

When Uncle Leo Got Lost in Paris

By Judy Zatkan

We're having breakfast over at my cousin Lucky's place a few days after Irving's funeral. We were five girl cousins and a couple of husbands. Linda asked if anyone knew the story of how our great grandfather came to America. Fred's daughter had been researching the family, and they had been talking about it the other night. One of the other cousins said, "You mean when our grandfather came to America?"

Marilyn said, "You mean when my father got lost in Paris?"

"No, no. That was 1920. This was earlier. This was Bobe Lipson's father. Our great-grandfather. The one who built the building in Jerusalem," Annette explained.

"The guest house."

"Hostel."

"Whatever."

"With the clocks."

"One clock and one sundial."

"No, no. It was built with five clocks. They said that each clock was set with the time of a different place so people would feel at home even if they were from far away."

"I never heard that."

"Yeah."

"So when did our great-grandfather come to America?"

"I don't know. He went to Chicago to raise money for the building."

"I know this story. He was known as Shmuel the Americaner because he had been to America."

"Ok. So, when he got to Chicago, it was after the fire, and all the records had burned up. So, they said anyone who was a citizen should come down and register. So, he went down and signed everyone up. Himself and his wife and all his kids. So now they were all born in Chicago. So, when Bobe Lipson came to America with her children in 1920 she could enter the country legally because she was an American citizen."

"Wait a minute," Marilyn says. "That doesn't make sense. My father became a naturalized citizen. I've seen his naturalization papers. Why would he have to be naturalized if he was already a citizen?"

"I don't know. That's the story."

"Well, of course our parents weren't born yet. He couldn't sign them up. Later they were the children of a citizen, but they weren't citizens themselves because they were born someplace else. So I suppose they had to be naturalized when they came here."

"Well, when did this happen?"

"When was the fire in Chicago?"

"I don't know. Does anyone know?"

"I don't know. Look it up."

"That's not my favorite story. My favorite story is the one where my father gets lost in Paris."

"Oh, I know about that. Tell it."

"Well, the luggage got lost."

"It didn't get to France from Italy."

"Judy, you tell it."

"Ok, but I just know it from Aunt Celia. It was 1920. Zaide couldn't come right away, and then it was World War I. And then they finally had the money. And he sent for them."

"Bobe Lipson had the five kids. My mother was the youngest. Bobe Lipson was pregnant with her when Zaide left for America. She was seven by the time she saw her father. They were traveling together with another family. When they all got to Paris, they found that the luggage wasn't there. So Bobe Lipson got elected to go back to Italy and find all the trunks. Remember how small she was? Just tiny. But she was tough ---like all of us. So off she went by herself. I don't know what languages she spoke. Some French, I guess. I don't know about Italian."

"How long was she gone? She must have traveled by boat?"

"I don't know. I always thought she went over land. But she had to leave all the kids. Celia was the oldest at a20 or 21. I'm not sure exactly how old she was because they lied about her age so she would be a minor when they came into the country. Anyhow, it was Bastille Day, and they were in Paris. So, Uncle Leo, who's ten, wants to go out and see all the excitement."

Marilyn says, "No, no. That's not how my father told that part."

"Oh? What did he say happened?"

"He said that the sisters wanted to go SHOPPING!!"

"YES!! Shopping in Paris on Bastille Day!"

"Can you just see them? Bastille Day SALE!!"

"Of course, they went shopping!! What do you think they bought? In Paris in 1920!"

"But they said my father couldn't go with them. So he tagged along behind. And they didn't realize he was there. And they were going in and out of stores. He wasn't sure what store they went in. And then he was lost. And a policeman found him. But my father didn't speak French."

"And they took him to an orphanage."

"Well, no. He said they took him from police station to police station. And the sisters were always one police station behind him. But the police couldn't understand him because all he spoke was Yiddish. Here was this little ten-year-old boy with payas alone in Paris, and they didn't know where he belonged, and they couldn't talk to him."

"I heard they took him to a Catholic orphanage. A *German* Catholic orphanage. And they could sort of communicate because he spoke Yiddish and they spoke German."

"Well, what I heard was that when the sisters found out he was missing, Aunt Celia said --Now you understand that I got this from Aunt Celia."

"Oh. But she was always mad at my mother," Linda said. "You know what Celia told me? She had to go out to work. And she would buy clothes. And my mother would wear them and ruin them. And Celia couldn't say anything. Celia was always mad at my mother."

"So, Aunt Celia said that when they realized that Leo was lost, Eva said, 'The hell with him. Who needs him?'"

"But Celia knew that she'd be in trouble. She was the oldest. Imagine Bobe Lipson comes back from Italy, and they've lost the only son? So, they found him by going to the police who sent them to the orphanage. And that's how Uncle Leo got lost in Paris."

Lucky said, "But you don't know there's a postscript to the story. Do you remember when I was engaged to marry Michael? We were going to Oceanside, and he was going to introduce me to his parents. Well, Michael always liked a good story. So, on the way down there, we're in the car, and he starts telling me about how his father, when he was a little boy, got lost in Paris. And I said to him, "Wait a minute. That wasn't *your* father. That's *my* father." He was trying to steal our story!"