

It Could Have Happened Like This: Reconstructing Ruchel Solomon:

When you're a child and your father tells you stories about his mother, who died long before you were born, you believe them. You believe the stories and you believe them the way he means you to. For example you believe that he had a mother who, when he was a little boy and stuttered, "slapped him out of it." And you believe him when he says it was a good thing that she slapped his face until he stopped stuttering, because if he had been a stutterer how could he have become, later on, a champion debater for AZA, a respected lawyer and banker in Charleston, a master of ceremonies at weddings? When you are a child, you believe him when he says that she was a "strong" woman. You believe him when he says that "if it hadn't been for Momma, I wouldn't have been nothing," and you hear his youngest brother Nathan say the same thing.

Only when you are older, do you think more deeply about his stories. You realize that your father's memories, like everyone else's, were formed selectively—consciously and unconsciously—from what he wanted to remember and what he wanted to forget. And that he chose which stories to pass on to his children as a way of creating an explanation and justification of the man he had become.

You begin to think of his choice of stories as the creation of a mythology, with gods and goddesses, fates, and heroes. The goddess in my father's family was his mother, Ruchel Morgenstern Solomon. And the Greek goddess most like her was Hera, wife of Zeus—in her unrivalled strength, her unquestioned fury, and her sublime authority.

Now, my father's father was no Zeus, but a pious, observant Jew who cared little for the rewards of this world. And of course my father's mother was not a Greek goddess. She was a Yiddishe woman, who travelled, in 1890, from Poland to Charleston, South Carolina. She came to join her husband who, with his brother and their father, had already arrived and opened a small furniture store on upper King Street.

But to her children, Ruchel Solomon was as fierce as Hera. She insisted that her family leave the furniture store and set up a separate business on King Street. She insisted that her first grandchild be named Miriam, for her mother, and when her grandson was born—a boy some of you know as Bernard Solomon—she heard what he had been named and rushed back from Glen Springs to Charleston to insist that the name be changed to Tzvi Alter, her father's name. When her eldest daughter, Gertrude, ran away to New York City to become either an opera singer or a Socialist—there are two versions of this story—Ruchel got on the train, found her, and according to her other children, "dragged her back to Charleston." When another daughter, Florence, married a non-Jewish Charleston man, Ruchel never spoke to her again. Again and again, my father and his brothers and sisters spoke of her will, her strength, her influence, and most of the time, her wisdom. Their family was very poor, but she welcomed all strangers to their Shabbos dinner. When my father told her, as she was dying, that he had decided to become a lawyer, she said, "Make sure you are an honest lawyer."

Now, much older, I have many questions. How did my grandmother herself experience her life, her feelings, her thoughts and desires. What is the story she would tell about her life?

I was told that her first son born in America was a brilliant boy, a beautiful boy, and an athlete, and that he died at the age of seven from inhaling the fumes from paving Upper King Street. I was told of the "breakdown" she had then, and her stay at Glenn Springs, but not of any other griefs she had. I was told of her joy when my father was born, that he was the "spittin' image" of his dead brother, but not how she felt when he began to speak with a stutter and she raised her hand to slap his beautiful little face. I was told that when she was pregnant with her tenth child, she threw herself down the stairs, trying, unsuccessfully, to abort him. But I don't know what led her to such despair or why she had so many children. I knew that her porch on King Street was filled with growing flowers—and she allowed my father to keep pigeons. But why? Could she have learned to grow things in Poland? In the shetl—or in the countryside? My cousin Bernard saw a picture I inherited of her, laughing with my grandfather, and he said that in all the years he spent in her kitchen, he never saw her smile. Did my grandmother set out to become the Hera of her children's lives, or did it simply happen that way?

To begin to answer my questions, I decided to write a novel about her, to let her create herself out of my imagination—which is the way of fiction.

I also wanted to know more about the times she lived in. I began at the New York City Public Library, reading the Charleston newspapers of the 1890's. Charleston was still grieving the defeat of the South in the Civil War and the destruction from the earthquake of 1886. Pitchfork Ben Tillman became governor of the state, and segregation was intensified—though in Charleston, black and white people still lived closely together. What had my grandmother heard about black people in Poland, I wondered, and what did she experience of them in Charleston? One editorial lamented the small numbers of people who came out to memorialize the Confederate dead. Could my grandmother have passed by one of the memorial parades, and what might she have thought about it all? What did she make of the physical safety that Jews had here? And of the wide gulf between social strata inhabited by Reform and Orthodox Jews in Charleston?

What were her parents like? And how did she feel about leaving them? Usually we think of how lucky Jewish immigrants were to escape the poverty and pogroms of Europe. But were they eager to leave their families to come to America? When I was younger and sat with my great-aunt Dora Solomon on her porch at 80 Pitt Street, she told me that it was terrible for her to leave Poland. “I was a young girl with a baby,” she said, “and I had known my husband for only a week and when he left, he didn’t even know I was pregnant. I knew that if I left, I would never see my parents again or my sisters and brothers or my rabbi. For three years I made excuses about why I could not come. Then my rabbi got a letter from Mr. Patla in Charleston who said I must come. I made more excuses. Then Mr. Patla wrote again and said that if I didn’t come, my husband, Velvel, would go to the Bet Din in Savannah and get a divorce. Still I didn’t want to go. But my parents and my rabbi said I had to.” My “Aunt” Dora and I wept as she talked. I don’t think that that grief is something immigrants talked about much—they were expected to feel lucky to be in America—but my grandmother Ruchel may well have experienced it.

When I come across interesting historical facts, I ask how My grandmother might have experienced them. Here’s an example: a roller skating rink was built on upper Meeting Street in the 1890’s. If children of my grandmother went skating there, she may have been horrified at their physical freedom and at the reflections of her daughters’ bloomers in the polished wooden floor. It could have happened like that. The skating rink may have been an early sign to her of the battles she would have to wage against America.

Here’s another historical possibility: what if she wanted to show her children the ocean and took them on a walk down lower King Street to the Battery? What if, as she walked along the wall of the East Battery toward Broad Street, she saw black nannies walking with their upper-class white charges? It might have happened like this. What if the black nannies, in their confusion at how she and her children spoke and dressed, told her she had no right to be walking there? She, who spoke mostly Yiddish, might not have understood their words, but certainly she would have understood their meaning.

I am writing Ruchel Solomon as I imagine her—within what I know of her time. No matter how many years separates her from me—there is much we share. We have each experienced success and failure, love and hate, grief and joy, freedom and constraint, jealousy and gratitude, hope and despair. I may claim, as a fiction writer, all sorts of historical liberties but not complete historical license. My grandmother was an inhabitant of nineteenth-century Poland and came to adulthood in the first third of the twentieth century in Charleston. I can draw on the universality of human experience in telling her story but I must make her specific and internally consistent—if she is to be believed. I cannot know exactly how her life happened but I must believe: it *could* have happened like this.