

A Portrait of Bella and Life in a Shtetl by Glenda Levitt

This is about a remarkable woman, 93-year-old Bella Spiro, maiden name Roskofsky. Meeting Bella in Toronto in 2004 was a memorable occasion which we initiated on our visit to Mia, our daughter, who was living in Canada at the time. We had been told about her by her dear friend Sonia Lever whom we knew in Kfar Saba, Israel where we live. Sonia and Bella were lifelong friends from their school days in the village, Plungyan, Lithuania.

We met Bella, almost blind, charming, charismatic, highly intelligent, with a phenomenal memory, great sense of humour and with a delightful and strong voice of a young girl. We both felt privileged to be in the presence of a magnetic personality.



Bella Spiro in Toronto in 2004

Bella was born in 1904. Her parents, Eda and Chaim had a dairy farm, but moved to the town of Plunge, Plungyan in Yiddish, when she was 4 years old. Then in 1929, Bela moved with her family from the Shtetl, Plungyan to the city, Memel.



Bella as a Scout in Plungyan

We were delighted to discover a family connection. Bella's great grandmother and my husband Abel's great grandmother were sisters.

Bella opened a window in our minds to create a glimpse of an authentic picture of life in a Shtetl in those early 1920 years. She dispelled our pre conceived images of religious bearded men, women with scarved head coverings, cobbled streets and poverty.

Bella described her life in the Plungyan Shtetl. Most of the houses in the Shtetl (village) were low wooden little houses that expanded according to the needs of the family.

Public life in Plungyan, as in every other village, was amazingly intensive. There were religious, educational and welfare services, funded mainly by the wealthier members of the community.

There was education for all ages in Yiddish and Hebrew, for religious and for secular. There were well run voluntary organizations and many varied youth movements and sports clubs.

In Plungyan she lived diagonally opposite the Levitt's, Abel's grandparents, Aba and Sheina, at number 10 Telsai Gasse/Street. She told us that at the age of about 16, her family were in financial difficulties and she faced having to leave school. The two young Levitt brother's Note and Yisroel, who lived opposite with their families in Number 13, in semi-detached houses with a shared large back yard, offered her a part time job.

Farmers from the surrounding areas would bring in their flax and flax seed to town for selling. Monday and Thursday were market days. Note and Yisroel had farmers come with their flax which was weighed in their back yard. The Levitt brothers built her a little room attached to the kitchen with a window from which Bella would pay the farmers who presented her with a note for payment, calculated by the weight of their product. Bella was very appreciative of their help. With the money she earned, she was able to complete her schooling at the Tarbut High School in Plungyan.

Bella remarked that the Levitt's had a very lovely vegetable garden at the back of their house and while she was still at school, the family had electricity installed into their home. Before, the home had been lit with candles.

She also described Abel's aunt Hena, as very elegant, very attractive; she had a presence about her and a very nice personality. Hena also smoked, not all that common for a woman in those days.

There were many youth movements, Maccabi, Zionist, Leftist and Communist which was active, but underground. Many members of the communist movement were arrested, all were Jews, as in the 1920's there were no non-Jews living in the center of the town.

Bella was very active in the Scout movement.

Her scout master was Zvi Brik, Aharon Barak's father. Aharon Barak is a retired Judge President of Israel. The organizers of the Tzofim / Scout movement were Zvi Brik and Zalman Levy, the brother of Sonia Lever whom I mentioned at the beginning of the story. Bella described the scout meetings as being of a very high intellectual level on many topics including Zionism. Much of their discussions took place in Hebrew which was of a very high level having been educated at the Tarbut High School. She also emphasized that in spite of the high level of discussions and debates, they had a great deal of fun.

They were all, Chalutzim, Zvi Brik was in charge of issuing permits to go to Palestine. In 1932 she left Lithuania to spend 18 months in Palestine. She mentioned that during that time she once had tea with David Ben-Gurion. The Palestine experience was common among many of her friends.

Bella described a typical Friday evening when all the parents were in Synagogue while most of the youngsters gathered outside. One evening after the family Shabbat meal, the Scout group as usual, gathered at someone's home.

No-one had realized that a group of parents, including hers were visiting a house on the opposite side of the street with a clear view through the windows and saw the youngsters, including Bella smoking. Bella laughed as she recollected the scandal that resulted. It was just part and parcel of life in the Plungyan Shtetl. Bella created a vivid picture for us of Jewish life at that time, not stereotypical, but of a community that was active and vibrant. Other than technology, no different to lives of the present time.

In 1936 Bella left Lithuania for Rhodesia.

She told us that she married and her husband refused to have children. When she found herself pregnant in Rhodesia, her husband rejected her as she refused to give up her baby. Bella moved to Israel with her son where she was extremely happy. Mervyn, as an adult was head hunted by a Canadian company and moved with Bella and his family to Toronto. She shared with us her sadness as she missed her life in Israel.

Bella enriched us with her personality, knowledge and by creating a genuine informative, descriptive picture of Shtetl life in the 1920's.

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