

A SUFFRAGETTE IN THE FAMILY

This year marks the centenary of women's suffrage in Britain, a good time for [Anne Sebba](#) to recount the courage of her relative Leonora Cohen, as well as the lives of other family members whose stories are admirable but less well documented

Few writers can resist the temptation of putting their own family under the spotlight at some point in their lives. Beware the writer in the family, as the old adage goes. But if tackling a biography about someone you never met brings challenges by demanding you imaginatively enter into that hitherto unknown person's world, writing about your own family is littered with traps of a different sort, emotional involvement merely one.

So I know I am not alone when, in between researching and writing books about well-known figures that have been commissioned, I turn to my own family for inspiration. In my case the magnet is my grandmother Lily, who left school at 14 and achieved some fame in her day as a music-hall singer and artists' model. Born in 1889, the same year as Charlie Chaplin, she briefly worked alongside him and used to tell us how he once proposed marriage and she turned him down.

'Not a good prospect, you see. The whole idea was to get off the stage and live comfortably.' Perhaps she was right. For a brief time in her teenage years, Miss Lily Black was a big star in Bradford, had songs especially written for her and was even principal boy in an Emile Littler pantomime at Drury Lane in London. She was also the model for a series of rather risqué murals on Liverpool Town Hall ceiling painted by John Henry Amszewitz, who was commissioned after he won a major competition in Liverpool. But in 1910, aged 21, she gave it all up and married my grandfather Leo, also 21, then working as a travelling salesman



Anne Sebba's grandparents Lily and Leo on their wedding day, 1910.

for Raphael Tuck & Sons, the greetings-card company. Although Leo's Polish Jewish family had settled in Birmingham and were running a silverware business, his own job was to persuade Lily to have her photograph taken for a postcard series he was promoting. They fell in love, she agreed to convert to Judaism and they were married in a Bradford synagogue by the pragmatic rabbi Joseph Strauss. Lily was famous enough in Bradford that the local paper sent a top reporter to cover her wedding. But then she became a housewife, mother of three and never really talked about her teenage independence and success, nor would she be drawn on the other men who had sent bouquets and carriages to the stage door to woo her.

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I have been trying to find out about Lily's early life for years, but there are no letters. So, in idle moments, I browse The London Library shelves searching for any possible reference to her in books of theatre history or postcard history, or biographies of Chaplin, Tuck, or any of the artists for whom she sat, all of which the Library has in abundance. I have read many interesting vignettes of social history, but of my grandmother, sadly, there is nothing.

Creating any biography demands multiple sources of information including archives, letters, photographs, newspapers and diaries, as well as interviews and conversations. All these must be sifted until some hoped-for objective truth arrives. But artefacts can be useful too; clothes or sometimes jewellery. For my biography of

Wallis Simpson it was a moth-eaten coat that had been made up especially for Ernest Simpson by the Prince of Wales's tailor, which revealed to me how comfortably the affair had started as a threesome, with Ernest fully colluding in and enjoying the step up in society which the proximity to the Prince gave him through his wife's friendship. When I wrote about Laura Ashley the family gave me a tiny document wallet, which Laura called her briefcase, in which she carried a piece of needlepoint, an example of her faux deference and wily determination to show that her husband Bernard was the boss. Writing about one's own family there is at least a good chance that you might already own some letters, photographs, perhaps even the dinner plates they used, or have memorised half-listened to, overly embellished, family yarns.

A few months ago I received a thrilling email from a stranger that sent me down a different path in the search for Lily. My correspondent, Geoff, told me that he owned a large pocket watch made by my great-great-grandfather Abraham Cohen, the man who became Lily Black's grandfather-in-law. Abraham was born in Warsaw in around 1828 and in the early 1840s came to Leeds, where he married, had nine children and set up a watchmaking and jewellery business which quickly flourished. His signature is engraved on the inner casing of this large silver pocket watch, which was the part he would have manufactured, the movement no doubt imported from Switzerland. Geoff had worked out my family connection to the watch thanks to an article I had once written about Abraham's famous daughter-in-law, the militant suffragette Leonora Cohen, who befriended my grandmother when she, ten years later, married into the family.

Leonora, a former milliner, had grown up in hardship with only her widowed mother, Jane Throp, working as a seamstress to support them both. In 1900 she married Abraham's son Henry, although both families opposed the marriage - the Cohens because they wanted a Jewish wife for Henry, and Jane because she did not want her daughter to marry at all and suffer the same hardships as she had. Yet everyone who knew them described the marriage as a love match and Henry was always deeply supportive of his radical wife. Henry's sister, Rosa, married the man who became my great-grandfather and it was their son



Top Signed postcard of Lily Black posing as a flower-seller.

Above The pocket watch made by Sebba's great-great-grandfather Abraham Cohen, which now sits on her desk.

Leo who fell in love with Lily, a similarly unsuitable love match. It was thus hardly surprising that when Lily and Leo married they invited Henry and Leonora, Leo's aunt and uncle, to be witnesses at their wedding. There is no mention of any parents being present at the Bradford ceremony.

Leonora was politically aware from a young age and in 1909, by then a mother,



Above The piece in the *Times* on 8 February 1913 about Leonora Cohen's court case.
Left Leonora Cohen, the suffragette who married Sebba's great-great-uncle Henry. Photograph Bridgeman Images.

Opposite Leonora's suffragette dress, now in the Leeds Museums and Galleries collection. © Leeds Museums and Galleries, photograph Bridgeman Images.

In 1913 Leonora became nationally famous when she followed a group of schoolboys into the Jewel House at the Tower of London and flung an iron bar into a glass cabinet

had joined the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) led by Emmeline Pankhurst, which believed in direct action to win the vote, sometimes resorting to bombing and arson. But after several years of peacefully handing out leaflets and selling marmalade to raise funds, she wanted to raise her game. On 1 February 1913 she became nationally famous when she followed a group of schoolboys into the Jewel House at the Tower of London and, by sticking close to them at the back, gave the impression she was their teacher. Seizing her moment she flung an iron bar, hidden in her coat, over the heads of the schoolboys into a glass cabinet, which loudly smashed. She had wrapped a message around the implement bearing the message 'Votes for Women: 100 years of Constitutional Petitions Resolutions Meetings & Processions have failed'.

She was immediately arrested, overpowered by Beefeaters and a police sergeant, who asked her why she had done

it. 'It is my protest against the treachery of the government against the working women of Great Britain,' she replied. Her case came up for trial three days later and, charged with causing damage worth more than £5, Leonora conducted her own defence. Thanks to his expertise in the jewellery trade, Henry had found an expert witness, a cabinet-maker who insisted he could repair the smashed case for only £4 10s. The jury decided therefore that Leonora was not guilty of causing damage in excess of £5 and was acquitted.

The newspapers loved this dramatic story and, in the basement of The London Library, I find the *Times's* sober reference to Leonora's victory, a small paragraph but a clear reminder that she had narrowly escaped a prison sentence of several months, as was handed out to her fellow protestors. But in the following weeks suffragette violence escalated and, before the year was out, Leonora was arrested

again, this time for smashing windows in Leeds town centre. She believed that while attacking private property was wrong, government or public buildings were a legitimate target. This time, charged with causing damage of £26, she was sent to Armley prison in Leeds where she immediately went on a hunger and thirst strike. Her health deteriorated rapidly and within two days, as she was close to death, she was released on licence. These tactics were legitimised by Herbert Henry Asquith's Liberal government following the passing of the 1913 Prisoners (Temporary Discharge for Ill Health) Act, commonly known as the Cat and Mouse Act.

Henry, incensed at the possibility that his wife might die, now wrote to Home Secretary Reginald McKenna stating categorically that if Leonora were again arrested and subsequently released on licence he would refuse to accept her back, so that the government would have to take responsibility for her possible death. She survived and, together with their young son, Reginald, the couple soon moved to Harrogate to restore her health, where she set up and ran a vegetarian boarding house. During the war Leonora worked in a munitions factory and afterwards moved back to Leeds, became a magistrate and was awarded an OBE for her public work. She died 40 years ago in 1978, aged 105. I am devastated that I never met her even though my mother was named Rosetta, in memory of Henry and Leonora's baby daughter Rosetta, who died before she was one.

Geoff told me that he had found the watch, now broken, in an old biscuit tin and that it had been used by one of his grandfathers, both cotton-mill engine men in Worsthorpe, near Burnley, so the accuracy of the mechanism would have been crucial. But he had no connection to it and wanted to offer it to me as a gift. 'Perhaps a fair exchange would be one of your biography books,' he charmingly suggested. I rushed to the post office with three, duly signed. And soon after I received the watch.

Merely holding this heavy object, which sits comfortably in the palm of my hand, gives me a frisson. I took it for an estimate for repair from an expert horologist and was only momentarily cast down by his opinion that it would cost hundreds of pounds to restore the movement properly and that the watch



had little or no intrinsic value. It is a good, solid, well-made everyday watch, which would have been pulled by its chain out of a waistcoat several times a day. By 1914, just a year after Leonora's trial, soldiers in the trenches favoured wrist watches, and pocket watches went swiftly out of fashion. Yet the silver case, probably made in Birmingham and assayed in Chester around 1870, is charming and undented, and its value to me is priceless. I now have this watch, repaired, sitting on my desk, as a clock, reminding me (as I have to wind it daily) of my connections to this pioneering family. It could not have arrived at a better moment. In February 1918, women over 30 in Britain were finally granted the right to vote. And so, as this year is being celebrated as the centenary of women's suffrage, it is worth remembering that some women felt such a strong sense of injustice that they were prepared to take part in violent protest and risk undertaking

hunger strikes to the death in order to win that right.

Of course the pocket watch does not directly tell me any more about my actress grandmother who, striving to be upwardly mobile, turned down Charlie Chaplin and married a watchmaker's grandson. And yet, for me, it is as if one more piece of the jigsaw puzzle has just been slotted into place. In this case a silver pocket watch has revealed to me how smoothly the small-scale Jewish emigration to early Victorian Britain could operate. Within a generation a scarcely educated Pole could build a flourishing enterprise and become sufficiently assimilated into provincial British society that his son and grandson felt confident enough not only to marry for love two British-born girls, respectively a milliner and a music-hall actress, but, in Henry's case, to challenge the laws of the land by supporting his wife in her fight to the death for justice. ●