship was rolling and pitching in the big seas of the South Atlantic, and many people were looking a bit pale and queasy. Lara and her mother had taken their seasickness tablets earlier, but even so they were both affected. "Let's get something warm to put on, and go out on deck for some fresh air, and then get an early night." suggested Lara. On deck, Lara noticed how Mother looked down at the foamy waves far below, and suddenly she felt afraid. It would be only too easy to climb through the railings on a dark night when no-one was looking and fall into the sea. She knew she'd have to keep hold of her mother's sleeping pills. Looking down into the water, she thought that this was another danger that hadn't occurred to her.

Back in the cabin, when she was alone for a few minutes, Lara counted out mother's nightly allowance of sleeping pills, put the rest in her own dressing gown pocket, and later, when they were both ready for bed, slipped the bottle of pills surreptitiously under her pillow and climbed up into her bunk. In the morning, again when mother was out of the cabin, she transferred the

pills back to her handbag. This became her routine for the whole fourteen days and nights of a voyage which rapidly took on nightmare qualities.

The fun which Alice had prophesied was only possible for Lara in rare moments when she knew Mother was safe - sitting in a lounge with a book, or, even better, playing cards. Even so, she checked up on her every few minutes. It was possible to play deck tennis or quoits, which Lara really enjoyed, on a section of deck just outside the lounge which Mother like to sit in. Lara could play with some of the young people she had met, and also glance in at the window every so often to make sure her mother was still there. In between games she'd pop in to say "hullo" and see if Mother needed anything. If she looked at if she was getting restless - one of the odd things about her depression, Lara had noted, was that she'd be very withdrawn and then want to move about in a restless, almost aimless way - Lara would suggest that they had a walk together.

During those walks there was only one topic of conversation, if you could call it that. It was the familiar theme that had accompanied many walks during the long years of her mother's illness. Mother told Lara how bad she felt, and asked Lara what she could do to feel better. Lara tried to make helpful suggestions, but none of her suggestions were welcomed. Then mother told Lara how worried she was that she would be too ill to meet her brothers properly. She explained, again and again, that she didn't want anyone to know how ill she was so she was making a huge effort to talk to fellow travellers, and to join in card games, but she didn't enjoy any of it. In New York, if they ever got there, and she was ill, she wouldn't want her brothers, or their families to know that she was ill, so she wouldn't be able to see them and the journey would be wasted.

After each of those walks, Lara felt drained and despairing. But the walks together were better than the times when mother slipped away from Lara's almost constant vigilance and went walking on her own. On a few occasions, when Lara checked the lounge after a game of deck tennis, and realised her mother was no longer sitting there reading her book, her heart raced

with fear. She paced the decks looking for her, asking people they knew, as casually as she could, whether they'd seen her. Each time she imagined her mother falling, falling into the ocean far below, never to be seen again.

Many decades later, in an exploration of Lara's tendency to need to keep control of things, and her fearfulness if someone was late for an appointment or later home than expected, her therapist asked Lara what would happen if she relaxed her vigilance and let things go out of control. Without pause for thought, Lara said, "My mother would die." Later, she identified that voyage as the experience which had embedded in her the belief that without her vigilance someone close, someone dear to her, would die. "I run disaster scenarios in my head" she said. "As soon as someone is ten minutes later than they should be, I'm imagining they've been in a car crash, or had a heart attack, or fallen down a mountain. But if I'm in an actually dangerous situation with the person I care about, I don't feel particularly frightened. It's only when I don't know what's happening to them that I get anxious. It's as if my presence, or even my knowledge of where they are keeps them safe." She paused to think, then added "I guess there's almost a magical quality about my belief. It's clearly not rational, although it has its roots in the very reasonable and rational fear I experienced on that ghastly trip."

Day by slow day the voyage continued. As they approached and then sailed through the equator the heat increased, and everyone was advised to take salt tablets. 'Crossing the line' ceremonies were duly enacted, with one of the ship's crew dressed up as Father Neptune, and ducking all the pretty young girls in the swimming pool on the top deck. Lara watched and took part in everything she could, while staying constantly on the alert for her mother's whereabouts. She knew that her state of mind was deteriorating and worried about how they would manage the next stage.

After docking at Southampton, they had to catch a train to London, find their hotel, and after three days take a train back to Southampton to get the transatlantic liner to New York. With mother increasingly needing to be encouraged, helped and even badgered to do anything at all:

get dressed, eat, have a shower, read a book, or sit in the lounge - never mind talk to people - Lara wondered how on earth she could take care of her, and also make sure they had all their baggage and caught the right train.

In later years Lara was unable to remember anything except little flashes about that stage of their journey. She recalled being in London, but not how they had physically got there. She remembered at last reaching the hotel and their bedroom, where, thank goodness, there was a telephone.

"What shall I do?" Lara asked Ben when she finally managed to get through to him on the phone. "She's very depressed, as bad as the time when she went into the nursing home. It got worse and worse as the journey went on, and now she's hardly sleeping, even with the pills - yes, I'm keeping them on me all the time. She's eating very little, and she keeps saying how terrible she feels - you know what it's like. I don't know what to do. Should we just try and get a flight straight home? We daren't risk another long sea voyage. It's too dangerous with her in this state. We certainly can't go straight on to New York with her so depressed, even if we were to fly. She'd refuse to see anyone."

Ben listened, but didn't seem to comprehend just how bad things were. He suggested that Lara contact the psychiatrist for whom she had a letter of introduction, and see what he recommended. "Don't come straight home" he said. "She'd never get over it if she doesn't manage to see her brothers despite getting so far. Try to see what you can do to get her help in London so you can go on. You might have to postpone the next stage, but that's better than giving up now. Once you get to New York, Taube will help you. See what you can do, and phone again tomorrow. You'd better get on to Cooks straight away and tell them you might not be able to sail this week because of illness."

Lara duly phoned Cooks, and then phoned the psychiatrist's office. She made an appointment for mother to see him the next morning. He had had a letter from his colleague in Cape Town,

so he knew the background. Then she phoned her cousin Taube. in New York, and for the first time in this appalling fortnight felt there was someone who understood how difficult things were and cared about how she felt and what she was going through. "You must do whatever seems best to you" said Taube. "You're the only one who knows just how things are. See the psychiatrist tomorrow morning; then decide what to do next. Of course I'm longing to see you both, but only if it's possible for you to manage. If you are able to continue, once you get here I can take care of her so you can have a break - I'll bet you need it badly! But you'd have to get here, and then there's the long journey back to Cape Town to think about. Call me tomorrow when you've seen the psychiatrist."

Chapter 11: Afterword, by Debra

Sadly, Mum died before she could share any more of her stories and reflections with us.

In Chapter 3 she describes how she and her Mother, (my Granny) did indeed reach America; she told me what a hugely important experience this was for her mother, to at last be able to meet one of her brothers, and to be reunited with the two brothers who had left Latvia when she was young.

Taube had been pivotal in making this possible, and on the last occasion that I met her, in February of 2020, I told her so. I had always admired Taube, for her freethinking independence and her generosity of spirit, and over occasional meetings over the years I had tried to convey my admiration, only to be met with a self-deprecating shrug, which to me was the epitome of sophistication.

So, on that February morning, my last meeting with Taube, I spelled out how her open hearted, open minded ability to listen and support had given Mum the space she needed to talk things through, and to find the clarity and strength to travel on to America with her mother. Again, that iconic shrug and dismissal – 'it was nothing' – but this time I stressed how important, indeed how pivotal, her support had been, and this time I think she really received my gratitude.

My mother, Zelda Alexander, has bequeathed to us a rich legacy of history in this blend of story, journaling and poetry. To complete her collection I leave her with the last word, a delightful pastiche on John Masefield's Sea Fever.

Chapter 12: Poem

CHARNEY FEVER

I must go down to Charney again
to the Chavurah's Retreat
And all I ask is the Manor House
and a car that's safe and fleet
And the teatime trolley and comfy
beds and the wild birds flying
And davenning* on shabbat morn
and the bonds of friendship tying

I must go down to Charney again
for the call of the Ruach retreat
Is a strong call and a clear call
that we may not defeat
And all I ask is a sunny day
with time to shmooze outdoors
And the children, and the chatter
and the swallows' calls.

I must go down to Charney again
to the thoughtful retreat dream
To the dancers' way and the singers' way
where the talk's like a flowing stream
And all I ask is a caring sharing
with a trusted Ruach friend
And a safe return, sweet memories when our time has got to end.

Zelda Alexander, 23 July 2005

* participating in a service.