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## FOREWORD

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### From Cardiff to Canada

*One day in 1997 Rosalie Sharp called me to ask if I would be a contributor to a book she was publishing together with Irving Abella and Edwin Goodman entitled Growing Up Jewish: Canadians Tell Their Own Stories. The twenty-six people selected would share their families' experiences as new immigrants to Canada. I felt most honoured to be among those included, sharing my unique family history as newcomers to this country. This is my contribution.*

**I**N DECEMBER OF 1992, I was invited to Berlin for a United Jewish Appeal (Keren Hayesod) conference to address a group of European chairmen. For me it was a very emotional experience, unlike any other I have had. For the first five minutes I spoke in German—a language I had heard at home. This is how I began:

“Were it not for Hitler, I would have been able to say to you tonight, ‘*Ich bin eine Berlinerin.*’ I would have been able to tell you about the home my parents, Elli and Max Podolski, who lived on Passauer Strasse. I would have been able to tell you about my father’s *Herren Bekleidung* (men’s clothing) and *Schuhwaren Geschäft* (shoe factory outlet) on Berliner Strasse, or about the synagogue they attended on the Sabbath and *Yomtov* on Fasanenstrasse, or even about Charlottenburg, where my grandparents lived.”

During my three days in Berlin, I visited some of those places that I had heard about since my earliest childhood. Of course, my parents’ home is no longer there. Even the street name has been changed to Ettaler Strasse. What remains of the synagogue where my parents were married are two pillars in front of the Berliner Gemeinde Haus (German Jewish Community Centre).

My parents belonged to that group of Jews who felt that Germany was a haven from persecution and poverty. They were modern, enlightened, and yet orthodox in their observance of Jewish tradition. Life was very comfortable and serene. But all that changed with the rise of Hitler. Nevertheless, like most Jews, as the perpetual optimists, they did not hasten to leave and stayed until it was almost too late.

It was the terror of *Kristallnacht* that finally brought the message home to them that things were really as bad as they appeared. When the next day the Gestapo called for my father, he miraculously managed to evade them and left for England on the



Cardiff, circa 1947. My parents, Elli and Max Podolski, sister Jeanette, and me, the little one.

first plane available, which happened to be on the Sabbath. Being uneasy about travelling on the Sabbath, my father asked the rabbi for advice and was told that in matters of life and death, life took precedence over the Sabbath. That advice proved to be very fortuitous, as the next plane out after the Sabbath crashed, with no survivors.

My parents were the lucky ones—lucky that they had relatives who could bring them over. The rest of our family were not that fortunate. And this is how a Jewish girl and her sister, Jeanette, were born in a coal-mining town called Cardiff, in the south of Wales.

This was a time when Jews from Europe found refuge in all sorts of places, and for my parents, who were “true Berliners,” Cardiff was their salvation. The war years were not easy for them, but compared with what they fled in Europe, the city was paradise. However, that hardship had left its mark on them, so when the tensions of the Cold War grew, they decided to immigrate to Canada, as far away as they could get from any impending conflict.

So in May 1948, at the age of four and a half, I, with my parents and sister, aged eight, sailed off to New York on the *SS America*, first class. Decades later, when my mother was sorting through old passenger lists, she discovered that on our deck was the Kennedy family. We were to journey across the ocean two more times. The



(Left) Purim festival in Cardiff, 1948, just prior to the establishment of the State of Israel. My mother made these costumes of blue and white plastic to express our love for our new homeland. (Right) Our family's journey on the *Queen Elizabeth* from Southampton to Canada, 1949.



decision to make a firm commitment in Canada seemed too daunting for my parents. It wasn't until the return trip back to England that we realized Canada was indeed the place to begin our new lives.

Obviously, our adjustment as new immigrants was not smooth. We first settled in Montreal, and my father set up a leather goods factory, where he



(Left) Wearing a red dress as a teenager in Toronto, circa 1957–58. (Right) Sharing a moment with lifelong friend Cathy Newman.



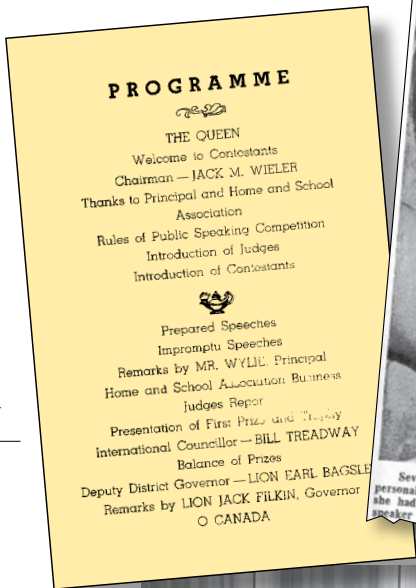
manufactured ladies' purses. Unfortunately, business ventures with various partners turned sour, and the French language posed a problem for my parents even in those days. My father felt Ontario was the place to go, so in 1954 he relocated his business in Toronto. By that point he had also realized that my mother was the best and only trustworthy business partner he could have.

After a very unsettled childhood, I was finally beginning to feel that Toronto would be my permanent home. I grew up on the fringes of the established community, not quite fitting in to any particular social group. Even though my sister and I did not have a Jewish day-school education (only some private tutoring and some *cheder* classes), we retained our strong Jewish identity because of our upbringing at home. One of my earliest memories, for example, is of seeing my father during his morning prayers. He always considered it *mazeldik* if I kissed the square tefillin that rested on his forehead.

The first synagogue we attended in Toronto was the Gilgorm, off Eglinton Avenue. Going out during the Yizkor service together with other young people was a social highlight. This was the opportunity for my sister and me to mingle and socialize with members of the *shul* and make friends.

I vividly recall marvelling that during the Israel Bonds Appeal on Kol Nidre there were Jews who could buy tens of thousands of dollars' worth of bonds and dreamed that perhaps one day I could be one of those purchasers. It was my first introduction to communal fundraising.





I attended Northern Secondary School, on Mount Pleasant Avenue, where I was one of a handful of Jews. During my five years there, I was very much aware of my Jewishness. I became very adept at explaining to our principal the significance of every Jewish holiday and why I could not attend school. However, none of this hindered me from fully participating in all the school's extracurricular activities, which I thoroughly enjoyed and which helped to shape me as a person.



(Above) Our wedding picture, March 17, 1963. My parents, Max and Elli Podolski, me and Henry, Golda and Israel Koschitzky.

(Top) Northern Secondary School public speaking contest. The impromptu speech was "Why I am happy to be me." The title of my prepared speech was "Voice is a reflection of your personality."

natural thing to do in those days.

The first years in Toronto were difficult for our family, with major setbacks. Only one year after arriving from Montreal, my father was involved in a serious car accident and was hospitalized at Mount Sinai for twenty-one months. In the end, his right leg had to be amputated. We had no family, no medical connections, and found it impossible to find the proper medical consultations.

At the beginning, our social lives revolved around attending functions with our parents at the New World Club, a group of immigrants from similar backgrounds who enjoyed one another's company. My parents never hired babysitters for us—we just went along wherever they happened to go. It seemed the most





Circa 1976/1977. Israel and Golda Koschitzky's seven grandchildren. (Left to right) Joel, Sarena, Hartley, Tamar, David, Leelah, and Jonathan.

(Below left) Henry, me, Golda and Israel, Mira, Saul.

(Below right) My sister's family, the Massoudas. Melanie, Marjorie, Benny, Jeanette, Mother Elli, Celeste, Clarissa.



My mother had to attend to the business, bring up her two daughters, and also care for my father, who would eat only her kosher food in the hospital. We brought the food to him every day, travelling on two buses and the subway. I often wonder how we survived those first few years.

But, thank G-d, some good always emerges from difficult and stressful times. A romance developed between my sister and the chief resident, Dr. Benjamin Massouda (who saved my father's life), and in time they were married.

My father lived for another thirty productive years. He worked full time, travelled, and enjoyed life to the fullest. He marched down the aisle at the weddings of several grandchildren and experienced the birth of great-grandchildren.

At the age of eighteen, in my last year of high school, I was fortunate to meet my partner-to-be, Henry Koschitzky, son of Israel and Golda and brother of Saul. Their family history, although vastly different from mine, still had the same thread running through it, as they also survived the war years (finding refuge in Russia), and came to Canada as new immigrants in 1948. Henry and I both feel very fortunate that our families were among the lucky few who survived the Holocaust and were successful in rebuilding strong Jewish families in Canada. After our many happy years of marriage, we can be proud of our four children, their spouses, and our grandchildren.

When I reflect on our past, I come to the conclusion that our survival and what we possess today are not the result of any wise decisions but rather a gift from G-d, and, as I have been blessed with this gift, it is incumbent on me to share in every way possible my good fortune with the rest of *Klal Yisrael*.

## Ulpana Grade 12

**G**ood morning. Thank you for inviting me back. I say “back” because this is the third time that I have had the pleasure of addressing the grade twelve class.

In Jewish life, they say that if you perform a task three times, you have a right to do it forever. Well, I guess I should hope and pray that by the time my great-grandchildren, who are now ages one and three in preschool Netivot, get to Ulpana, Rabbi Grauer still asks me to speak, and I will be a very lucky woman.

Steve Jobs once stated when addressing a Stanford University commencement address, “Nobody is eager for a lecture, but everybody loves a story”—so he proceeded by telling three stories connecting the dots in his life.

Well, today I will share four stories through four pictures that will hopefully reveal something about me.

A couple of months ago my children presented me with this birthday T-shirt inspired by the famous American artist Andy Warhol, known for pop art. I am sure you have seen his work everywhere, such as the Campbell’s Tomato Soup can, Mao Zedong, and Marilyn Monroe.

For the back of my T-shirt, my children were inspired by Shakespeare’s famous play, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and turned it into a “Much Ado About Safta,” which they used as a motif for my various hairdos at different ages and stages. I must admit, it went right over my head!

However, in thinking about today’s address, I have given each picture a different title that has nothing to do with hairdos and everything to do with my life’s journey.

The first photo is titled “Eyes Wide Open,” and it was taken during my first week and first year at Northern Secondary School when a photographer from the *Daily Star* came to write a story about the new trends in hairdos for the beginning of school. But “Eyes Wide Open” refers to my waking up, opening my eyes, and discovering the world around me. Because, simply put, up until then my life was rather a fog—perhaps because my childhood was so unsettled during my younger years. My parents, Elli and Max Podolski z”l, were German Jews from Berlin who felt their life was comfortable and serene. They were reluctant to believe things were as bad as they seemed. It was not until the advent of Kristallnacht—the Night of Broken Glass—that signalled to them that they must flee. So, fortunately, in the eleventh hour they escaped the clutches of



the Holocaust to find refuge in Cardiff, South Wales, where my sister and I were born.

But after a few years of living in this coal-mining town, they grew restless thinking about greater opportunities for their two daughters. Canada was their destination, and so we crossed the ocean. But after a brief disappointing stay in Montreal, we returned only to realize their mistake. For the third time in two years, once again we made our voyage across the Atlantic.

I attended three different public schools until the age of eleven, and only then did I begin to feel that Toronto was a permanent home.

In those days, a Jewish education was not in the realm of possibility for my parents. However, my strong Jewish identity was formed by a very traditional Jewish upbringing. At Northern Secondary, I was among a handful of Jewish students and I became adept at explaining to our principal the significance of every Jewish holiday and why I could not attend classes on certain days. However, none of this hindered me from fully participating in all the school's extracurricular activities: choir, school performances and plays, public speaking, and cheerleading.

In those five years, I learned the most valuable lesson: It is far more fulfilling and gratifying to be an active participant than a passive bystander. I believe all those activities, coupled with my studies, helped to shape me as a person. This is where I discovered who I am and what I am capable of doing.

I chose my role models in school. If someone excelled in the drama club, I wanted to be like them. If another student became a public speaker, I did what I could to enhance my skills, asking my parents not to waste their hard-earned money on piano lessons. I was determined to find an elocution teacher. So for one year, I travelled on three buses once a week after school to practise voice and speech. I learned the same tongue twisters as King George the Fifth in *The King's Speech*—try to see that movie; it is wonderful. (“Theophilus thistle” was a famous tongue-twister.)

Those five years of high school gave me my identity as a young woman, enabling me for the first time to dream about my future.

Then, just as I was about to graduate from fifth form (which is equivalent to first-year university today), a special person walked into my life, Henry Koschitzky, with whom I could share my dreams.

The second photo is titled “All in the Family.” This chapter in my life was devoted to our four children, Sarena, Hartley, Jonathan, and Leelah—all graduates of Ulpana and Or Chaim. Some of them make up the twenty-five percent who have made Aliyah to Israel and six of our grandchildren have served and continue to serve in the IDF.

From first-hand experience, my husband and I feel blessed to see the fruits of our

wise decision. Each one of them, thank G-d, married wonderful spouses, with children of their own, and in their respective communities of Toronto, New York, and Israel are leading meaningful Jewish lives, devoted to their families and communities, each engaged in some form of chesed. I know that this coming Shabbat, Rabbi Grauer will be attending a worldwide Bnei Akiva Conference with two of our couples.

All the while that I was engaged in bringing up our family, I began to hone my skills as a volunteer, involving myself in the Parents' Council—organizing fundraising events, publishing a children's cookbook to raise money for Associated Hebrew Schools, where our children attended, as well as publishing a yearly calendar that is still in circulation every year.

Then one day, out of the blue, I received a phone call inviting me to attend a brain-storming meeting to see how orthodox women can become more involved in the United Jewish Appeal campaigns. From that experience I have always maintained that you never know where one "yes" can lead to—it can open doors and chart new paths you never dreamed of. I always think of how I could have missed out on glorious moments in life had I said no and found some excuse not to attend that first meeting.

The third photo is titled "It's Been My Privilege," which is the title of a book I published ten years ago with some of my speeches highlighting extraordinary experiences I have had spanning three decades. That one "yes" eventually took me all over the world to visit Jewish communities in South Africa, South America, Australia, Europe, and the former Soviet Union.

That one "yes" gave me the opportunity to be engaged in so many defining moments in modern Jewish history—Israel's fortieth, fiftieth, sixtieth, and seventieth anniversary celebrations, and Operation Exodus and Operation Solomon, campaigns for the Russian and Ethiopian Jewish immigration to Israel.

I spent countless hours preparing, writing, and rewriting speeches, highlighting these events from the early 1980s, and the thought of having them tossed into a recycling bin one day was too painful.

These concerns prompted me to compile my speeches into a book with a hard cover that might have a longer shelf life than the ephemeral lifespan of a human being. The book is dedicated to my children and future generations.

The book was also a way of expressing my *hakarat hatov* to the community of Toronto who in a sense gave me my identity as a Jewish woman—I will be forever grateful for the opportunity of a lifetime. This is the family where I was nurtured, taught, inspired, and given the confidence and competence to assume many varied roles of leadership and responsibility. The pages of my book are pictures and tales

of joy and commitment. And finally, the fourth photo is titled “Climbing the Second Mountain.” That title was inspired by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z”l, the former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain.

Whatever our life has been this far, there is another chapter to be written, focused on being a blessing to others, sharing whatever gifts we have with those who have less—handing on our values across the generations, using our experience to help others come through difficult times of their own. Doing something that has little to do with personal ambition and much to do with wanting to leave some legacy of kindness that makes life better for at least someone on earth, so there is always a second mountain to climb.

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So as you all begin to climb your first mountain, I want to leave you with one last message that I have shared with close to three thousand new Canadian citizens when presiding at their citizenship ceremony. It is applicable for all of you here today.

I know that in this room there is a tremendous synthesis of talent, energy, expertise, and creativity, which when used to their utmost potential will achieve great things. For each in your own way have the ability to become a success story, if you dare to dream. So dream big, become a trailblazer, make a difference, for we are an unfinished story, and you can write your own chapter in it.

Eli Wiesel once said that indifference is our greatest sin. Indifference often stems from the feeling that it is not within our power to affect change, but to be a true servant of the Jewish people and of G-d, you have to have *bitachon* faith in yourself that you can reach for the sky!

I have every confidence that we will hear about your success stories moving forward, just as we heard at the last gala dinner about the Ulpana graduates who are doing remarkable things in this world.

So as you keep climbing that mountain, you too will stand here where I am one day to address the Ulpana student body in twenty, thirty, forty years from now.

My hope and prayer for you is that Hashem should fulfill your hearts’ desire and may all your plans and dreams come to fruition.