

My family

Eric Blair

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We begin with a necessary disclaimer. This is a family history, not a political broadside. I'm sticking to the facts, as best as I can reconstruct them. If you take this as some sort of commentary on current politics, then I hate you.

I think it is interesting history, however, because it's not often that a new country just pops up one day. I get the impression that some people think that Israel as a Jewish state just appeared one day, by UN decree. In one sense it did, but in another, it formed over the course of a century or so as individual people contributed. Since the members of my family are included among those contributors, my family history, in my mind, is tied to the history of Israel.

My grandmother was born in Botoșani, Romania, as the daughter of Rosa Ashkenaz and Aaron Cordova (a German). There are two main streams of Judaism: Ashkenazi and Sephardic, where the Ashkenazi were primarily found in Eastern Europe, and the Sephardic in Spain and North Africa. Noting that Cordova is a town in Southern Spain, we see that this was a marriage of the two traditions.

It was an orthodox household in an orthodox community. This list of Jewish Cemeteries¹ (which seems to be trying to cite its sources and get things right) has this to say about the town:

The current population is 5,000-25,000 with no Jews. The Census from 1839 registered 150 Jewish families. The 1899 Census registered 630 Jewish inhabitants. The 1930 Census registered 1884 Jewish inhabitants. The Jewish Community was founded in 1837 by an agreement with the owner Teodor Balus. On 1 July 1940, many Jews were massacred. Between June and July 1944, many Jewish families were deported in Oltenia.

She left around 1930 (don't recall the exact date), to the British protectorate that was called Palestine. The coin pictured here was in my grandmother's collection, along with the cute little tokens Israeli payphones used to run on and other such oddities. You can see that it is in Arabic, English, and Hebrew. The Hebrew in parens (at about 7 o'clock in the picture) is an acronym for what the Jew folk like to call this plot of land (Israel), so the conflict of naming is already beginning to show, though the Brits are showing their clear preference. The choice of *Palestine*, I am told, derives from the British fetish for all things Roman. Millenia ago, the Romans had renamed the territory from Judea to a variant on Palestine. The term also lives on in conversational English

¹<http://www.jewishgen.org/cemetery/e-europe/rom-d-e.html>



Figure 1: My grandmother was valedictorian of her 2nd grade class.



Figure 2: This is a 10 mil piece. I have no idea what that means.

in another variant form, *philistine*. [Once again, if you think this bit of etymology from the late 1800s has any relevance to modern politics, you've got issues. But ain't it interesting?]

Romanian sentiment toward Jews is famously bad. Arendt, in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, explained that when the Nazis came to train Romanians about how to properly persecute a Jew, the Nazi representatives were horrified by how inhumanely Romanian Jews were treated. As my grandmother tells it, the Romanians kept telling her to go back to Palestine, so she did. There, she was able to continue life as an observant Jew primarily in the Ashkenasi tradition, while others in her family were able to do the same in the Sephardic tradition. Her brother had already arrived, and as shown by the stats above, by the end of WWII everybody in the family had gone separate ways, to New York, Palestine, or, in one case, a gas chamber.

I asked her what she thought of the British protectorate, and she said “the Brits were brutes.” She cited one example that she witnessed where the British police allowed hundreds of immigrants arriving via sea to drown rather than let them onto shore.

My grandfather was born either in Bulgaria, just before the family went to Palestine, or in Cypress, en route; my mother is unsure. They met and married before Israel existed, and eventually settled in a little apartment in Haifa. The current edition of Wikipedia² lists Haifa's population in 1922 as 24,600, which is a small town by any measure; e.g., Washington, D.C. is 22 times larger, at 550,000 people (without suburbs). So their apartment was in a little, sparsely-populated seaport at the edge of a great big desert. My grandfather lived in that same apartment until he died about a decade ago; my grandmother lives there now. When my mother described the place as she remembered it, she doesn't paint a very pretty picture, and I only picture it as

²<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haifa>



Figure 3: My grandfather, trying to look valiant. Nobody is quite sure what to call the ground his horse is standing on.



Figure 4: Comments about how my mom was hot when she was in the military will be summarily deleted.

worse fifty years later.

So a few more years pass. My aunt was born three years before the official founding of Israel, my mother three years after.

I'm not entirely clear on their involvement in the many wars that Israel the country has fought. During the War of Attrition with Egypt, mother was stuck watching radar screens near the Sinai Desert, since women in the military get trained in combat but are kept off the front lines.

Meanwhile, my father was born in Prague, Bohemia, Czechoslovakia. I've only met him briefly, but he says that his father, a doctor, was somewhat acquainted with Bertrand Russel, and a letter from Russel allowed the family to leave the country and go to Israel, where he mostly grew up.

One nice thing about the Israeli military: it is a meat market. It's a little more busy

now, but in the past it's just been thousands of 17-year old boys and girls with nothing to do but work out and flirt with each other. So, my parents met, my brother was born, and I was born a little later (in Australia, because, uh, why not).

Meanwhile, my aunt moved to the United States, after meeting the well-to-do owner of a condom factory, who whisked her away and married her. Since this was the 1970s and the USA still liked immigrants—more in the next entry—it was easy for my infant self to wind up in the USA as well. My aunt had a son, who married a woman from Ohio, and they had two kids who self-identify as Catholic.