

Rachel's story

Zelec, Northern Bohemia - 1783

Rachel watched the horse drawn cart carrying the coffin of her husband Nataniel set off. She called her children together, all dressed in their best Shabbat clothes, wrapped her shawl around her against the cold autumn air and set off to follow Nataniel on his final journey to the cemetery in Mecholupy. The older boys leading the younger children. The year was 1783. The Jewish cemetery lay between Zelec and Mecholupy about four kilometres away from their small stone cottage. The cemetery was situated in a small copse at the top of a hill in the midst of fields growing hops. It was surrounded by a low stone wall and had been bought by both Jewish Communities from a local farmer. The land was not particularly fertile or usable lying on the hill top, so it had not been too big for the farm. It was a peaceful spot and seemed very suitable for a cemetery.

Rachel and Nataniel had been married for eighteen years, but had been childhood sweethearts for much longer. Although severe sickness was always a present danger, she was still numb from shock at the speed of the pneumonia that had taken her husband away from her.

As they walked the leaves blew across the pathway and that strange bright autumn light gleamed through the trees. She tried to remember the first time that she had met Nataniel.

The Frankl family had come to Zelec, the village where her family, headed by Marcus Koniersch had lived for many years. They arrived in 1745, when she was just four years old. Refugees from Prague, escaping the banishment of the Jews as demanded by Empress Maria Theresa because she thought they were becoming too rich and powerful.

Simon Wolf Frankl, Mayor of Prague in 1741 had organised a great celebration for the birth of Empress Maria Theresa's male heir on 13 March 1741, later to become Emperor Joseph II. Although impressed by the celebrations, the Empress decided that the Jews were becoming too rich and powerful and she wanted to bring them down a peg or two. So, she issued an edict expelling them from all of Bohemia. Her advisers tried to persuade her to change her mind, but to no effect and the Jews were forced to leave Prague in January 1745.

The Czech population of Prague took advantage of this decree and used it to mount a number of attacks on the Jewish areas raiding the stores and stealing what they could lay their hands on. Those who tried to protect their property were immediately set upon and beaten up. Many were killed. In one particular riot, Moses Frankl, a *Shochet* (a kosher butcher) was attacked and beaten up.

The ghetto was an immensely crowded area where Jews lived in densely populated conditions, separated from the rest of the Prague population. In the early 18th Century the Jewish population of Prague was just over 12,000, with just over one third being below the age of 10. Houses were three to five stories high and divided into many tiny separate living units, with more than forty people living in each house. The cramped and crowded conditions were not pleasant, sanitation was virtually non-existent and disease spread quickly through the packed houses. There was little privacy and thieves and scavengers were always lurking around for an opportunity to grab some item of limited value from a slightly careless person.

It was not a good place to live and bring up a family, so as soon as he recovered enough to walk, although he never completely recovered from the severe beating, he and his young wife, Rebecca, decided to leave Prague to find a safer home in the countryside. Moses had a contact about 35 kilometres from Prague in the manor of Zelec, with Marcus Koniersch, who had on occasion requested him to come and carry out the slaughter of some of his cattle. Marcus and his family were well established in the manor and he also ran an inn, which was quite a common activity for a Jewish family and one of the businesses that Jews were allowed to operate.

Moses and Rebecca decided to move to Zelec, far enough away from Prague to be able to stay quietly and safely, but near enough to be able to return if the situation changed.

The manor and estate of Zelec was within the area of the larger village Mecholupy, some twenty-five kilometres south west of the town of Louny in the region of Usti nad Labem. The manor house was built in the second half of the sixteenth century. From 1747-1810 the Zelec estate belonged to the Zessner of Spitzenberg and consisted of a stone fortress built with beautiful spacious rooms on the ground and first floors and with a free-standing mill in a near-by building.

Moses and Rebecca and their one son Nataniel, aged eight, arrived in the village in the Spring of 1745. Moses's contact Marcus, found them space in a Christian owned house with two other Jewish families. Moses carried out ritual slaughtering of the animals brought to him by Marcus and began to travel around the local area around Zelec, visiting other Jewish families and carrying out the slaughter of chicken, ducks and geese as required by families prior to their main Shabbat meal on a Friday evening. As he travelled around, he would be given fruit and vegetables in exchange for his butchering services. Occasionally he would also be given cloth, made by the family he was visiting or even some other practical goods, such as baskets. The family began to enjoy their

country life and even though Jews were soon allowed and even encouraged to return to Prague, they decided to stay in Zelec. Moses's health remained poor but as a learned and Jewishly highly educated man, he began to teach the Jewish boys in the area. In particular, he began to train Nataniel in the intricate laws of Tractate Chullin in the Talmud that deal with *shechita* and in particular the relevant chapters in the Shulchan Aruch (Code of Jewish Law written by Joseph Caro in the 14th C CE).

Nataniel was a good looking, bright lad and an able student. Although the days travelling around the gentle rolling hills of the surrounding countryside made for long and wearying days for a young lad, he enjoyed being with his father and he loved to listen to the stories from the bible as they walked from place to place.

The land around Zelec was very fertile and the most common crop was hops and so there were many local people who made their own beer. In fact the name Mecholupy in German is known as Michelob and its hops were so highly regarded that it's possible that in 1896 Adolphus Busch named his beer after it as he set up his brewery in St Louis, Illinois.

Nataniel also spent time with the Koniersch children, who were quite wild as compared to his much quieter and studious home with Moses and Rebecca. They roamed around their farm and it's animals. In the summer they swam in the local lake and as a group were constantly getting up to mischief, but were just about tolerated by their parents and other villagers.

The inn that the Koniersch's ran was a little bit of a hub where a number of business transactions were carried out. The family had a bit of a reputation as horse traders and wheeler – dealers.

The winters in the region were bitterly cold and dark and finding enough food and keeping warm were significant challenges. Many of the older members of the community found the winters extremely tough and every year, a few of the older and weaker ones did not survive to see the spring arrive.

Rachel was the youngest Koniersch child, a rather quiet girl, but still full of energy and ready to compete in tree climbing with any of her older siblings. She was six years old when Nataniel started spending some time with her family. She liked to watch him as he was challenged by her brothers to take part in some slightly wild and risky venture. Nataniel was already better educated than her family and she particularly enjoyed hearing him tell them all one of the bible stories he had learnt from his father.

Moses, as the most learned Jewish man in the area, and a descendent of the *Cohanim*, priests from the Temple times, led Shabbat and festival services in the small prayer room in the close-by larger community in Mecholupy.

He also had been trained by his father to carry out *brit milah*, the ritual circumcision for all new born male babies, once they had survived for eight days after birth.

Nataniel, grew into a strong and healthy young man and had mastered many of the intricate rules and laws of Kashrut, he had begun to take over some of the slaughtering from his father and by the time he reached seventeen years old, he was beginning to make visits around the area on his own. His father's health was failing and so much more responsibility fell on his shoulders.

Rachel aged thirteen was a bright girl. She had an aptitude for languages and was a quick learner. She had picked up some German from visitors to the house, she spoke Czech with their neighbours and had memorized many of the regular Hebrew prayers recited in daily and Shabbat prayers. She had explored the surrounding fields and woods and had learnt about many of the herbs and useful plants that grew in their area. In the autumn, she was the best at finding the tasty wild mushrooms that grew in amongst the pine trees and she knew how to cut them up, lay them out in the sun to dry and then store in dry containers, so they could be hydrated and used throughout the winter. She also was becoming a skilled seamstress and was learning how to read and write by sitting in on some of the lessons given by Moses to the boys.

In 1756 the wider world intruded on the everyday life in Zelec. The Austrian Empress, Marie Theresa wanted to re-capture Silesia from the Prussians. The Prussian Army led by the military genius, Frederik the Great had captured Sillesia from the Austrian Empire in their last conflict.

At the age of eighteen, Nataniel was required to join the Austrian army as the plans for war developed.

Moses and Rebecca were delighted to welcome Nataniel home in 1762 a very different man. He had been injured twice, recovered and grown into a tough fighting soldier and a leader of men. He had lived through virtual starvation, scouring the broken countryside for food during the cold winter months and had learned how to seize food from local farmers and peasants at any and every opportunity. He had observed enough about the ridiculous ambitions of Emperresses and Kings to last him a lifetime and the complete disregard they held for the life and safety of their countrymen.

Although only twenty five he was now greatly toughened and much more aware of the pitfalls of the wider world. He had learnt that many people were not how they appeared and that the 'authority' of the nobility was never to be fully trusted or relied on. He returned home wanting to build a quiet home country life, free from the arbitrary and restrictive rules of the army but at the same time cynical about the rather naïve religious rules that he had learnt about as a child.

While he had been away much building had taken place in Zelec, the old Gothic style church had been rebuilt and dedicated to St. Nicholas had been completed in the baroque style just before he had joined the army and construction of a new fortified castle had been started in 1760. With his army experience he became involved in this project and provided good advice to the Zessners, the local Manor owners.

He also discovered that the young Rachel had grown into a very attractive and skilled young woman. It didn't take long before they had a plan to get married. But it wasn't so simple because of the restrictive rules of the Familianten laws.

The whole process was slowed by the death of Nataniel's father Moses, who had suffered from poor health for many years. Somehow he had held on while Nataniel was away, but as soon as he had safely returned, Moses had enough energy to remind his son about the rules of *shechita* and to pass on the final lessons. Moses was buried in the cemetery that lay between Zelec and Micholupy. Nataniel took the death of his father seriously and made a commitment to complete the full required mourning cycle of prayer. This meant that his marriage to Rachel was delayed for a year, but it also gave them time to gather the documents, register with the local magistrate and pay the required taxes. The Zessners were able to assist and persuade the magistrate to look favourably at the marriage request.

The permission for the marriage to take place was finally granted in the autumn of 1765. There was great excitement in the Koniersch household. Aron, the head of the family was delighted to celebrate the marriage of the daughter of the house and planned a great celebration. The whole Jewish community in the vicinity of Micholupy was invited and additional Koniersch family from the largest nearby town of Zatec.

Rachel was dressed in the wedding dress used by her mother and grandmother and Nataniel in his best Shabbat clothes.

Aron Koniersch, Marcus's oldest son, owned some properties in the area, and rented them a small cottage in the village of Micholupy, quite close to the house which was used as the place the Jews gathered for prayers, prior to the establishment of the synagogue. They began to settle into married life. Nataniel carried out his butchering tasks for the Koniersch farmers and made a weekly tour of the local Jewish community carrying out the ritual slaughter for local Jewish families on the animals they wanted to use for their weekend Shabbat dinner. Nataniel, as a result of all his training as a Shochet and with all he had learnt from his father became a regular leader of religious services on Shabbat and festivals. He also became a source of advice on ritual issues for his local community.

The traditional role of the Jewish woman at the heart of the family covered three main function; *challah* – the baking of the traditional bread eaten on Shabbat, *hadlakah* – the lighting of the Shabbat and festival lights (candles) and *niddah* – the keeping of family ritual, following the dietary laws and personal hygiene through the use of the *Mikveh*

Rachel continued to develop her skills as a baker, making Challah every week and a variety of small pies and cakes. She had a real creative streak and quickly developed a reputation for making cakes for special events. She also developed her seamstress skills.

It wasn't long before Rachel became pregnant and she was amazed as her body changed shape and the new life grew within her, especially as the winter months gave way to spring and the surrounding countryside also came to life. The birth of a child was always a risky time for women. Protection for the mother and child was all based on a combination of superstitions, prayers and herbal medication. Months of pregnancy came under the sovereignty of specific planets, with Saturn ruling the eighth and Jupiter the ninth. Between the malevolent influence of Saturn and the unlucky even number eight, the Talmud considered a child born in the eighth month to be nonviable. Some sages that such a child shouldn't be nursed except when it would be dangerous for the mother to retain her milk. However, Rachel was well into her nine month when the contractions started. Her bedroom was prepared for the birth by a Koniersch cousin, Miriam who acted as the local Jewish midwife. A stack of ferns were laid outside the bedroom door and the walls of the room would be chaked with symbols to ward of *Lillit* the dangerous demon who was known to steal new babies! Men would gather their *tefillin* and it would be hung on the head of the bed

Rachel was provided with a special birth amulet, while Miriam brought a birthing stool. In a separate part of the house, the men gathered together and began start to recite psalms. Once Miriam had checked that Rachel's womb was open and the contractions were coming very quickly , she threw some Rosemary onto the brazier to sweeten the air. The baby came quickly and Miriam was delighted to announce the safe arrival of a boy.

A first born boy was an occasion for great celebrations. After eight days the *Brit Milah*, circumcision would take place and then a month later the *pidyon ha-ben* would take place. Torah declares that every firstborn male, belongs to God and in the time of the Temple first born sons were given to the priests to work in the Temple. Tradition states that if the father wishes to keep his son he must be redeemed from this service by giving money to charity.

From Maggie Anton's *Rashi's Daughters Book II: Miriam*

Juda their first son was born in early 1767. It was a custom to dress the baby in red to ward off evil spirits at the *Brit Milah*. Rachel and Nataniel dressed in their wedding clothes carried Juda to the synagogue. Obadiah the local *mohel* arrived carrying his equipment. He handed his assistant the *azmil*, the special knife used for the circumcision. Rachel noticed that Obadiah had strangely shaped thumbnails. Rachel and Nataniel had asked her father, Marcus to be the *Sandek*, for the *Brit Milah*. This special task is regarded as an honour and a blessing and Marcus was required to hold the baby throughout the event. A special chair for the *Sandek* and an additional chair for Elijah, the prophet, were placed on the synagogue *bima*. Obadiah gave Rachel the wine-soaked cloth for the baby to suck, who then placed the baby in his grandfather's lap removed his nappy and Obadiah approached the child, placed his thumbnail under his foreskin, pulled it taut, and sliced off the extra skin. He then used his sharp nails to push down the membrane underneath, exposing the corona. He then finished off his handiwork with a neat clean bandage. Aron, Rachel's brother walked up to the *bima* with a glass of wine for Rachel and Nataniel so that they could join in the blessings for the health of the baby and his parents. Rachel told Aron that the name of the new child was to be Juda. Aron was delighted and immediately gave a *dvar torah* on why Juda was such a good name.

More children followed in fairly quick succession, David and Sara were born in 1769, Michael in 1771, Isak 1772, Samuel 1774, Rosl 1775 and finally Ester in 1775.

Life in the family was busy and chaotic, and although Nataniel very strictly enforced Jewish ritual, it was a loving household. Juda, David and Sara as the oldest children took on most responsibilities and chores, instructing and guiding the younger ones in how things needed to be done.

Nataniel's mother Rebecca had died in 1776, she had lived for a further twelve years after Moses died, but the spark had gone from her life and although she did what she could to help Rachel with the growing family, she slowly sort of faded out of their lives.

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After Nataniel

Rachel was made of stern stuff and although Nataniel's loss severely affected her, she was also determined to help and support her children to make the most of their lives. Her practical seamstress and baking skills were very well known within the local Jewish community and she worked very hard to build a reputation for cakes and breads for special occasions, as well as offering to repair clothes and create new clothes by patching and combining older partly worn out items. Juda in particular grew up fast and learnt from his uncle Aron how to trade and work with cattle and horses. As soon as he reached his twenties, Rachel started to search for a bride for him. Juda in his travelling often visited one of the largest nearby towns, Louny. On one such visit he was invited to stay with the Hirsch family, where he discovered Amalia, a girl older than him, but still a very good match. With help from the Zessner's and their connection and reliance on the trading skills of the Koniersch family, the rules and requirements of the Familanten laws were relatively easily met or circumvented and so Juda and Amalia were able to get married in November 1789 in Siroke Trebcice and set up home there. Their descendants helped to establish a significant Jewish Community in Siroke Trebcice

The next to get married was Sara in April 1793 to Aron Schirmer and they stayed living in Mecholupy.

She was followed by Michael who married Theresia Braun in August 1803, they moved to Vastislav about 20 kilometers north west of Louny. Michael initially worked as an assistant schnapps distiller but continued to train and learn the laws of ritual slaughter and eventually received his licence to carry out his chosen profession.