

## MY NAME WAS RENA HASS

*My daughter-in-law remarked one day, “It must feel awkward to use the name Irene instead of Rena, your real name. Why did you change it?” I had no ready answer. Things just happened. Time went by and I became wife Irene, mom Irene, mother-in-law Irene, Grandma Irene, my American friends’ Irene—I have been called Irene throughout my new life.*

*I became Irene during the dead time between my old and my new life and I said, “So be it.” But it has been nice to be called Rena by my Polish friends here. And it made me feel all warm inside when I heard my sister call me Reniusia, the sweet diminutive form of my name of long ago (which she never used to call me in those days!). And at times, my American husband calls me Renia, awkwardly but so very softly. But I couldn’t remember when and how I lost my old name, and I decided to revisit the young Rena to find the fragment of time that had swallowed it.*



“Renusiu,” says my mom, brushing a stray hair off my forehead, “only birds can fly, not little girls.” Aching all over, I lie in my bed and feel sorry for myself. My pride has been bruised by my unsuccessful “pioneering flight” down the stairs to the basement of my house on Spichrzowa Street in Grudziadz, Poland. Through the window of the bedroom which I share with my parents, I see the ferryboat crossing the Vistula River on its way to

the Left Bank, where one road leads to our river beach and the other to Gorna Grupa, my favorite country resort. In the living room, my bratty sister is crying again and Mama will go to nurse her. But I want Mamusia to stay with me, so I cry too, but my mom ignores my sulking and says, “Reniu, you brought your misery on yourself, now show us that you can be a big girl; don’t cry....” Well, I guess Mom has to feed the brat so I let her go. I can hear the big puppy Rex bark and bark downstairs and I wonder if his mother needs to nurse him or if he is just barking to let us know that he is a biter.

Things get to be far better when Auntie Zosia Golemberska comes to visit. “So my tomboy Reniusiu,” my auntie scolds me, “you want to fly and you want to pee like a boy! And when you were two years old, you ran away from home to march with the army and you got some spanking! And my hand hurts because I kept shielding your behind from your dad’s spanking!



Aunt Zosia Golemberska

ing! What will become of you!?” Now I decide to smile a little, especially since Aunt Zosia’s beautiful daughter Wandzia will soon be home from school. Who knows, she may even come here and again sing for me the funny song (which I am not to tell about), the one about the crow that went bathing on the Left Bank and made Pan Capitan think that it was his wife bathing there (ha, ha). “Sir Captain,” says the crow, “I am not your wife, sir, I am just a bird, a little crow!” Or the one about the woman who stuck the rake into another woman’s...rim tzim tzim...mouth? Wanda will surely say, “Rena,

remember that you promised to keep your mouth shut about the songs, right? We are pals, right?” I wish I had a sister like Wanda, a grownup sister like Wanda. I touch her arm. My aches feel much better.

Aunt Zosia is not my real aunt. My dad and her husband, Pan Golemberski, both play in the band at the Grudziadz Kawiarnia (cafe), and that is why Aunt Zosia and my mom became close friends. I love Ciocia Zosia as if she were my real aunt and I love Wanda. But her brother, Zdzisiek, teases me a lot, especially when he stoops down to dance with me and tells me

that I dance like a cow. Much later on, when Zdzisiek leaves Grudziadz to study at the Polytechnic Institute in Warsaw, he will contract a serious parasitic infection and will suddenly die of that infection. Auntie Zosia will always wear black and cry a lot after Zdzisiek's death.

Nanny Mariasia, my beloved niania and I go walking after our lunch up the Castle Mount, the Gora Zamkowa. We walk up our Spichrzowa Street and then way up the pathway to the Klimek, the Castle Mount's watchtower. The tower used to be part of the Castle of the Teutonic Order which the Polish King Wladyslaw Jagiello conquered in the Battle at Grunwald, wherever and whenever that was. Now we have their watchtower, part of the walls of their castle, and most importantly, their well. The well has a brick rim that is more than one meter high and it takes many many steps to go around the rim. There is an iron grating covering the rim of the well and you can lean against it and try to see the bottom, which, niania says, lies, at the bottom of the Gora Zamkowa. It is hard to imagine the depth of a well piercing this entire high mountain, a mountain that long ago bore a true castle of Poland's mortal enemy. Now you could throw pebbles into the well and, of course, spit into it. I do spit though Nanny always says "Niusia, you are not a street urchin; young ladies do not spit. Come, let us make sand-cakes in the sand box." I don't like making sand-pies. I prefer sliding off the great big boulder that the Devil himself dropped onto the Gora Zamkowa. I am not sure why and when that happened, but here it is, nice and smooth. When it is time to pee in the bushes, we go together. I have to pull my panties down but Nanny does not have to do that because she does not wear panties. I often would like to see what her pee comes out of but she always admonishes me not to peek, with: "Rena, you naughty girl..."



Nanny Mariasia Soltysiak

Dad goes berserk one day and buys me a dollhouse with furniture, dishes and all. "*Du bist mishuge* (you are crazy)" I hear Mom say to him in Yiddish so that I wouldn't understand it. "Go return the toys." To me she

says with a smile, “Tell Daddy that you make your own toys Reniusienka, my creative girl. Tell him how we pretend that you and I wash dishes together, clean the house together, and go to the market together.” So, the dollhouse is returned and I continue playing creative “pretend” games, mostly by myself, sometimes with Mommy. When Dad’s lady-student sits waiting in our living room to have her violin lesson, I like to stay with her and pretend to be my sister’s mommy. But as soon as I attempt to take my little sister out of her bassinet, the lady-student starts calling for my mom. And Mom’s scolding, “You are a very bad girl, Rena,” is sure to be followed up by Dad’s spanking (later during the day when Auntie Zosia is here to shield my behind). At least, this is the version of the story related to me by my dear Wandzia in the years to come.

It is during Passover that we go to my parents’ hometown of Brzezany to visit their families. Mom is still fat and has to nurse my sister. My spinster-aunt Giza, who is my mother’s youngest sister, tells me that indeed I was born in the very house where she and Grandma Sara live to this day and that I screeched all day long so that the neighbors called me a *kvetchke* (a whiner, in Yiddish). She also says, “Niusienko, you were the cutest, smartest little girl when you were a toddler. You held your nose and said in your Grudziadz-Mazurian clipped Polish, with a lisp, that the sewers in Grandma Sara’s backyard smelled phew.”

Grandma Sara recites poems for me and she treats me to the greatest pickles in the world. Grandma Sara and Aunt Giza have a pub in the Market Square of Brzezany. Ukrainian farmers tie up their horses and wagons at the posts in front of the pub and they come inside to drink beer and vodka with a pickle and pickled-herring chaser. When I am introduced to the big husky farmers with great big moustaches under their noses, they call me Irinka, but Grandma tells them that I am called Rinka. Later, Grandma Sara explains to me that my Hebrew name is Rachel or Rochel-Elke and that this name was given to me in memory of her sister, may she rest in peace. As to the Ukrainian Irinka, I am told that this is the diminutive version of the Ukrainian name of a Holy Lady, Saint Irina. Back in Grudziadz, Wanda derides the name Saint Irina and says that the Holy Lady’s name was Saint Irena and that my parents had shortened that name to just Rena. Likewise, my middle name Ela was derived by shortening the name of

another holy woman, Saint Elzbieta (Elizabeth). I wonder if I may have seen the pictures of both holy ladies at our cathedral, the Fara, since Nanny Mariasia had often taken me with her when she went to pray there.

We celebrate Passover at my father's family home in Brzezany. I love that house and I love all the fun happenings there. It surely is fun to drink from a barrel filled with well water. Grandpa Leon tells me that I ought to drink water very carefully so as not to swallow one of the well's frogs. Grandma Ida hugs and kisses me and says, "Niusienko, you know that your Grandpa Leon is kidding, don't you?" Do I really?

My Auntie Hela, Dad's sister, takes me to the outhouse and shows me how to squat on top of the toilet board and not fall into the multi-shaded brown stuff seen way down on the bottom. My dearest cousin Sylwinka teases me with, "Rena, how come you are all brown and smelly?"

I will always remember standing on a kitchen step-stool singing for the family, all of them clapping and *kvelling* over me (Yiddish for "drooling over me"), delighting me with their praises: "Our Renia has Dolo's musical talent," and such. And I will forever remember my dad (Dolo) taking out his cherished violin and playing gypsy songs that make you cry, with everyone in awe of his talent. Then, my father's younger brother Zygo with his guitar, and Dad with his mandolin, play the lively Ukrainian dances while Zygo's girlfriend Lusia keeps on dancing. She dances the lively Ukrainian *kolomyjka* all around the living room and onto the long, long balcony called a *ganek*. And as I lie down to sleep on the living room sofa, I hear the chiming of the clock on the tower in the painting of the square of St. Marks in Venice. Each hour on the hour it chimes the beautiful melody of Italian gondoliers, a melody that will haunt me for the rest of my life.

Our subsequent summer vacation trips to Brzezany involve two days of travel by steam trains that belch out clouds of smelly smoke. I feel nauseous most of the time and usually vomit by the time we reach Lwow. There is a short layover in Warsaw and a longer one in Lwow. The layover in Lwow is long enough to visit Dad's cousin, Zenka, and her family in the Jewish tenement area. Zenka and her brother Kuba often tease me because of my "choppy" Mazurian dialect, so one day I surprise my cousins and perform for them one of Lwow's street songs with singsong lyrics and a folksy *ta yoy!* I am rewarded for the song with a recording of Szczepcio i

Tonko, the popular comic singers of Radio Lwow. Thereafter, I consider myself somewhat a Lwowian girl and I show off my singsong speech before my friends in Grudziadz

On one occasion, Uncle Max, my mother's brother from Vienna, shows up at the train station in Lwow. He is on his way to Brzezany but we are, at this time, on our way to the sub-Carpathian oil town of Boryslaw to visit my mom's sister Rachela. "*Meine schoene Irenke...ja ja, du heist doch Renusia* (my pretty Irene, yes, yes, your name is Renusia)," says my uncle who speaks Viennese German to us. This is my first meeting with Uncle Max and this also is the first time that I see my mother burst out crying in public. Mom starts crying when Uncle Max tells her that Grandma Sara has died and that he is going to take care of Grandma Sara's pub and house in Brzezany. I wonder why no one wrote to us about Grandma Sara's death; perhaps my mom was shielded from the sudden bad news because of her heart condition.

I am always "our smart Renusia" to my Aunts Rachela and Giza who now live together in Boryslaw. Aunt Rachela is a dentist and a dental surgeon. Her dental technician, Eidikus, addresses me using the respectful form of "Panna Renia" as if I were a grownup. I don't know if that is because I am Dr. Rachela Schepper's niece or because, to Eidikus, the "Panna Renia" is a form of endearment. I love to watch Eidikus mold denture forms. But I hate it when Aunt Rachela says, "Rena, it is time to have your teeth checked, let's go into the office!" Aunt Rachela always wears a white coat because she socializes with us in the living quarters in between seeing her patients.

Aunt Giza one day takes me to see how the oil is pumped and how the heavy crude comes up and spills into pipes that take it into the refineries at nearby Drohobycz.

It is also fun to walk on the wooden sidewalks of Boryslaw. It is even more fun to be taken to the nearby resort of Truskawiec, although its mineral waters have a powerful odor of rotten eggs.

Uncle Munio and Aunt Pepka, my mom's younger brother and his wife, along with their stuck-up son Wolfus, live in the big city of Bialystok. Mom and I visit them, and Wolfus makes my life miserable. He constantly tells me that I don't know much of anything because I am just a dumb girl

from a godforsaken little town somewhere in the Polish Corridor, which the Germans were only too happy to give up to the Poles. In order to be as smart as he is, says Wolfus, I would have had to attend the cosmopolitan schools of Bialystok or one of the other big cities of northeastern Poland, which the Russians surely hated to give up to the Poles. Oh, how I rejoice telling Wolfus that we have taxis, trolley cars, and elevators in the city of Grudziadz, while his provincial Bialystok has muddy streets, one-story Russian-style houses and horse-drawn carriages. And Grudziadz's PPG, the biggest rubber-product factory complex in Poland, is surely more important than all of Bialystok's textile factories taken together.

Wolfus gets even with me for my bragging and calls me Renela, a name that he concocts because he knows that I hate my middle name Ela. When Mom and I return to Grudziadz, I beg her to request that my middle name be removed from my school registration papers. She promises to do that and keeps her promise. While we are on the subject of names, Mom also tells me why some of our relatives call her Esterka and others Tyncia. It appears that the nickname Tyncia is an abbreviated form of her Polish name Ernestyna, while Esterka comes from her Jewish name Ester. Mom is called Tyncia by her in-laws and called Esterka by her own family who take pride in their Jewish ethnicity.

I like the fact that Uncle Munio goes to the movies a lot and reads a lot. He wears thick eyeglasses and is almost completely bald, things that attest to me of his wisdom. And wisdom is surely lacking in Wolfus, his hirsute son who has perfect vision!

The report card from my combined first and second grade classes at the private school I attended previously comes to my new school, the Tadeusza Kosciuszki Public School. It bears both my first and my middle name. But I become just Rena Hass in my new school and I will remain just Rena Hass throughout my school years. The teachers of the elementary grades call me Rena. In the junior division of the Gimnazjum (similar to junior high school that includes grades 7-10), my teachers (whom we address as "professors") call me Hassowna, a combination of my last name Hass and "owna," the modified Polish form of surnames ending in a consonant and used only for unmarried women. But my French teacher there, Madam Bochnigowa, calls me Renee. She tells me that Renee is a very



pretty French name, and it is the first time in my life that I feel proud of my name. For once, Rena becomes a legitimate name and not just an abbreviated form of the Christian Irena!

In the senior division of the Gimnazjum (the *Lyceum*, grades 11-12), while we live in Bialystok under Soviet occupation, I become Rena Adolfovna, the middle name here denoting the patronymic term reserved for women. The Russians pronounce my first name “Reena,” as in “Ireena.” But then, all of our names, which are of course written in the Cyrillic alphabet, do acquire a new taste and texture when they are pronounced in the sonorous Russian language. To my family and friends I remain Renia, Re-nusia or simply Rena, depending on whether it is uttered with a feeling of love or not.



*I continue to search my memory in vain to pinpoint the event that made me lose my name, Rena. I open a folder that has my mementos from the Nazi occupation and find yellowed copies of official documents and notices dating back to 1945, the year of my liberation from Nazi concentration camps. I find a yellowed page of stationery titled UNRRA STUDENT HOSTELS-HEIDELBERG UNIVERSITY dated December 9, 1945, and it says I attended the University as Irene Hass. I next read a hand-written invitation to a British officers' dance on June 25, 1945, addressed to Irene Hass, three months after I was liberated from the camps. I recall that my Bialystok friends used to call me Irke in the camps, a common Yiddish nickname for Irene. Now I will have to search my earlier past and face the beginnings of my life in the camps...*

*It is August of 1943. After a shower in the wretched Saune, I stand at the entrance to the infamous Majdanek Concentration Camp, shivering in a skimpy hand-me-down camp dress. I'm scared, oh, so terribly scared. Next to me stands my mom in an equally ragged dress, and Aunt Pepka, who looks surprisingly handsome in her short hand-me-down camp dress. A Polish inmate in striped prison garb registers us. I give her my age and name. She looks at me with disdain and says, "You Polish Jews, you have*



*taken our Polish surnames—you should take our Polish first names as well! Now, as to your name, there is no Saint Rena in Poland, we only have a Saint Irena. As far as I am concerned, your name Rena is but a short form of Irena, Saint Irena. So, we will call you here Irena Hass, and you better like it!”*

*My mother says to me afterwards, “Stick to this name Irena, maybe they will treat you better. Maybe later you can say that you are only half Jewish? Maybe you can say that you were adopted by Jewish parents? Who knows, maybe you could even claim that you are an illegitimate child of your Niania Mariasia and of a Folksdeutch man? And who knows, maybe they will transfer you to a better, special camp, and maybe even with your mother? After all, you can always have a legal name of Irena and call yourself Rena....”*

*I decide to keep my new name, Irene, throughout my new life, and it begins to grow on me. Especially after I get to hear Woody Guthrie’s “Irene, Good Night...”*