

Judith Berlin's story of

Ruth



In another culture, she'd have been called 'chippy' or 'cheeky'. Her family thought of her as vibrant, energetic, and fun. Brooklyn born in 1920, Ruth Berlin thrived on her East European Jewish families' love. Her father, born Saul Gorodoevski, became Gordievsky, then Gordon, via Ellis Island's name editing tradition. Saul (or Chaim, or Jamie), was brilliant and scholarly. A fashion designer, he overcame immigrant barriers, later taking the professional name James Gordon. Ruth's beautiful mother Henrietta was rumoured to descend from gypsy queens.

Ruth was bright, vivacious, and outgoing. She had curly reddish brown hair, long legs, her mother's cheekbones and her father's piercing blue eyes. Ruth and her brother's weekends were punctuated with childhood street fights – Jews ('Hymies', or 'Yids') pitched small stones with neighbourhood Irish Catholics ('Micks'). Her father bought boxing gloves and taught her how to throw punches, in case the "sticks and stones" sayings didn't work. She spent many hours in movie matinees. Hypnotized by early cowboy heroes such as Tom Mix, Ruth was nicknamed "Tommy", and it stuck for life.

Mother Henrietta gave young Ruth the leather-bound "World Stories of Travel and Adventure" which fed her eagerness to travel and explore the world. Ruth loved to move: dance, swim, walk, skate, ski. By her late teens, she had broken a few bones but was undaunted. She loved dare-devil rides and hot pastrami sandwiches at Coney Island. She learned Greek and Latin in school and became a lover of music and of the English language. She read Emerson, Wordsworth, Shakespeare, Yeats. She volunteered at a New York settlement house. She excelled at an all-girls college. Her father's fashion design work took them to California and her and her brother to UCLA. While a UCLA student, she was also: a junior journalist at Time magazine; a seasonal farmworker, side by side with Spanish Americans; and a ticket-seller at the Los Angeles Central train station. She was fired from the train station job for secretly selling discounted tickets to poor families. By the time she got her Bachelor's, she had renamed herself Ruth Eloise Hope Gordon. The Gordon family was wearing a groove in the trail between New York and L.A., and Ruth continued the tradition, adding a side-trail, outside San Francisco, testing bombs for the War Department and becoming a vocational teacher there.

Ruth's beauty attracted the attentions of John Garfield, George Sanders, and other stars, but she didn't give a hoot for public glamour. At UCLA, her love of theatre led her to the seedling Theater Arts department. She swore off acting after a Restoration comedy scene with Branaird Duffield, who had planted cue cards onstage and 'threw me around to get to them'. Ruth grew tan, walking miles to school, past endless orange groves. Her gang of theatre-lovers, frat boys and lefties included the frighteningly handsome intellectual, Ted. Friendship became love, clinched by a ski trip to Mammoth. War broke out, and Ted was made a naval officer.

They were married at New York City's Tavern On The Green on one of Ted's leaves. Soon after, her father, now James Gordon, co-owner of Smart Mode of California, died suddenly, on the job in L.A.

Ruth became pregnant. Their first child was born ten months later. When peace broke out naval hero Ted was released to New York to join her. They moved to Long Island, but the family was hounded by a McCarthyite neighbour. The family had a second daughter, moved to an apartment, then another home. Ruth's mother's death in '53 cemented her agnosticism. She had a third daughter. Ruth loved being pregnant, but she couldn't bear being awake for any of the births.

Then Ted lost his textile job, and Ruth now sang the merits of sunny Cal. They left the extended New York family nests. She flew with the children; he drove with their belongings.

Between '45 and '54, Ruth and Ted lived in six places, finally settling in Malibu with the help of Ted's G.I. down payment. They were the only Jews on a twenty-mile stretch of coastline.

Ruth had a life-long restlessness, a need to give her life fresh starts. When she wasn't moving homes, she was moving the furniture. She would surprise her family with new living arrangements when they came home from work and school. As a housewife in Malibu and West L.A., she became a peace and social justice activist. She worked for the League of Women Voters, S.A.N.E., N.A.A.C.P, Women for Peace. She wrote letters, marched, and gave donations wherever she could. Her fading blue marching hat became covered with political buttons.

She and Ted entertained, starting in New York early in their marriage. Their parties were known for fun and laughter, loud music (from Cole Porter to Tahitian drums), Ruth's good cooking, and flowing drinks.

In rural Malibu – "the sticks" – Ruth joined the merry "Grasshoppers", housewives who read and played scrabble, sunned all summer and discreetly drank crème de menthe drinks called Grasshoppers. Ted became an end of day martini man. After seeing the sobering "Days of Wine and Roses" at the family drive-in, for a few days they contemplated drinking less.

By 1962, the family had lived and owned in Malibu twice (the second time was a sunset view on the same street as the first) and West L.A. three times. Ruth had persevered with approximately one miscarriage per pregnancy until the fourth, the "lucky extra" – a boy- was born in 1960. Ruth was 40. She claimed to identify with the Anne Bancroft character in "The Pumpkin Eater", who drove husband Peter Finch mad by only feeling fully alive when 'preggers'. Cancer and a hysterectomy brought short her potential for more pregnancies.

Ruth remained sometimes naïve, in spite of becoming worldly, well-traveled, and sophisticated. In '58, after a disastrous beauty parlour attempt to platinize her hair, she attended an evening junior high PTA meeting 'in town'. Shorn, fried hair glowing yellow-white, she responded to the chair's call for a motion by blurting, "I'd like to make a movement", causing gales of laughter. When she had tried gardening, her son in law tricked her into thinking she had grown the store-bought zucchini he placed in her little plot in West L.A.

She developed high blood pressure and tried to control her temper later in life. Before then, the family was treated to occasional epithets and explosions. She might hurl sponges or magazines, as when Richard Nixon was on tv. Once, Ted neglected burnt a duck on the barbeque when guests were due, and the carcass took an unexpected flight through the kitchen. The term "Jesus H. Christ" sometimes split the air. Ruth also used the "Bronx Cheer", an impish, splatting sound, done with tongue out, thumb to nose, and four fingers waving. Many of her favourite phrases and homilies referred to animals: "That'll get his goat", "I'm bleeding like a stuck pig"; "I could eat a horse"; "You'll catch more bears with honey", "He's a snake in the grass" (Richard Nixon, again). She told me, "The eyes are the windows of the soul, so put your mascara on; otherwise, men can't really see you". To Ruth, the greatest personal tragedy for a woman was to die a spinster.

Although McCarthyism and the Cold War had shadowed Ruth and Ted from coast to coast, Ruth continually volunteered in international and national peace and integration groups. She loved rubbing shoulders with Hollywood progressives like Harry Belafonte or the vitamin-popping Warren Beatty. Once, she got on the afternoon quiz show "PDQ". There, answering skill-testing questions while looking like a cross between Janet Leigh and Katherine Hepburn, she yelped her way to a beaver stole and a new

vacuum cleaner. Ruth had a repertoire of laughs, all the way to the prized snort, earned from her only by the truly comic.

In the 70's and 80's in Southern Cal, Ruth also tried owning an antiques store, hostessing at the Pritikin Center, selling real estate, and getting her post office worker papers. Her appetite for life knew no bounds, and in the mid-eighties.

Early feminist as she was, she wouldn't stop bleaching her hair ("your father would hate it"), or confront Ted about his drinking ("We've got to stop at the store for Ted's wine"). She, too, still sometimes drank more than necessary, as while cooking a la Julia Child. Life was sweet, though. Ted had earned early retirement, and they bought up the coast, although Ruth's appetite for change knew no bounds, and she was talking of a townhouse in England (they almost bought one sight unseen) or a lanai in Hawaii.

In 1986, Ruth started happily going to an exercise gym. She was thrilled to get her first credit card without her husband's name on it. She was hoping to get back in shape, hoping for world peace, for a new U.S. president, fewer gun crimes, less violence, more money for the poor. She and Ted had almost bought a townhouse in England, partially to be near their now ex-patriot son, and she toyed with opening a bed and breakfast. Ted wasn't that interested. She always called him 'My Rock', and he wasn't about to budge anymore.

On sleepy Sunday March afternoon, Ruth got into her car to go home after a local Democratic women's committee meeting. She slowly pulled away from the curb, then suddenly was struck by a drunk driver going ninety miles an hour in the wrong lane. Her car was built like a tank, but she died within hours.

When he heard the news of her death, her newly hired roof repairman cried. Ted and the four adult children howled in a heap in her and Ted's darkened bedroom. Famous and not famous friends and family filled her backyard memorial, sunglasses masking their red eyes.

She was a great cook, a great reader, a great telephone ear to her many long distance friends, a great correspondent with friends made in Europe and Britain, a great mother, and a wonderful grandmother. She had corresponded with the president of Mexico. She had dressed as a clown for her children's elementary school and brought the family to the pivotal San Francisco to march for peace in Viet Nam.

The clothes in the closet, now without her form, lost what had seemed their stylish allure. Ted packed and sent them to the needy in Cuba. He collected money and bought a bus for a charity in her name.

One word Ruth used often was "hope", as in 'I hope John Kennedy wins'. The body is gone over twenty years now, but Hopes still lives.