

LISTEN AND LEARN by Beulah Gross

Do you, as I did, have someone tell you stories about family and life in the old country when you were a child? Did you, as I did, sometimes find it difficult to separate truth from fiction? Did you, as I did, sometimes regard the stories as bobbe-myseh? Have you ever thought to research any of the stories? Believe me, there is a wealth of information in many of these stories of value to genealogists. Let me give you a case in point.

My beloved maternal grandmother, Henny Ausbruch, the only grandparent I ever knew, spent hours regaling me with tales of her childhood in Libau (now Liepaja), Lithuania and her later life in South Africa. Her stories were full of names of her friends and relatives who were, to me, shadow people despite Granny's often amusing details about their lives and loves. Granny also wrote short stories in old ledgers and on scrap paper, all of which I still have, and was always ready to tell me children's stories I thought she'd made up. I realised later that they were stories her mother and grandmother had told her.

So, when she told me the story of her arrival in Port Elizabeth, South Africa by ship in the middle of a storm, I was fascinated, but sure that her vivid imagination had embellished it. Still, she often repeated the story, telling me that she and other passengers had reached shore via a lifeboat which they'd been loaded into by some sort of flying fox contraption. She always giggled when she told this part as she said she'd enjoyed it so much that she wanted to do it again whereas other passengers were terrified and sick. This made me believe even more strongly that her imagination was running away with her. She also sometimes said, more or less in passing, that she'd had her 19th birthday on board the ship.

My belief was proved wrong when, in 1992, I mentioned the storm in a letter to my South African genealogy researcher in Port Elizabeth, Liz E. Imagine my astonishment a few weeks later when I received a large envelope from Liz containing photocopies of several pages of *The Eastern Province Herald*, Port Elizabeth's newspaper, dated early September 1902 and devoted to the worst storm ever to have raged in the Eastern Cape.

According to the articles the storm, referred to as The Great Storm, raged for several days from September 1, 1902. Twenty-one ships were wrecked, of which three were beached along the North End beach. Fifty-eight lives were lost, passengers, rescuers and another 200 people were seriously injured. I then recalled Granny saying that the passengers on her ship had to wait several days for

the storm to abate before they could disembark. The newspaper articles mentions the bosun's chair apparatus from the ships to the lifeboats and thence to the shore. Granny's story was true!

I questioned my mother and her sister in Israel for more information about Granny's journey with her mother and her five younger brothers from Libau to South Africa. I learned that they had first sailed to England, stayed overnight somewhere and had then been taken in a covered wagon to board a ship bound for South Africa. I wrote to the Jewish Genealogical Society of Great Britain (JGSGB). Richard Cooper and Harvey Kaplan answered and were more than helpful.

Given the date of the storm and Granny's birth date, they thought that she had boarded a Union Castle Line ship from Southampton. I reported this to Liz who was always interested in what was happening. She wrote back to say that, while walking that day, she'd rescued an old book from someone's garbage bin which listed, with photographs, all Union Castle Line ships, their size, tonnage and routes. From this, we worked out that Granny and her family had probably boarded the *Lismore Castle*.

Again, I wrote to the JGSGB for suggestions of how to proceed. A few weeks later, I received in the post the passenger manifest from the *Lismore Castle* and there, much to my astonishment and joy, I found Granny's name, that of her mother and those of her brothers. This ship had left Southampton en route to South Africa on 9 August 1902 which proved beyond doubt that Granny had indeed celebrated her birthday on 12 August on board.

I no longer doubt or dismiss stories told by the older generation. There is always at least a grain of truth in them. If you listen carefully and with an open mind you too may be able to expand your search into family history and enrich your knowledge of eras past. So, I urge you to Listen and Learn.

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