

VERY BRIEF AND APPROXIMATE BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES ON  
THE YIDDISH POETESS RUKHL FISHMAN

Rukhl was born June 10, 1935, in Philadelphia.

Her brother, Shikl, was born in 1926 (also in Philadelphia).

Her father, Aaron Fishman, came to the USA from Soroke, Bessarabia, c. 1910; her mother, Sonia Horwitz Fishman, came to the USA from Ostropolye, Ukraine, in 1920.

Rukhl grew up in a Yiddish-secular activist home (with Yiddish as the only language of the home) from which anything and everything that had to do with Yiddish in Philadelphia emminated. That home and/or the dental laboratory where both Aaron and Sonia worked together for many, many years, was the "headquarters" for Yiddish language and culture in and around Philadelphia all the years the Fishmans lived there..

Rukhl attended the arbeter-ring shuln (elementary & high school) in Philadelphia from 1941 - 1949.

During those years the family would take frequent trips to their many Jewish farmer friends in Vineland, N.J. and would, half-seriously, consider moving there. At an early age Rukhl grew to love the farm animals and rural life-style.

she was a camper in Camp Boiberk for several summers, where she was actively involved in Yiddish programing and activities.

She attended an agricultural high school in Philadelphia, 1944-1949 .

Due to her father's asthma, she and her parents moved to Los Angeles (summer 1949) where her mother's 3 brothers and their families lived. (Shikl had already come to NY the year before -in 1948 - to do his graduate work at Columbia U and study at YIVO).

In Los Angeles. Rukhl received private lessons from the poetess Malke Tussman, who encouraged (and guided her) to continue writing Yiddish poetry (which she had begun doing in Phila.). In Los Angeles, Rukhl also became active in the Hashomer Hatsair movement.

In August, 1951, her brother Shikl and his kale, Gella Schweid, had their "farknasung" in the Los Angeles Yidisher Kultur Klub. They were married in New York in December 1951. Rukhl and her parents came back to the East Coast for the wedding and decided to resettle in Philadelphia.

Upon her return, Rukhl became more actively involved in the hashomer hatsair movement and went to its hakhsharas in Hightstown, NJ and in Liberty, NY.

By 1953 she had met Theodore Holdheim, who had been sent from the hashomer movement in Israel as a shaliakh to the US. In NY he also attended the Julliard School of Music. (He was born in Germany and made aliya with his zionist-committed father and mother when he was approx. 12 years old). About 1952/53 Rukhl came to NY. She and Theodore had a "wedding-send-off" before departing for Israel, August 1954, in a Philadelphia Yiddish school. (She had already been to Israel once before-- during the summer of 1952 or 53-- and had worked there on a kibbutz).

Rukhl and Theodore settled in Kibbutz Bet Alfa, which was Theodore's kibbutz. Theodore was a gifted teacher of music and mathematics as well as an active member of the movement.

Rukhl insisted that she not be called "Rakhel" (the Hebrew pronunciation of her name) and was known only as Rukhl in the kibbutz. She worked in the pardes, kerem (grape picking) and olive grove (up to about 1969) and had a special love for outdoor work.

she attended the first conference of Yung Yisroyel in Kibbutz Yagur in 1956 and published in its journal in 1954, 56 and 57).

Avrom Sutskever was a major force in guiding her and publishing her poetry in the goldene keyt from 1956 to the end of her life.

About 1957 (probably even before), she showed signs of fainting, physical weakness and various undiagnosed (or incorrectly-diagnosed) illnesses. From 1955/56 to 63/64 she had 8 miscarriages.

Over the years, Theodore was also seriously ill with various illnesses (heart, kidneys, diabetes). They took turns taking care of one another and the kibbutz was always supportive and helpful.

Malke Tussman visited Rukhl in Israel in 1960

Rukhl & Theodore visited the USA in 1962

One son was adopted in 1964 and the other in 1967

Aaron and Sonia Fishman visited Rukhl and Theodore twice - December 1957 and December 1964

Aaron Fishman died of asthma in Philadelphia in 1965

Sonia Fishman left Philadelphia and came to NY. In 1967 she settled in Israel

Shikl and Gella and their 3 sons lived in Jerusalem for 3 years from 1970-1973

Rukhl was given a year off from work in the kibbutz in 1972 and came to Jerusalem to take Yiddish courses at the Hebrew University and also took private Yiddish lessons with Yudi Mark. This was her year to read and study and write - which she did as much as her health permitted.

Malke Tussman lived in Jerusalem during that same year 1972

Sonia was diagnosed as having Altsheimers disease and returned to NY in 1975. She died in 1977. She was laid to rest next to her husband at the Workman's Circle Cemetary outside of Philadelphia

During the 1970's Rukhl's illness became more pronounced and was ultimately (in the 1980's) diagnosed to be Lupus.

She received the Manger Prize in 1978. Four books of her poetry, two in Yiddish and two in bilingual (Hebrew-Yiddish) editions, had been published by then.

- zun iber alts -1962
- derner nokhn regn - 1966
- himl tsvishn grozn/shamayim be-eysev - 1968
- vilde tsig/ iza pziza -1976

Arye Aharoni, the famous Israeli translator of Sholem Aleichem's works, translated her poetry into Hebrew (and was, coincidentally, a member of Kibbutz Bet Alfa).

Rukhl and Theodore made an all-out effort to visit the family in the USA for the last time in 1982 (ten years after their first visit)

Shikl and Gella spent 6 months in Jerusalem in 1983

Rukhl died on Saturday, August 26,1984 in Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem and Theodore died 6 months later. They were both buried on the cemetery of their Kibbutz Bet Alfa.

All of Rukhl's papers, manuscripts, letters, documents, photos, etc. were given to Shikl and Gella Fishman by Kibbutz Bet Alfa after Rukhl and Theodore's death and were brought back to New York where Gella (her sister-in-law) organized a comprehensive archival collection (see attached description) of her life and creative work.

(prepared by Gella & Shikl Fishman - December 1992)