

Part V
Malvina's Forbears

It is fitting that I relate as much as I have been able to learn about Malvina's, that is, your mother's family. All I know is what I have heard over the course of the years since we were married in 1945, principally from her mother, Toba, and her father Oosher [Asher, aka Gerardo in Spanish, Gedaliah in Yiddish and latterly spelt in English as Gedale]. Her mother died here in Durham in 1971, and her father, also in Durham, in 1993.

I will undertake to relate as much as I have learned over the past fifty years of Malvina's family. You already know some of the younger members of her family, particularly her cousins, her uncle Abish's children and the son of her uncle Jacobo in Mexico.

Note regarding the spelling of Yiddish in this chapter. About the only difference in pronunciation between Podolian and Polish Yiddish is in some of the vowels. The Litvak "tahteh, mahmeh, kahleh, kahts" is also common in Polish Yiddish – not tawteh, mawmeh, kawleh, kawts as in Podolia. Also, in Polish Yiddish the sound of the vowel "a" in the English words "bay" or "way" or "hay" is sounded like the German diphthong "ei," as for example Malvina's uncle's name, her father's brother, is pronounced Laizer in Polish Yiddish (Leizer in German spelling) and Layzer or Leyzer in Podolian Yiddish. "Gay," meaning to go, becomes "gai" like guy in English, somewhat like the Australian pronunciation of the name of their country which akin to the Cockney London accent, Austrellia, Austrylia or Austrailia. I tend to use the Podolian spelling because that is the way I speak Yiddish. It is, therefore, natural for me to use that form of spelling. It would be an affection on my part to say Laizer instead of Layzer, to say "bain" or "bein" instead of "beyn," "shtein" or "shtain" instead of "shtayn." The consonants are the same, for the most part. When they are different, I will indicate this in the text.

Chapter 24

Malvina's Forebears: Emigration from Poland to Cuba and to Guatemala

Malvina was born in Havana, Cuba 26 October 1925 and was brought to Guatemala while still an infant by her parents in 1927 or so. There her sister Tere [Tirzah in Hebrew] was born 9 October 1928. Tere died her in Durham in 1973. Malvina's youngest sister Lily, *aka* Leah in Hebrew and in English, was born in Guatemala in 1933. These five people constituted the entire family in Guatemala and the only family members Malvina knew during her childhood. She had no extended family in Guatemala, neither on her father's side nor on her mother's, except for Miguel [Mekhel] Mendelsohn, a first cousin of her mother.

Her mother and father were alone in Guatemala. The members of both their families who had remained in Poland, except for a scant few who had emigrated to the United States, Cuba, Mexico and Israel before the Second World War, all met an untimely end in the German/Nazi extermination camps. This being the case, the absence of an extended family during her childhood, Malvina never knew her grandparents nor any of her aunts and uncles nor any of her cousins. As a child growing up in Guatemala she had direct contact with only one member of her extended family, besides Miguel Mendelsohn, a sister of her father, her aunt Gutsheh [a Polish version of Geetel in Yiddish]. Just before the outbreak of the war, her father brought Gutsheh to Guatemala where she remained but for a short time.

Later on, when Malvina was already an adult and travelled outside the country, she met other members of her extended family – uncles and aunts and cousins –: 1) her father's elder brother Layzer, in New York, who had been in the United States since about 1903 or so, and whom Malvina's father, born in 1902, met for the first time in the early 1930s; 2) her mother's younger brother Yahnkel [Jacobo in Spanish] for the first time in Mexico in 1956; 3) also in 1956 in Mexico, another cousin of her mother and a brother of Mekhel Mendelsohn, Shmeel [Samuel] Mendelsohn; 4) and another brother of Mekhel, Shloimeh [Solomon], who for a brief period of time lived in Guatemala just before the Second War; 5) another brother of her mother, Abish, who came to Guatemala in 1947 and who Malvina met for the first time on one of our visits to Guatemala; 6) and in 1968 in Israel, she met another of her father's sisters, Hindeh and her children.

Unlike my own experience, Malvina never experienced the special feeling of being comforted, cherished and praised by grandparents. Her mother and father and her sisters were all alone in a "farvawfen winkel," a remote corner, of the wide and alien world, Central America, where destiny had brought them. But they did have an

extended family of a sort, if not by blood then because of a common origin and past as well as shared experiences in Guatemala where Destiny had cast them – the minuscule Yiddish-speaking community. Almost all of the twenty or so East European, Yiddish-speaking Jews in Guatemala had arrived after the First World War via Cuba. All would have preferred going to the United States, but the doors were shut.

After the end of the First World War, Poland became an independent country again and was free of Bolshevik Russia. But for Jews, the new Poland was hardly less oppressive than when under the Tsars. Antisemitism was rife and of the brutish kind where Jews were not only reviled by word of mouth by the lower echelons of Polish society, but were also in danger of physical harm. Jewish army recruits, as my father-in-law often related, were frequently in mortal danger at the hands of gentile soldiers in their detachments. Both he and his father were conscripted at the same time into the new Polish army created for the prime purpose of fighting the Bolsheviks. Also, though free of Russian tyranny politically, Poland was in an economic shambles after the war and struggling to establish an independent economy no longer tied to Tsarist Russia.

The Jews of the little towns, the *shteytlekh*, some of whom were craftsmen and petty merchants for whom living from hand to mouth was accepted as a normal way of life, not only found it difficult to make a living in the newly revived Poland independent of Russia but also, in addition to their material woes, were also envied, reviled and hated by the lower class Poles who frequently made life in the little Jewish villages even more difficult than before. Their traditional way of life as well as their customary way of earning a living had become totally untenable in the new Poland, which also included large portions of Lithuania and White Russia.

Many of the *shteytl* Jews migrated to Warsaw and other large cities such as Lublin or Cracow. They ran from their ancestral homes in the little towns and villages, a phenomenon also common in post-war communist Russia, not only in a search of a better economic situation, but because of an even more pressing reason, fear of mob violence. The jubilation the Polish populace felt because of freedom from Russian tyranny, frequently was expressed in bloody attacks on the impoverished Jews huddled together in the small villages surrounded by a hostile and envious peasantry who believed the Jews to be rich and well-off because they seemed to live so well dressing in clean clothes and eating white bread on the Sabbath.

The economic, and consequently the social, situation for Jews by the early 1920s was grim. There was no hope of a secure future for young people. Emigration was the best expedient. But where to? Prior to the First World War, Jews had emigrated to the United States in the hundreds and hundreds of thousands. I do not know the figures, but I believe that perhaps more than a million Jews left Russia, which included post-war Poland and Lithuania and other Baltic countries, between the time of the pogrom in Kishinev in 1903 and the outbreak of the First World War

in 1914. The newly-passed restrictive immigration laws in the United States effectively closed the doors to immigrants from eastern Europe, which in effect were directed at Jews from Poland, Russia and the areas of Austria and Hungary, including Bukovina, the Carpathian mountain region, Galicia, the area where the Galitsianer Jews lived and which was part of Poland before its partition in the late eighteenth century.

But Cuba was open to immigrants, not only from Spain – from Asturias and Galicia – Fidel Castro's parents were immigrants from Galicia – and also eastern Europe. During the first years of the 1920s whole boat loads of young Jews emigrated to Cuba from the new Polish port of Danzig on the Baltic sea. Most thought of Cuba as only a way station on the way to the United States. In Cuba they would at least would be safe and make a living while waiting to find a way to their destination of choice, the United States.

In view of the dire and hopeless situation Malvina's father considered himself to be in, especially after he and Toba were married in 1922, he wrote his older brother, Leyzer, who was in New York. Leyzer had been in America since 1903 when his baby brother, Malvina's father, was about one year old. He never returned to Opole and so they had never met face to face until the 1930s. Leyzer was a uncomplicated, straightforward and generous soul who without any fuss at all sent his younger brother the money needed to escape Poland.

Since Oosher was still of military age, he had to find a way out of the country, illegally but justifiably in view of the treatment that awaited him as a Jew in Poland, a future of certain penury. I believe he went to Warsaw where his sister Gutsheh was living at the time. There he was put in contact with a man who fabricated passports for young Jews anxious to flee Poland. The first thing the passport maker did was to write in a false date of birth which made him too old to serve in the army. My father-in-law was irrevocably committed to this early date of birth all his life. It was the date he had to use when he became a Guatemalan. The fictitious date of birth was entered on his Guatemalan passport which he used when he traveled abroad. He actually entered the United States with that fictitious date of birth. Customs and immigration authorities would marvel of how young he looked for his age.

The man who fabricated his passport in Warsaw, told him he could not use his own name, but would need another name for greater security. When he hesitated and said he did not know what new name to assume, the passport man asked if he had a sister and what was her name. He answered that he had a sister named Gootsheh. "Gootsheh, then you will be Gedalyah," was the instantaneous decision on the part of the passport maker. It was also not advisable to use the family name, Noodelman, sometimes given as Nadelman in Polish. Without a moments hesitation, the passport maker shortened Noodelman to Man spelling it with only one "n" rather than two which would have been the German rather than the Polish spelling. In this way Asher Noodelman became Gedalyah Man.

After he arrived in Cuba, or perhaps later on when he emigrated to Guatemala, Gedalyah became Gerardo in Spanish, and that was the name I knew. However, in speaking to him I always addressed him as "shvehr," father-in-law, in Yiddish, and even when speaking English after he and my mother-in-law Toba settled in Durham. He travelled to the United States with his Guatemalan passport in which his name appeared as "Gerardo Man," but for some reason or other, of which I have no idea, he began to use the name Gedale, a close Spanish phonetic transliteration of the assumed name the passport maker back in Warsaw in the early 1920s had given him.

By the time he settled in Florida after Malvina's mother died, he stopped using the name Gerardo substituting instead, not his true name of Asher, but rather Gedale. The assumed name on the false passport by means of which he was able to escape from Poland became his official name on all his legal instruments and papers including social security – payments of which he began to receive as beneficiary of his second wife, May Freedman after she died in 1984. He used this name on bank accounts, stock certificates and even the deed to his condominium in Century Village, Deerfield Beach, Florida, all were registered in the name of Gedale Man. Americans, however, pronounced the name as Ge-Dale, as though the "e" was silent.

But my mother-in-law always called him Oosher, the Yiddish pronunciation of the Hebrew Asher. His brother Layzer and his sister Hindeh as well as her children always referred to him as Oosher. I doubt if they were even aware that in Guatemala he was called Gerardo. At any rate, his true name has been passed on to a great grandchild, Charlie's third son, born 11 November 1995 in Saint Louis. The infant was named Asher in Hebrew. In English he was named Gregory recalling the memory of the names in Yiddish, Spanish and English his great grandfather was also known by, Gregory being an approximate phonetic transliteration of Gedalyah, Gerardo, Gedale.

I believe Malvina's father left Poland for Cuba about 1922 or so. Her mother followed him there within a year or so. Malvina was born 26 October 1925. According to what I heard, Toba became sickly there. It was difficult for her to acclimate herself to the hot tropical climate of Cuba. Though they were able to make a decent living sewing men's suits for a large retail establishment, she was miserable and they decided to go elsewhere. The possibility of entering the United States was totally out of the question because of the special quota laws passed by Congress which all but closed the doors to the United States for immigrants from eastern Europe Eastern Europe, in effect Jews from Poland and Russia. Jews who were fortunate enough to have become Polish citizens after the First War could emigrate, if they would find some country to let them in. But these restrictive immigration laws were moot as far as Russian Jews were concerned because they, as well as gentile Russians, were forbidden to emigrate from communist Russia.

Somehow or other, Malvina's mother and father heard about Guatemala. To them and to the average American or European, Guatemala in Central America was an unknown "farvawfen vinkel, oivehleh velt," a remote unknown corner, far away beyond the world. They were told that Guatemala not only had a pleasant climate, but that the country also welcomed European immigrants. In fact, when they visited the Guatemala consulate, the consul himself urged them to leave Cuba and settle in his country. He noted that Toba and Tsesheh, a close friend, were there with their babies, Malvina and Hershel or Enrique, Tsesheh's son. He said that if they went to Guatemala, they would have servants to care for the children. Malvina's parents were still hesitant, as also were also their close friends Tsesheh and her husband Leybeleh Tenenbaum who accompanied them to the consulate. The two young couples, still in their twenties and with infant children, had never heard of Guatemala and knew nothing about the country. They asked the consul to return their passports which they had left with him when they had first applied for entry to Guatemala. The consul was reluctant to return the passports and continued to urge them to settle in Guatemala.

At any rate, it must have been about 1927 or so when Malvina was about two years old that Malvina's mother and father along with Tsesheh and Leybeleh Tenenbaum and their son Hershel sailed from Havana as deck passengers and arrived in Puerto Barrios in Guatemala. There the two small families, thrown together by a common destiny, became an extended family. Two more children were born to both families – Malvina's sisters Tere and Lily, and Hershel's brothers Yako and Benny. The Man's had three girls and the Tenenbaums three boys.

After Malvina's parents were established in Guatemala City, a first cousin of Toba, Mekhel or Miguel Mendelsohn arrived to settle there. Within a short space of time he brought his wife, Frimit, from Opole. Their daughter Gootsheh was born later in the 1930s. She was sent to Denver, Colorado to live with an aunt of Mekhel's while she went to school there. She still lives in Denver with her husband and children. At a later date, a brother of Mekhel, Shloimeh or Solomon, came to Guatemala with his wife. He lived there for but a short time before moving to Mexico City and eventually Israel.

While she was still a child, these few people comprised Malvina's extended family in Guatemala, including the Tenenbaums. These few individuals were but a small fraction of the family as a whole including grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins in Poland, whom she never met, and who were doomed to perish at the hands of the Germans in the Holocaust.

However, the feeling of loneliness and isolation from blood relations was ameliorated somewhat by the existence of a tightly knit Yiddish-speaking community in Guatemala, often referred to as the *colonia*. In the 1920s and 1930s, the community was comprised, in the main, of young married couples in their twenties and early thirties, all with young children generally of about the same age as Malvina

and her sisters. In the mid-1940s, the community numbered some twenty families with many of the children already of marriagable age. These families of the Yiddish-speaking community were all closely knit. In a very real sense, they were a single extended family despite the fact that they were not related by blood. The members of this community shared many life experiences and so had much in common. The majority had immigrated to Guatemala from Poland via Cuba while they were still young. The majority of the men fled Poland to escape a hopeless future and eventual penury as well as from the more immediate danger of being compelled to serve in the anti-semitic Polish army. Like my father-in-law, they all escaped with fictitious names and false passports. Some even arrived on the same ship that carried them from Danzig to Havana. Also, almost had been recently married before leaving Poland. Very few were still bachelors when they came to Guatemala. A few of the bachelors married local non-Jewish girls, most of whom converted to Judaism.

The majority of the new Polish Jewish immigrants turned to peddling general merchandise to the workers on sugar cane and coffee plantations on the Pacific coast where they sometimes were infected with malaria, as was Malvina's father. The peddling phase did not last very long because most were able to put some money together from the profits earned from peddling and open up retail stores.

Chapter 25

The Pre-War Jewish Community of Guatemala

Guatemala is better known today in the world at large than during the time Malvina was growing up in the 1920s and 1930s. Guatemala, and Central America as a whole, were isolated from the rest of the world, off the beaten track, so to speak, and somewhat insulated from the direct effects of economic, social and political forces that obtained in the United States and, even more so, in Europe. The greater majority of the population was native Indian labor-intensive farmers who worked the land growing crops to fulfill their own needs primarily. The scant surpluses they produced were sold in the local markets of the Guatemala City and Quetzaltenango and to a lesser extent in the smaller urban centers.

The principal exports were mainly coffee and bananas. These were produced on large plantations, most of which were also labor intensive operations because of the nature of the crop which required a great deal of hand work. Intensive labor on large scale operations, unlike in the United States on wheat or corn farms, was the norm in Guatemala because of the ample supply of Indian peasant labor. Investments in labor saving machinery, as one expects in the United States, would have been quite pointless on coffee farms, especially those located on accidented terrain in the mountains.

Most of the bananas in Guatemala were produced by the American-owned United Fruit Company which invested great sums of money in irrigation projects and farm machinery as well as in the purchase of vast extensions of land, most of which was not cultivated, but kept in reserve. As cultivated fields lost their fertility, they were kept fallow in order to regenerate and return to their original ecological state, a tropical rain forest. The Fruit Company, unlike coffee plantations, depended on hired labor to work their banana holdings.

The problem regarding having a dependable a labor supply was quite different on the coffee plantations. When a coffee farm was sold, it was common for deeds of purchase to include, not only the land in question, but also the number of *ranchos*, thatched huts, on the land. This was an oblique way of indicating the number Indian families permanently residing on the plantation and the quasi-feudal labor force available to operate the coffee farm.

Land by itself was worthless without the labor to work it, and so the size and quality of the Indian community living on the land was mentioned in the deed of purchase, not too different from Russia before the end of serfdom in 1861. The inseparable connection between labor and land, serfdom, is treated in Nicolai Gogol's *Dead Souls* which I suggest you read, if you have not already, to get some idea of what my grandfather Yahnkel Markman meant when he said he remembered

"pahnsheeh," serfdom. A type of serfdom still existed in Guatemala when I first came there in the 1940s.

Land was never bought without *ranchos*, that is without Indians living on the land to work it. I heard of cases in which owners changed to a different crop and had no further need for the labor of the Indians. They then decided to remove the Indian families living in the *ranchos*. This was indeed very grievous because many Indian families had been living on the land in question since colonial times.

Many of the coffee plantations were owned and operated by Germans. When the Second World War broke out and President Ubico brought Guatemala into the war on the side of the allies, the Germans were immediately declared enemy aliens and their property expropriated. Some of the best coffee plantations were turned over to a special government bureau to operate. Before the war, most of the coffee crop was usually sold and exported to Germany. There was a German bank, Notebohm, which financed the crop, lending money to the owners and even to the exporters.

But the Jewish community, particularly the Polish Jews, were only partially affected, and indirectly at that, by the vicissitudes of the world market for bananas and coffee. They lived an urban life in Guatemala City and dealt with the few members of the Guatemalan upper and middle classes resident in the city. A number of merchants in the community imported leather goods for the manufacture of shoes. The stock most of Jewish merchants dealt with was usually piece goods of various sorts including silks, cottons and synthetics and the like for ladies' dresses as well as woolens and worsteds for ladies' coats and men's suits. Guatemala City lies at an elevation of 5,000 feet and enjoys a cool spring-like climate all year. Woolens are worn, especially at night after sunset. all year long.

Malvina's father and two other members of the community imported woolens and manufactured ladies' coats. Mekhel Mendelsohn specialized in worsteds, *casimires*, for men's suits. As a matter of fact, it was through him that I was introduced to the Jewish community and eventually married Malvina.

I came to Guatemala looking for a bit of cool weather as a respite from the heat of Panama during the semester break in 1944. While walking down Sexta Avenida, I saw the name Mendelsohn on the window of a store that sold men's suitings. I entered and bought some goods and ordered a suit. We spoke Spanish which soon changed to Yiddish. He invited me to some sort of meeting or gathering that evening where I met part of the Yiddish-speaking community including my future mother- and father-in-law.

Like the whole of Guatemala and Central America which were somewhat detached from the main currents of world events, the minuscule Guatemalan Jewish community, including the even scantier few Polish Jewish families, also lived largely isolated from the rest of world Jewry. Before the outbreak of the Second World War and the creation of the State of Israel, still Palestine in those days, the principal contact with the rest of the Jewish world was through "sheleekhim," emissaries,

collectors of funds for charitable purposes, who arrived to raise money for various Zionist organizations, principally the Keren Haysod and the Keren Kayemeth. Also, "shnorrers," free-loaders, from the United States would arrive sporadically, also for the purpose of collecting money, usually for yeshivas and other charitable institutions, and sometimes even for personal needs. The reason they usually gave for undertaking to raise money for themselves was that they were writers engaged in writing books on pertinent Jewish subjects, or that they were scholars, or rabbis and Talmudists, devoting their lives to the study of Torah and so merited moral and financial support. I still have a few books written in Yiddish or in Spanish which some Jewish authors left with Malvina's father as samples of their craft.

Perhaps the strongest bond holding members of the Polish Jewish community together was the many yearly campaigns to raise money for Israel. Neither the Sephardic/Arabic community, nor the German community entered into this activity with the same high intensity and zeal as did the Polish Jews. Malvina's father, being one of the *principales*, most prominent members of the community, and one of the most respected of the twenty or so "bahlabahitim" [householders, citizens] of the Polish Jewish *colonia*, colony, would frequently go along with the "sheleekh" to ask for donations. They used to go from store to store up and down Sexta Avenida where the more prosperous merchants, humorously dubbed "dee gehnahraylim," the generals, had their business and also along Quinta Avenida, where shops were of lesser category or class were located and whose owners were dubbed, also humorously, as "dee Keenteh," the Fifters.

The amount each family contributed, really an assessment, was decided beforehand by the managers of the campaign to raise money, especially for Keren Haysod and Keren Kayeth for the purposes of buying and settling the land in Israel. Some of the contributors did not always agree to the amount they had been assessed. Malvina's father sometimes had to bargain with the contributors as if he were selling them some merchandise, which he was indeed, the goods being the mitzvah of fulfilling the commandment regarding the giving of charity. The reluctant contributors usually agreed to comply with their assessment after being coerced by the tacit and never-mentioned threat of being literally excommunicated both socially and economically from the community.

In fact, I heard of one such individual, a Mr. Selechnik, who was as hard as nails when it came to giving charity, so it was said. He always balked at contributing because of which he and his family once suffered social exclusion. Just shortly before our wedding in March of 1945, the Polish Jewish community decided to put him in "kherem," excommunicatio]. Malvina's parents had invited him and his family to the wedding. When news of this got out, a committee, of which I believe Mekhel Mendelsohn was a member, appeared before Malvina's father earlier on the very same day of the wedding, requesting him to inform Mr. Selechnik that he was not welcome

and to stay home; and that if he did not rescind the Selechnik invitation, not a single family of the Jewish community would attend the wedding.

It was one of the most painful things Gerardo had to do in his life, to go and humiliate Mr. Selechnik and plead with him that he and wife not attend. This must have been as painful to them as it was to Malvina's father, because the Selechniks had already sent a wreath of flowers [sending of wreaths of flowers for joyous occasions and celebrations was a unique Guatemalan custom which the Jews adopted as well] and Mrs. Selechnik had already been to the hairdresser.

Travel to the United States, and to Europe too, before the Second World War was by ship. Trips abroad were not undertaken on the spur of the moment. Buying trips required prior preparation regarding merchandise to be purchased as well as special arrangements necessitated by the fact that one had to be absent from home for an extended period of time. Not all the members of the Polish Jewish community had the means or the necessity of travelling abroad for business reasons. Direct experience and knowledge of what was going on among Jews in the wide world outside, reached the Guatemala Polish Jewish community when some of the more affluent merchants undertook buying trips to the United States.

Another source of information about world Jewry was in the Yiddish language newspapers from New York, to which some of the community subscribed. But a more immediate and living source were the Jewish travelling salesmen or manufacturer's agents who came to Guatemala with some regularity, many a least once a year. They would bring some news of the what was happening in the outside world, particularly in New York. And of course, the sheleekim who came to Guatemala to collect money for charitable causes, also brought news of the outside Jewish world. Nonetheless, generally speaking, before the outbreak of the Second World War and the establishment of the State of Israel, the Yiddish speaking Jewish community had very little direct contact with the outside world.

This situation of feeling literally "being alone in the world" operated to draw the twenty or so odd families even closer together. In effect, they became members of one large extended family with a common language, a common religion, a common past including similar experiences which had brought them to Guatemala and also, a bond of overriding importance which drew them even closer together, their common economic interests and problems. Practically all twenty Yiddish-speaking families were engaged in retail merchandising and, in a few cases, in minor manufacturing activities – ladies' coats, men's and women's shoes, men's shirts – selling the goods they produced in their own stores. In addition to the East European Yiddish-speaking Jews, there were two additional colonies in Guatemala: first, the German-speaking Jews, some of whom had actually settled there even before the First World War from as far back as the last quarter or so of the nineteenth century; and secondly, Jews from the Middle East among who were Arabic-speakers as well as those of Spanish descent whose home language was *ladino*, old Spanish. The near-

Eastern Jews were collectively considered Sephardic, though they came from countries as disparate in culture and geography as Arabic-speakers from Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, a few from Iraq, and the *ladino*, old Spanish, speakers from Turkey. In fact, they all came from areas which had been part of the Turkish empire before the First World War. They were referred to by Guatemalans as *turcos*, Turks, just as the East European Jews were referred to as *polacos*, Poles. The *turcos* also mainly arrived in Guatemala right after the First World War. Being called a *polaco* or *turco* was far from complementary.

The German Jewish community probably numbered at least fifty families, but I am not entirely certain of this. Of course, as happened wherever East European and German Jewish immigrants lived in proximity to each other, the Germans felt superior to the others. They were not a close-knit group at all. Many had married non-Jews. Some had even converted to Catholicism and became part of the upper echelons of Guatemalan society. To all and intents and purposes, most German Jews, though even more lukewarm with regard to religious observances than the other two communities and though feeling stand-off-ish from them, still held on to one of the most important *mitzvot*, commandments, of philanthropy, and still supported Jewish charities. Some were also in retail merchandising, some had print shops, some even owned coffee farms, and some were coffee brokers and bankers. In general, before the Second World War they engaged in more or less the same commercial activities as their German non-Jewish compatriots.

The Sephardic community possibly also numbered about fifty families. But I am not certain of this number. Their commercial activities, mainly operating retail stores, were quite similar to those of the Polish Jews, though, as far as I can remember, none engaged in the manufacture of the goods they sold. The Templo Maguen David belonged to the Sephardic community. I was led to believe they held services there each Sabbath, though I am not sure because, like the Polish Jews, they also kept their stores open for business on Saturdays, that is all except one, the *khakam*, Mr. Mussan, who performed the marriage ceremony at our wedding.

The three Jewish communities socialized together, the Germans only rarely, during joyous celebrations, particularly at weddings which began to become more frequent as the children of the first settlers reached marriageable age. But as a general rule, they did not intermarry, except in a few rare instances. Intermarriage only became common among members of the third Guatemalan generation, that is, between the grandchildren of the original immigrants, by which time the social and even economic differences among the three groups had become somewhat blurred.

The melding of the three communities became even more frequent beginning with arrival of another cohort of immigrants from Europe and other parts of Latin America after the close of the Second World War. During a visit in 1983 Malvina and I were astonished to see how the Jewish community had grown, and also that we no longer knew all the members of the Polish Jewish community many of whom had

arrived in the years since our last visit twenty or so years before. Malvina's parents and her sisters had moved to the United States in the interim.

But during the time Malvina was growing up, and even at the time we were married, each community held religious services separately. In 1945 when we married there was only one synagogue in the whole of the republic of Guatemala, Templo Maguen David, Temple Star of David, where Malvina and I were married. The synagogue had been built some years before as a communal effort, my father-in-law also having a hand in raising money for that purpose and for time serving on the board of directors. But to all intents and purposes, the synagogue building belonged to the Sephardic community.

Malvina and I were married in Templo Maguen David by a Sr. Mussan, a Jew from Aleppo, Syria. My father-in-law felt he deserved the honor because he was the only Jew in all of Guatemala who scrupulously observed the Sabbath and the only Jewish merchant in all of Guatemala who closed his store on Saturdays though it was the best day of the week for business. He was not a rabbi, but a man learned in Torah. He was always referred by his Sephardic correligionists as the *khakham*, a Hebrew word meaning a man of learning. Sephardic rabbis are traditionally referred to a *khakham*. The word in Yiddish is pronounced *khookhim*, meaning an intelligent person, not a rabbi nor necessarily a person learned in Torah. "Ehr iz a groiser khookhim," he is very intelligent or he is very smart. Sometimes, in typical Jewish "left-handed" humor where overstatement or exaggeration is used for meaning the opposite, the word *khookhim* is sometimes used to deprecate someone who has said or done something stupid. The meaning of the phrase "Er iz a groiser khookhim," depends on the tone of voice and may be mean exactly the opposite, which is to say "He is a fool, a blockhead, a dunce, an oaf, a stupid ignoramus." The meaning of *khookhim* depends on how the word is voiced. My father-in-law used the word *khookhim* "tongue-in-cheek" in speaking of Mr. Mussan because, in fact, though he was a *khakham* he was far from being a *khookhim*.

At any rate, the *khakham* did his best in that first experience of his as a cantor and marriage performer. He intoned the marriage ceremonial ritual in an atrocious dissonant voice. Though full of fervent pious feeling, it was painful to hear. Benny Tenenbaum, about four or five years old who was some sort of a page or ring bearer in the marriage ceremony, began to chuckle and then laugh out loud as Mr. Mussan was intoning the marriage service. His mother, Tsesheh, cuffed him on the ear to shut him up. Not only was the *khakham's* voice atonal, but the Sephardic melody he was singing was strange to the majority of the company, Polish Jews, including Benny whose father, Leybele Tennenbaum, had a beautiful tenor voice and led the prayers on the High Holy Days each year for the Polish Jewish community.

Synagogue attendance was not common among members of the three communities: not on the Sabbath and very rarely indeed, if at all, daily. But all three communities held services during the High Holy Days of Rosh ha Shonah and Yom

Kippur. The German Jews did not have a synagogue building, and so rented the Masonic Temple for services. The Yiddish speaking Jews, that is the Polish/Russian Jews held services in the large banquet room off the rear patio of Templo Maguen David.

For a short period after the Templo was built, the East European Jews joined the Sephardic/Arabic community for holiday services in the main sanctuary. Though using the same prayer book and reading from the same Torah, the nature of the Sephardic services, especially the music, was strange and seemed even bizarre and outlandish to the Yiddish-speaking Jews accustomed to the Ashkenazic form of services and music. They decided that it would best for both communities to hold services separately. The Ashkenazic Yiddish-speaking community then began to hold High Holy Day services in the large room behind the synagogue building proper.

I believe that weekly Sabbath services were held by the Sephardic community in Templo Maguen David, though I never attended. The Polish Jews did have weekly Sabbath services as much for social reasons as for religious. A minyan or so of men met Saturday mornings in the Polish Jewish community's clubrooms, the Centro Israelita, in an upstairs apartment on Sexta Avenida. Most of the members, the whole Yiddish-speaking community belonged to the club, had retail stores which they kept open on the Sabbath. They would either leave their wives or some trustworthy clerk, if they were fortunate enough to have one, in charge of the store while they attended services in the clubrooms. One room in the club premises was large enough to hold the ten or fifteen men who customarily came to services. The room was equipped with a *belemmer*, reading desk, and an *aron ha kodesh*, holy ark, for the Torah scrolls. It was in this little synagogue room that I was given an aliyah on the Sabbath morning of my wedding.

Malvina's father was the prime mover in the founding of this social club for the Polish Jewish community. As a former *Bundist* back in Poland, he conceived of the club in purely secular terms. The *Bund* was a socialist Jewish movement in Russia and Poland before the First World War. It was proscribed by the communists when they came to power after the Russian Revolution. However, the *Bund* continued its activities in Poland after the war when it became independent of Russia. He used to say that his intention was to organize a secular social and cultural club, but instead the club had become a "bes medresh" [beth ha medrash in Hebrew, a house of study or a house of prayer, a synagogue].

It was not unusual, quite common, in fact, for the traditional synagogue in pre-First World War Russia and Poland before communism, to have other uses in addition to its primary religious purpose. The synagogue was a Beth ha Tefilah, house of prayer, Beth ha Knesseth, house of meeting, or prayer, Beth ha Medrash, house of study. The synagogue building in the east European Jewish shteytel also served as a place of shelter for the poor and for homeless wanderers, as an inn for

itinerant preachers and scholars to spend the night, for poor students to live while studying.

Poor students slept in the synagogue on the same benches where they sat and studied all day. They were given *teyg*, days, that is they were fed in a different household each day of the week. Householders would vie with one another to have the better students assigned them to feed for a given day of the week. And the students always hoped that the houses where they were invited to eat each day were not impoverished that the householder also had enough food to feed themselves as well as the student. All hoped to be given the Sabbath as their day in the house of rich bahlahboos for then they would be fed so amply that they could exist the rest of the week on a few pieces of bread and a bowl of soup or some kasha and milk. This custom was, in a sense, a scholarship program supported by even the poorest Jewish communities in Tsarist Russia. And it is remarkable indeed, that this system of supporting scholars and Torah learning was devised by a poor, disenfranchised people subject to inequities and liabilities at the hands of the government and of the brutalized lower class Russians, Ukrainians and Poles in the backwaters of Tsarist Russia.

The minuscule community of Polish Jews in Guatemala, as I have already commented above, were like a single family. And like members of the same family, they sometimes bickered and had controversies and held opposing opinions on many matters. Yet, they treated each other more like siblings, so that rarely did their differences lead to unreasonable biases against each other or to long-lasting animosity among disputants. There was a semi-serious rivalry among some of the male members of the community seeking to be elected president of the Centro Israelita or to the "junta directiva," board of directors.

I remember that the election of Max Russ to the presidency was questioned by many members saying it was fraudulent, though no one said he should not take office. It was rumored that Max, an importer of cotton goods, had extended credit far beyond what was prudent to a number of merchants in order to obtain their vote. This story was repeated more in jest, than with any resentment.

While Malvina was growing up, and even at the time when we were married, there never was a rabbi in Guatemala, not for any of the three communities, to teach the children or to conduct religious services. Some members of the Polish Jewish community as well as some of the Sephardic Jews, especially Mr. Musssan who was their khakham, had some training in Torah learning. Most of the Polish and Sephardic Jews arrived while still in their twenties. They had been cut off from the sources of traditional Judaism in their former their homes. Their first and overriding concern in Guatemala was to earn a living. Religious observance was of secondary importance. In Guatemala they sought to carry on and preserve a tradition they knew and experienced only in the days of their childhood and youth, before they were mature adults with grown families. Most of the Polish Jews carried a minimum of

Jewish traditions with them in their baggage when they left home. In Guatemala they found themselves novices with regard to maintaining and preserving Jewish traditions and a Jewish way of life. They had to rely on themselves without the support of an older and larger community. Furthermore, coupled with the urgent need to make a living, strict religious observance and maintenance of Jewish culture were considered luxuries and secondary to the basic necessity of earning a living.

The Sephardic community also ever had a Hebrew teacher for their children. Mr. Mussan, whom they considered their *khakham*, a quasi-religious leader if not rabbi, did not teach any of the children of the community except his own. He was well versed in the matter of Jewish religious practices.

Our Jews, that is the Polish Yiddish-speaking Jews, had one or two men who had some advanced yeshiva training in Poland. They could lead the services as well as read from the Torah. One, Benyoomen Tennenbaum who operated a shoe factory, attended a yeshiva in Warsaw and so was adept at reading the Torah scrolls. He usually did so every Sabbath. There was also one other man that I know of, a Mr. Torun, short of stature and beset with a severe hunchback, would also lead services and, I believe, also could read the Torah scroll.

But all the time Malvina was growing up, there was no religious teacher in Guatemala to serve any of the three Jewish communities. Malvina's father taught her the Hebrew alphabet, and so she learned to read Yiddish and, only recently, the Hebrew prayer book as well. Amazing! But the Polish Jewish community never had a formal Hebrew teacher, let alone a rabbi to deal with matters of *halakha* [religious observances, matters Torah practices and law]. There were a few members of the community who had attended the traditional *kheyder*, elementary Hebrew school, and had some training in Jewish education. I understand that only a very scant few of them undertook to teach their children to read the *siddur*, prayer book.

It is not my intention to write an account of Jewish life in pre-Second World War Guatemala, of which you already know something from visits when you were little children as well as from stories you heard stories from Malvina as well as from your grandparents Oosher [Gerardo] and Toba. It is important that you know something of Jewish life in Guatemala because it is pertinent and germane to understanding the unique conditions which shaped your mother's, Malvina's childhood: a small nuclear family consisting of her mother, father, her sisters Tere and Lily, as the only blood relations near at hand, except Mekhel Medelsohn; being part of a Jewish community which, in effect, was her extended family comprised of twenty or so Yiddish-speaking families equally alone and far from their kith and kin in Poland and Russia; two other disparate Jewish communities, the German and the Sephardic-Arabic; the isolation of Guatemala, especially the Polish Jews, from the mainstream of world currents.

