

Ready and raring

• ABIGAIL KLEIN LEICHMAN

Ruth Sterenbuch was all revved up about the young Jewish state when she came home to Manhattan in 1955 from an intensive post-high-school year here.

"I couldn't understand why my parents and everybody else in America didn't get up and go. The state was there and this was the dream of 2,000 years," she relates.

"At 18, I saw it very clearly. I almost feel a bit embarrassed now about my naivete."

Indeed, the vicissitudes of adult life conspired to keep Ruth from moving here permanently until much later, but she retained her enthusiasm. Living in Rehavia since her arrival nearly 10 years ago, she has jumped into life here with zest. "I guess I'm a person who likes a challenge," she says.

FIRST EXPERIENCES

Ruth and her younger brother were brought up in Manhattan's Washington Heights neighborhood. Her family had roots in New York from the beginning of the 20th century. Ruth's mother, a lawyer, wanted her children to know their Jewish heritage, so she sent them to day schools and to the Zionist, Hebrew-speaking Camp Massad. Her Hebrew comprehension was quite good by the time she came on the year-long jaunt through Mizrahi Hatz'a'ir. That came in handy when the group of 100 or so teens met prime minister David Ben-Gurion in November 1954. B-G picked Ruth as the spokeswoman and posed some biblical trivia questions relating to the land (who was the first king to conquer Eilat?) that had them all stumped. "I was mortified and honored at the same time," she recalls. Someone took her picture with the statesman and she had him autograph it when she returned to Sde Boker 10 years later with her husband.

From 1956 to 1958, Ruth attended the Hebrew University and worked in its library at the Terra Sancta Monastery in Rehavia. She recalls a hair-raising expedition one day aboard a biweekly armed transport taking soldier-policemen to the deserted Mount Scopus campus, an Israeli enclave surrounded by Jordanian territory. Most of the library's books were still housed there; the soldiers would spirit out a stack on every trip.

"We got to the border and the Israelis got into an argument with the Jordanians about ammunition. The UN was called in and eventually we made our way up," she recounts, the sheer fright still fresh in her mind. All alone, she walked through the university buildings and Hadassah Hospital, where she noticed abandoned experiments in the labs. "It was absolutely eerie because it had been neglected since 1948."

Today, she takes classes at that completely revitalized campus and often thinks of that time.

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

Ruth was not meeting suitable men in Jerusalem, so she transferred her credits in Jewish history to the Jewish Theological Seminary in Manhattan, and in 1960 married William (Zev) Frank, a promising young physicist educated at Yeshiva University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The Franks honeymooned in Israel before moving to Washington, DC. Daughters Naava, Avital (Tali) and Debra were born between 1961 and 1966. For two years during that



period, the family lived here. "My husband had a Fulbright fellowship at the Weizmann Institute, and then he taught at Bar-Ilan," Ruth relates. They figured on making aliya after building up their savings. But the plan got derailed tragically when Ruth's husband developed multiple sclerosis. He died in 1976 at 44. In 1982, Ruth married Martin Zlotnick and created a blended family including his children Hila, Cheri, Adam and Daniel. Martin shared her passion for Israel, and they almost made aliya in 1997. Their shipment was in the port waiting to go when Martin suddenly died. Despite her grief, Ruth was not deterred for long. "I decided since aliya was something I had always wanted to do, I came at the end of 2001 by myself."

LIFE IN JERUSALEM

Regardless of the sad circumstances delaying her move, Ruth counts herself as fortunate.

"One could not have had an easier time than I did," she says. "I'm fluent in Hebrew, and I had friends and my daughter Tali, stepdaughter Hila and many grandchildren were here when I arrived." Recently Cheri also made aliya.

Ruth had worked in four different careers in the States. With a master's degree in library science from Catholic University, she worked in the DC area's two day schools. Later she served as director of the Jewish Book Council, which led her into public relations for authors and publishers. Finally, she directed the Foundation for Jewish Studies in Washington, where she brought educational programs to local synagogues.

"When I came to Jerusalem, I imagined I would guide at a museum and do volunteer work. Then I heard about an 18-month tour guide course, where you could learn about the country and about Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Nobody told me there

WITH THE OLD MAN. Ruth spent a year with Mizrahi Hatz'a'ir in 1954.

were exams and papers, so I jumped in."

After passing all those exams easily, Ruth is a licensed tour guide (www.ruthfrank.com) and also a volunteer guide at local museums.

"It's career No. 5, but I found the right one at the age of 70," she says. "It combines my love and interest in Jewish history with my love of the outdoors, so it's brought everything together and is both rewarding and challenging."

Though she will take her clients anywhere they wish, her specialty is walking tours and archeology in Jerusalem. "I always begin with an overview at the Mount of Olives," she says. "You get a 'wow' when people first step out and see the city at their feet."

EDUCATIONAL PURSUITS

Feeling blessed to have a lot of energy at 75, Ruth is not done learning. She recently taught a course on ancient Jerusalem at the Association for Americans and Canadians in Israel, and she continues to study archeology and Jewish history.

GREATEST INFLUENCES

Ruth names her two role models as Rabbi Joshua Haberman, the Reform founder of the Foundation for Jewish Studies, and the Orthodox feminist author Blu Greenberg. "They taught me the value of persistence and that if you want to get something done you just have to keep trying from a different angle or approach."

ADVICE

"I believe one has to be able to move on and accept changes. Often, if one is not held back by fear of the unknown, things can work out well and for the best."



RUTH S. FRANK, 75
Washington, DC
to Jerusalem, 2001