

## Immigrant Origins: The Blacks and Zimets

### The Blacks

The Black's journey to San Francisco was a circuitous one. Your grandfather's, Morris Black, parents were Samuel (1858-1937) and Leah Black (1865-1929). They emigrated from Poland to Great Britain, and during the 1890's the family moved again, this time to South Africa. And early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Blacks – parents and kids -- made their way to San Francisco.

Janet learned from her father during his final days that their Old-World name was Schwartzburg. According Ancestry, "Schwarz was a nickname for someone with black hair or a dark complexion from Middle High German swarz .... Yiddish shvarts 'dark', black. This name is widespread throughout central and eastern Europe." However, the burg at the end of the name indicates town rather than complexion. As was the case with so many families immigrating to the US, names were changed. Schwartzburg became Black.

We don't know Leah and Samuel's home town in Poland. Presumably they came to the United Kingdom in the 1880's when so many eastern European Jews emigrated, escaping Russian terror. Irving Howe writes in *Land of Our Fathers*,

"On March 1, 1881, Alexander II, czar of Russia, was assassinated by revolutionary terrorists; the modest liberalism of his regime came to an end; and within several weeks a wave of pogroms, inspired mostly by agents of a new government, spread across Russia. For the Jews packed into the Pale and overflowing its boundaries, the accession of Alexander III signified not only immediate disaster but also the need for a gradual reordering of both their inner life and their relationship to a country in which Jews had been living for hundreds of years. The question had now to be asked: should the east European Jews continue to regard themselves as permanent residents of the Russian empire or should they seriously consider the possibility of a new exodus?"

While two million Jews immigrated to the US over the next several decades, your great-grandparents first made their way to Great Britain. Their son, Morris Black, was born in Glasgow, Scotland January 3, 1883. He had three siblings born in England: Alfred (1886), Eva (1887) and Ben (1889).

During the 1890's the Blacks moved to South Africa. In an article about band leader Ben Black which Georgie shared, Leah Black reported that her family traveled from "Cape Town to Johannesburg by prairie schooner." A prairie schooner was a fancy name for a covered wagon used by pioneers heading west. In South Africa, Samuel and Leah had two more boys, Julius (1892) and Isador (1893).

We know a little of Leah's difficult personality from a family tall tale. As the story went, Samuel was so eager to get away from his unpleasant wife that one day he and his older sons went to

the store to buy a sack of potatoes and did not come home. They returned several years later after serving the English Crown in the Boer War (1899-1902). The family still has memorabilia showing that the Blacks, including young Morris, fought in the conflict.

Of course, there are two sides to every story about whether Leah was just plain mean. Georgie points out that both of her great-grandfathers were rabbis, Jewish scholars or teachers in the orthodox tradition. Perhaps Leah was simply resentful after shouldering so much of the family work while her husband lounged with his nose in a book. Who knows?

Another family myth demonstrates that the Blacks were an adventurous family. Georgie shared the story that the Black brothers flipped a coin when deciding where to seek their fortunes. One option was to go to Alaska during the Klondike Gold Rush, the other was San Francisco. Lucky for us, San Francisco won the toss!

Morris entered the US on February 11, 1907. He first traveled first from South Africa to England, then sailing from Liverpool to New York on the ship *Carmania*. The voyage took a little longer than a week. On the ship's manifest Morris is listed as an electrician. Although later documents show his occupations include: electrical engineer, window trimmer, sign writer and advertising.

Morris' mother, Leah Black, arrived two years later in the US in 1909, departing from Southampton in England aboard the ship *Adriatic*. There is lots of conflicting information about Leah. One census says she and her parents were born in England rather than Poland, although Janet says this was not the case. The 1920 census lists Leah as divorced, living with Morris, Alfred, Julius and Isador. However, her 1929 obituary describes Leah as Mr. Black's "beloved wife".

In 1917 Morris Black received a draft registration card for WW1, although we don't know if he served. The physical description on his draft card shows he was much shorter than your dad, only 5'7, medium build, black hair, and hazel eyes.

Morris' brother, the accomplished musician Ben Black, requested a deferment from WW1 to take care of his mother and sister. In addition, records show that Morris' younger brother, Julius Black did serve in WW 1. He was assigned to Battalion B of the 144<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Unit of the US Army.

Leah Black was said to exert a strong control over her sons. She insisted on keeping them close and discouraging marriage. Nevertheless, in 1917 Morris Black married Hilda Zimet (1893-1985). The groom was 34, the bride 24. The Blacks lived in San Francisco.

Hilda and Morris had two sons. Your dad Robert (1919-1989) was born October 20, 1919. Your Uncle Ted (1921-1999) came two years later, August 21, 1921. City directories show the family had homes on various well-known San Francisco streets, including: Haight, Ashbury, Ritch, and Stanyan, and 15<sup>th</sup> and Fulton Avenues.

Morris' mom, Leah Black, died January 30, 1929. His father, Samuel, would live eight more years. He passed away August 7, 1937. Sadly, Morris would only live one more year than his father. He died in 1939 at 54.

Morris Black's obituary was entitled, *Funeral Today for Advertising Man*. In it was written, "Mr. Black was widely known in fraternal circles and in Masonry was a member of Lodge number 495. His wife Hilda Black, and two sons Robert and Ted Black, and four brothers, including Ben Black widely known orchestra leader, survive." He was buried in Salem cemetery in Colma.

## **The Zimets**

Hilda Black would outlive her husband by more than 40 years. She was born in San Jose in 1893 as Hilda Zimet. Her parents were Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. Hilda's father was Israel Zimet's (1864-1947). His country of origin is listed several different ways: Austria, Poland, and Russia. These can all be true since the town of Dukla was controlled by various European powers over several centuries. Dukla is now a town in southern Poland.

Israel's petition of naturalization lists his birthdate as June 20, 1865. He attended school through the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. The petition also shows he emigrated from Dukla in 1890, at that time part of the Austro-Hungarian empire.

Israel sailed from Hamburg to England. In Liverpool, he boarded the ship *Umbria*. The manifest indicates he traveled below deck in steerage – the cheapest fare across the Atlantic. He arrived on July 28<sup>th</sup> in New York harbor. Several documents list Israel's occupation as peddler. He became a naturalized US citizen in 1906. Jannie and Georgie explained that he was also a learned rabbi.

Hilda's mother was Fanny Lily Horn (1867-1947) also an immigrant from Poland. Several documents say she was from Kepno, Poland and others list Dukla, Poland. She married Israel in 1887 and immigrated to the US around the same time as her husband, between 1889 and 1891. According to documents, she had eight children, seven of who survived, including your grandmother, Hilda Zimet.

Hilda was affectionately known as Grara – named by Janet who as a little girl couldn't say grandmother. By her granddaughters' accounts, Grara was a loving and intelligent woman. Although she had not gone far with formal schooling, she was very knowledgeable about contemporary issues and events. She spoke Yiddish and English beautifully, serving as a bridge between her immigrant parents and her American children. And Georgie humorously remembers Hilda correcting her sons' Hebrew, as each took turns presiding over traditional Jewish holidays.

Georgie recalls lots of Zimets and Horns growing up, including a few cousins she went to school with. When Hilda passed away in 1985 she was buried in Salem Memorial Park, in Colma, alongside her husband Morris.

In a little more than a century, the Blacks, Zimets and Horns went from fleeing poverty and oppression in eastern Europe to establishing middle class San Francisco families. They arrived in our special city, immigrants of modest means. They sought freedom and opportunity, not unlike so many immigrants today as their great-great granddaughter Sage points out. And they succeeded beyond expectation.

The Black family made their adventurous journey by way of the United Kingdom and South Africa. No doubt Janet, Georgie and Sage's love of travel is deep in the family DNA. The patriarchs of the groups were religious scholars, and the love of books and education was passed from parent to child to grandchild. May we pass along these fine traditions to the next generation as well.

Dave Forrest – third draft October 2021



ROBERT BLACK

**SHIRLEY NEWMAN**

Shirley staked out a claim on the rec room within the first ten minutes that she was at Mills. Her great lament is that soon she will have to give it up.

