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Tanya Frank: Wooed by the Weather, Terrain, and Girl Down the Block

Jeremy Rosenberg | March 7, 2013

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Each week, Jeremy Rosenberg (@LosJeremy) asks, "How did you - or your family before you - wind up living in Los Angeles?"

This week we hear from writer **Tanya Frank**:

CHAPTER ONE

"Long before I was even a twinkle in my mother's eye, my forebears, like so many other Russian Jewish immigrants of the day, left the old country and a *Shtetl* in the Pale of Settlement that no one remembers how to pronounce anymore and set sail for the new world and a life free of persecution.

"The story has it that when the boat docked in England to replenish provisions, my great uncle Uri was so sick that the family had to disembark. They landed up in the Poor Jews Shelter in Aldwych, East London. In the time Uri took to recover, my *Bube* (great grandmother) had found work, so they stayed in the area and two generations later that's where my mother was born, smack bang in the middle of the rag trade.

"I grew up resenting that sickly uncle who I'd never met. I wished the family had been able to rid themselves from the burden of caring for him. If they had just tossed him overboard or sold him for a few shillings, I could have been born in New York City, a place that I saw in *West Side Story*, a city of delicatessens and adventure, and a cool American accent.

"Instead my childhood was spent on a council housing estate in East London that was built by the government to house poor people. The flats were constructed upon shit -- literally. The place had been a sewerage farm before it became our home. Just a few feet beneath the concrete, excrement festered. Some days when it was especially hot, the smell wafted up through the outside drains and rats clawed their way along the exposed part of the River Ching, from which centuries earlier, Chingford had got its name.



"We were allocated to number 49, Yew Court, Lilac Way. No one knew why this dismal block of council flats was named after a tree, or the street for a flower. Perhaps wishful thinking, because aside from a square patch of grass that was used as a dog toilet, nothing much grew there at all.

"With so little greenery and so much grey, I was prone to daydreaming, to wanting for something better. It was called America.

"I had a contact, a lone relative. As an infant, my mother had been placed in Norwood's **Jewish orphanage**. It was just after the Second World War when Elizabeth Emanuel, a wealthy, bohemian lady in want of a little philanthropy, found her there.

"For a few years my mother was indulged, fed a diet of Beatrix Potter and Enid Blyton and all the things that a poor orphan was not normally privy to. Then it ended, just like that, because Elizabeth Emanuel, or Auntie Betty as Mum called her, left England to journey to America. She set sail on the Queen Mary from Southampton, making the very same crossing that my great uncle would have made if he hadn't got sick.

"If Auntie Betty had been married, she could have adopted my mother and taken her to America. As it was, Betty was gay, and gay women were not allowed to adopt children in 1959, the year that she left England to make her new life.

"Upon arrival in the Big Apple, Elizabeth worked as an editor for Doubleday, the book publisher. It was four years later in 1963 that she traveled cross-country to promote sales.

"In a letter she sent to us at the time, she wrote, "It was about a [two-] month trip and I went to all the different book shops. I love this country. I saw the Grand Canyon, the Petrified Forest and then I went to some of the old cities in New Mexico -- very romantic. I think it is a beautiful way of life, the Indians, all the dome-shaped buildings. I have decided I want to live somewhere in the West." And that is what she did.

CHAPTER TWO

"By the time I had started school in East London, Auntie Betty was working as a researcher and story analyst for **Irwin Allen** at Twentieth Century Fox in Los Angeles. She told us that when the film stars got crotchety, and their tempers frayed, Irwin called her to come to the main stage. She had the most elegant and quintessential English accent and it worked a treat, calming down and entertaining the cast and crew alike.

"Every week, Auntie Betty sent me letters typed on thin blue lightweight paper. Before opening them, I traced my fingers over the nine-cents worth of U.S.A postage stamps. I read and re-read her address, Hillcrest Road, Hollywood, California, 90028, United States of America.

"As well as the letters, I received my very own **View-Master** and a set of slides. On Sunday afternoons when the weather was too rotten to play out, I lay on my back on the living room floor, pointed the View-Master at the ceiling light and brought the images to life -- Land of the Giants and Lost in Space -- the very pictures that my aunt had helped to make.

"I have heard it said that history has a habit of repeating itself. In my case it certainly did. Auntie Betty's sexuality meant that she was freer in the artistic and liberal community of the Hollywood Hills than she would ever have been in West London. She paved the way for my liberation too.

"You see, like my aunt I am gay and I am a writer. I believe she influenced me, even though we were two generations apart. The house in the hills in which she and her life partner Maggie spent over forty years together, is the same house that my partner and I lovingly tend to today.

"It took me more than three decades to emigrate to Los Angeles. By the time I made the move I had two young children, Dale (thirteen) and Zachary (twelve), a full-time job and an extended family in the U.K. I had long given up on my childhood fantasy and had arrived in America for a fortnight's holiday. But like Elizabeth Emanuel had done in her day, I fell in love -- I was wooed by the weather, the terrain and the girl who lived a few doors down the street and who is now my partner of twelve years.

"My story, which informs the novel I've written, "**Chingford Hall**," is not all Disneyesque and sunshine. There are hard times too, moments when my gut aches from missing my English family and my niece and nephew's milestones. The bureaucracy and cost of immigration is never easy, and then there is the angst of a life with inadequate health care, an education from my country of origin that is not adequately recognized in the host country, and exorbitant prices for English food.



Tanya Frank with her Auntie Betty, in front of the council flats. Photo courtesy Tanya Frank



"I think as well about the common cause I have with a nation's worth of other American immigrants and migrants. I try to help others share their stories as a **facilitator** for Paper Legacies, an enterprise that provides memoir-writing workshops to assisted living communities.

"These days, when I walk in the canyons and climb the local hills, look out to the Channel Islands and see a ship on the water, I think of my great uncle who was unable to get here and spent his life in abject poverty.

"I think too, of those who came after him, including my mother, and I feel a tad of guilt, a touch of



Tanya Frank's Aunt Betty at the 20th Century Fox HQ. Photo courtesy Tanya Frank

I think, too, of those who came after him, including my mother, and I feel a tad of guilt, a touch of melancholia, and the sense that although I am here, I still straddle two worlds, never completely at home in either North or South, places that speak the same language, but with accents and dialects and cultures that are so different that I will always feel somewhat estranged, intrepid, a mighty traveler just like my Auntie Betty."

--Tanya Frank
(as emailed to Jeremy Rosenberg)

Do you or someone you know have a great Los Angeles Arrival Story to share? If so, then contact Jeremy Rosenberg via: arrivalstory AT gmail DOT com. Also contact or follow Rosenberg on Twitter @LosJeremy

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR
JEREMY ROSENBERG

Jeremy Rosenberg is a Los Angeles-based writer, editor, and consultant whose work has appeared in various books, magazines, newspapers, and online.

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