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Remembering a rose that bloomed By Gil Troy

Susi Shoshana Cohen died earlier this month at the age of 100. My wife's maternal grandmother, she was a living link to the immigrant generation, the uprooted millions who joined the miraculous mass migration from the perils of eastern Europe to the wonders of North America. It's an amazing epoch in Jewish history, North American history, and human history.

Susi Cohen's particular epic began on Jan. 1, 1907, in Brailla, Romania. One of six children born to an innkeeper, she would remember Romania as a land of natural beauty and rough conditions. During the Holocaust, Susi, by now married and the mother of her only child, Annie, lived in Bucharest.

While others suffered under the anti-Semitic regime, Susi remembered a few restrictions but more often spoke of Bucharest's grandeur. The family resisted the identity of "survivor," out of respect for the Jews in other parts of Romania and Europe who suffered horribly in ghettos and concentration camps.

Ironically, their greatest wartime trauma came from the Americans, who bombed Bucharest because of Romania's alliance with Nazi Germany. Their house was burned, destroying Annie's trousseau, the clothes and linens a family prepared for an expectant bride. By 1947, the postwar rise of Communism made life for the family unbearable. One day, the three left their house, turned the key, and walked away from their possessions and their life in Romania.

The family tried to reach Palestine, to participate in the great adventure of rebuilding a Jewish state, but the British blockade rerouted them to Cyprus. They spent months in a displaced persons camp learning Hebrew. They arrived in Israel shortly after the state was declared in May 1948.

Reunited with a sister who had moved in the 1930s to what became Israel, Susi and her family lived in Jaffa. Conditions were harsh during and after the War of Independence. Susi's brother-in-law died in battle, and Susi cared for her grieving sister, two young nieces, her daughter, and her husband, who never acclimated to the heat and the tumult of an embattled state in formation. After a few years, the family made the difficult choice to leave Israel, something Susi's daughter regretted deeply.

The family soon settled in Canada, along with hundreds of thousands of other refugees. Collectively and individually, these immigrants built extraordinary lives and developed impressive communities. Susi would live to see her daughter marry, prosper, and raise four children, who themselves produced eleven grandchildren. North America's freedoms and openness offered tremendous opportunities to Susi's clan. She would see her family thrive in real estate, psychology, chemistry, law and nursing.

In the final phase of her life, Susi became a pioneer in the modern quest to find dignity as we age. In Romania, in the 1920s, she studied art – and three paintings from that period survive, thanks to the sister who migrated to Palestine and brought them there.

Like so many women of her generation, Susi stopped painting once she got married. When Susi's husband died in 1979, Susi's daughter recommended that she take an art class. For the next 27 years, until her eyesight failed her, Susi painted. Most impressively, she grew as an artist, improving her technique and tackling more sophisticated subjects.

Today, many homes in Canada, the United States and Israel boast "Grandma Susi" landscapes – an eloquent tribute to an immigrant's grit, a democratic country's warm embrace, and the creative zeal of this irrepressible artistic spirit.

We are also blessed by my wife's foresight in videotaping Susi's "ethical will" and memoirs last year. Beautifully filmed and edited by Iris Wagner of Memoir Productions, we have a video to supplement the beautiful pictures, warm memories and legacy of freedom that Susi bequeathed.

Susi's Hebrew name, Shoshana, means rose. The name fit her, offering an apt metaphor for her generation too. Often rooted in foreign soil, roses frequently end up adorning different locations. And while necessity forces them to be tough, even prickly, growing thorns early on, they are best remembered for their blossoming, flourishing themselves while enriching us all with their hard-earned, but infectious, loveliness.

Susi Cohen's life was and is a blessing to so many who luxuriated in her art, her goodness, her values, her life story, which was so typical of her generation yet unique in its own ways, too.

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