

Thelma Cohen-Hymen-Hershkovit-Hackson

A Passing in Boynton Beach - An American Jewish life

By William Rabinowitz

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Cohen-Hymen-Hershkovit-Hackson, Thelma J. Hackson, 102, of Boynton Beach passed away on Dec. 24, 2008. Thelma (Cohen) was born in Atlantic City, NJ. on January 5, 1906. She married Zeidel Hymen in 1921. They worked together in retail, and had many stores and moved many times. He preceded her in death after 47 years of marriage in 1968. In 1968 she married Jack Hershkovit until he died in 1987. With the support of her children and step children she met James Hackson at an ecumenical pancake breakfast at the All Souls Abyssinian Church of Christ in Del Ray. She married James Hackson in 1991 until his death in 2001. Survived by daughter Nussy Hessel of the Sunrise Senior Care Center in Del Ray FL; son William Hymen (Sally) of Atlantic City NJ; granddaughters, Sunny Shapiro (Sue) of Boca Raton, Debbie Fine (Harold) of Jupiter FL; grandson Jerome Fine (Willow) of Frost Free, FL; step-granddaughters Sharon King (John) of Ft. Lee, NJ, Shaniqua Jones (Omar) of Del Ray, FL and 16 great-and step great grandchildren. Thelma was the oldest member of Temple Torah in Boynton Beach and the All Souls Abyssinian Church of Christ in Del Ray. She lived a life of great faith in God, and a positive attitude. She never had to change the initials embroidered on her towels. She always loved her family very much and they always came first. We will treasure all the memories of her and thank God for the many blessings and much love she gave to all of us. A memorial service will be held at Temple Torah on Jog Rd. in Boynton Beach at 9:00 to 9:15 AM Friday, December 26. Visitation will be held at the All Souls Abyssinian Church of Christ in Del Ray, Friday December 26, 2008 from 11:30 to 12:00 PM. Service will be celebrated at 12:00 PM. Following cremation the ashes will be buried at the Boynton Beach cemetery with James Hackson and at The Eternal Light Cemetery between Zeidel Hymen and Jack Hershkovit. In lieu of flowers, Thelma's family requested donations be made to the Hadassah Hospital Children's fund and the All Souls Abyssinian Church of Christ in Thelma's memory.

Margolis – Simpson Funeral Home of Boynton Beach (560) 134 -1908 entrusted with funeral arrangements.

Mendel and I met Thelma when she celebrated her 98th birthday party at the home. Mendel sang Thelma's favorite Yiddish song– “Az der rebe zingt, Zingn ale hasidim, *when the rebbe sings, all the Hasidim sing*”. I played the accordion. Mendel whirled and clapped and sang, his payyot flying in the air- his hearty laugh filling the room between stanzas. Thelma grinned

broadly from her wheel chair; her right hand opening and closing in the air in time to the music. Her left arm folded in front of her on her lap paralyzed from the stroke. The Haitian nursing attendants in the day room politely clapped and stared in confused amusement. Their job was to cut up the birthday sheet cake with a bit of ice cream afterwards. As the music stopped I looked out around the room full of walkers and wheelchairs. The Jewish patients remembered; the non-Jewish enjoyed. Few of the Jewish patient's children had ever heard the song before.

Thelma, even at 98, sharp, quick and clear, could swap quotes with Mendel and me. It was real fun to be in her presence.

"Thelma," I said, "Happy, Happy Birthday. I look forward to celebrating your 100th."

She looked up at me, the lovely blueness of her eyes slightly tinged with a yellowing age.

"You can live to be 100 if you give up all the things that make you want to live to be 100."
- Woody Allen, she said quickly. "I want a piece of my birthday cake with one of those large icing flowers on it, the pink one on the end. If you want me to enjoy my birthday be sure they cut that piece for me. They won't let me have too much sugar here. They say it is not good for my health." She leered at the support staff. They in turn just ignored her stare.

"Not, good for your health?" Mendel asked.

"No, the folks here at the home insist too much sugar will ruin me. I won't live to be 100 if I don't watch out." She said.

"If you live to the age of 100 you have it made because very few people die past the age of 100."

- George Burns, Mendel responded.

Thelma's mind was like greased lightning. This lady was no sleep walker. She was not patiently waiting for the end.

"Don't worry about the world coming to an end today. It's already tomorrow in Australia."
-Charles Schulz, Thelma said.

"Thelma,' I asked, the pseudo-psychologist coming out. "Don't you want to live to be 100?"

"Death is more universal than life; everyone dies but not everyone lives."

- A. Sachs, she shot back.

This was no ordinary woman. She could match Mendel and me at our quotation game – quote for quote.

"Shame on the body for breaking down while the spirit perseveres."
- John Drybred, I responded.

"Don't you want to live forever?" I asked.

Her eyes twinkled at me, a slight smile and she said,

Question: "If you could live forever, would you and why?"

Answer: "I would not live forever, because we should not live forever, because if we were supposed to live forever, then we would live forever, but we cannot live forever, which is why I would not live forever."

- Miss Alabama, 1994 Miss Universe contestant.

Mendel was not far behind. He twisted his kippah with his right hand and pulled his left payyah with his left. Looking at me he said;

"In the end, it's not the years in your life that count. It's the life in your years."
- Abraham Lincoln.

"I've always found that the best way to be immortal is not getting yourself killed, like the best way to avoid divorce is not getting married."- Tom Holt, Paint Your Dragon, I shot back.

Thelma sensed for once she had a suitable set of foils. Looking at the both of us she said in quick succession:

"Do not go gentle into that good night. ... Rage, rage against the dying of the light - Dylan Thomas

"Those who survived the San Francisco earthquake said 'Thank God, I'm still alive.' But, of course, those who died, their lives will never be the same again."
- Rep. Barbara Boxer, D-California

"Nobody grows old merely by living a number of years. We grow old by deserting our ideals. Years may wrinkle the skin, but to give up our enthusiasm wrinkles the soul."- Samuel Ullman

I made sure that Thelma got the corner slice of her birthday cake with the large pink icing flower. She seemed ever so happy.

It was a real shock when Sheila called me on my cell phone. I was standing in the dairy aisle of the new Publix on Woolbright and Jog. The shocked blank look on my face, as I listened to her words, did not disturb anyone who saw me. So many men stand in the dairy aisle with a crumbled shopping list in their hand a cell phone glued to their ear, a blank look of – what

brand of butter, salted or unsalted, two sticks or four pack, in the blue wrapper or the red wrapper did you want. I have even seen a few elderly men with the confused look, cell phone to their ear and the shopping list pinned to their lapels trying to figure out what the wife wanted. What was different about me this time was not the blank look of confusion but the tears running down my face. Thelma had died.

Thelma Cohen was born 102 years ago in Atlantic City, N.J. into a different America. She married young, 15, not so unusual at the time. She had a real “shot gun” marriage she recalled. “I was a Jewish juvenile delinquent. I was pregnant. Imagine, and I was the daughter of Cantor Benjamin Cohen, olah l’shalom (gone to his eternal peace), who taught at Yeshivat Beit Yehuda on Atlantic Avenue,” she recalled.

Her marriage to Zeidel Hyman had been a long one, not necessarily a happy one. It had its ups and downs, with business and kids and family. To make ends meet in the 20’s and with three children to take care of, the Hymens, like many small retailers, engaged in some small time bootlegging and distributing. Zeidel would buy the grain alcohol from Longy Zwillman’s bootleg network in Newark. Zeidel brought the *hooch* back to Atlantic City and cut it down, rebottled for the customers. What could not be sold from the store, Thelma would make home deliveries. She would strap six or seven half pints to the underside of her clothing and pad it with schmatas (rags) to look like she was pregnant. Thelma would make the deliveries never worried about the prohibition cops. “They might shake down Zeidel but they were absolutely forbidden to look inside a woman’s bloomers for booze. It was a good business until they made drinking legal again”, Thelma lamented. “I was pregnant a long time,” she grinned as she told me the stories.

Thelma never had much to say about her years with Zeidel. Her first born child they named Yehezkel – every one called him Yitz. He was killed in 1944 outside St. Mere d’Eglise, France. Wounded, the German’s shot him when they learned he was a Jew. His body was never recovered. Thelma had a tombstone erected over an empty grave at the Atlantic City community cemetery. The Rabbi had not permitted a false burial in the Jewish cemetery.

From 1944 until her passing, Thelma was a militant member of the women’s auxiliary of the Zionist Organization of America and Hadassah.

Zeidel had a heart attack in 1966. They sold their stores and moved to Florida.

It was a very short retirement. Zeidel died in 1968. Thelma was 62. She took my hand and looked into my eyes, “I was too young, and too full of life, if you get my drift” she said “to do the lonely widow bit for the rest of my days.” Four months after Zeidel’s funeral she met Jack Hershkovit at Temple Beth Ami in Del Ray Beach. They were married six weeks later. It was a scandal. Thelma’s two daughters were incensed but they knew their mother and that bitterness passed in time.

Jack and Thelma made a life together until his passing in 1987. It was a quiet normal life, they went out to dinner, they played bridge, he played golf, she did Mah Jong and they went to schul regularly every Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, at least until Yizkor was said.

Jack died and was buried in the plot next to Zeidel Hymen. It had been reserved for Thelma but she felt no great need for it. Thelma was 81 and still quite alive.

It was the age of ecumenism, and Jewish overt affirmation of their racial magnanimity, understanding and cooperation. Thelma had moved to Boynton Beach and joined a brand new congregation, Temple Torah. She was an active member of the sisterhood when the suggestion was first brought up that Temple Torah, in the interest of community, should twin with another house of worship in the area. A sister at the new member brunch suggested a welcoming, warm, community of God in Del Ray, the All Souls Abyssinian Church of Christ. Most of the women were at first put off by the thought of twinning with a black church. "Weren't all blacks basically anti-Semitic? Did they all not support Louis Farrakhan and the Jew hating Nation of Islam?" a few voices said. Thelma jumped in right away. It was her nature to take on a fight.

"No one is getting married to one of them," she said. "We are going to share a common humanity and faith in God." She was belligerent. She carried the day and the Temple Sisterhood went to the interfaith pancake breakfast at the All Souls Abyssinian Church of Christ. "I asked this nice elderly black gentleman sitting at the table with us if he would kindly pass the maple syrup," she recalled. "I love maple syrup ma'am," he said with a gentlemanly manner. "Only use pure maple syrup from Vermont – none of that phony Aunt Jemima sugar flavored stuff." Three months later James Hackson and Thelma Cohen-Hymen-Herskovit were married in a civil ceremony. They lived together in Boynton Beach until he too passed away in 2001. He joined Temple Torah and sat in services with her. She joined the All Souls Abyssinian Church of Christ and sat in services with him. For the first time in her long life she felt complete. She had a life partner who was part of her. Neither Thelma nor James were very wealthy people but together that had to do something that brought their souls closer to each other and to God.

Thelma's first two husbands, Zeidel Hymen and Jack Herskovit were Jewish, they would never go to Israel. Both refused to go because there might be a terrorist attack, or there was maybe a war, or it was too expensive, or they will do it a little bit later. They never did go to Israel. For James a trip to the Holy Land with the woman he loved was never a question. When Thelma's Hadassah chapter organized a group mission to Israel, James said "why don't we go together." On the shores of the Sea of Galilee, in a special ceremony arranged by Hadassah of Boynton Beach, near Tagbah where Jesus walked on the water and the Holy City of Tiberius where the Rambam, Moses Maimonides, *from Moses to Moses there was none like Moses*, is buried, they stood and reaffirmed their vows of life and love again before God.

James died in 2001. Thelma was devastated. Shortly after his passing she suffered a massive stroke. Shaniqua and Omar Jones, James's granddaughter and son in law wanted Thelma to live with them. Thelma's daughter's wanted her in a long term care facility.

Thelma was a fun lady to be around. There was a sharpness about her that sometimes could be confused for bitterness. She was never bitter but always made you think. She certainly always thought. I asked her about the difficulty of being in a home, trapped in a damaged body? Did she ever think about ending it? We could talk about everything.

She said:

"Razors pain you;
Rivers are damp;
Acids stain you;
And drugs cause cramp.
Guns aren't lawful;
Nooses give;
Gas smells awful;
You might as well live."

- Dorothy Parker, "Resume"

Thelma's family wanted her to be buried next to Zeidel, following Jewish tradition; it was by him she had had her children. Thelma, though not Orthodox for many years in her practice, had considered the situation. In her usual independent way she made up her own mind for her final rest.

The day of the funeral, I attended two services. One at Temple Torah on Jog Road in Boynton Beach and another at the All Souls Abyssinian Church of Christ. Her remains were cremated afterwards and her ashes were sprinkled over the graves of Zeidel Hymen, Jack Hershkovit and James Hackson.

As I made my way home that day, I remembered the words of the great Scottish poet Robert Burns, and thought of Thelma. May she rest in Peace.

"If there's another world, he lives in bliss;
If there is none, he made the best of this."

William Rabinowitz lives in Boynton Beach with his wife Sheila and their dog Norman.

They can be commiserated with at Amzhs@hotmail.com
