A painfully fragmentary awareness of my father Louis Bohm’s family history has lurked at the edge of my consciousness all my adult life. The things he actually talked about when my sister Yvonne and I were growing up in London can be counted on the fingers of one hand – an occasional mention, for example, of the fact that as a boy sitting on a tram in mid-winter, a unknown woman suddenly got up and started vigorously rubbing his blue nose to prevent him from getting frostbite, or of an incident when he was helping out in his father’s textile warehouse, and got hit above the eye by a bale of cloth. Nothing at all, however, not a word, about his mother and sixteen year old sister or indeed the more extended family he left behind in November 1938 (travelling through Europe, apparently on Kristallnacht) when aged eighteen he left Łódź for good to come to the UK. From one of the handful of pre-war letters that survive, I realise that the plan was for Louis to complete his studies in England and to return to Poland to join his father’s business.

My mother Dorothy was also just sixteen when - introduced to him on the street by someone in the textile business who knew both their fathers - she first met Louis in the northern English city of Manchester in 1940. Despite her quite often recalling that at first he treated her more like a sister than a girlfriend, the significance of this only occurred to me much later. And the fact that, while clearly respecting her independent career as a photographer, my father was always fiercely protective of my mother also makes more sense to me now.

It was only when I was fourteen that I discovered (just how, I simply do not remember) that my father’s mother Teresa and sister Hanna had perished in the Warsaw Ghetto. And although I knew my father’s father Herman, who managed to escape from Poland to Palestine during the war and later came to live in England, and also his aunt Bronia, who against all the odds survived the Holocaust and came to England after the war, nothing was ever said in our presence about their Polish past. Only regular consignments of delicious citrus fruit sent to us from Israel by a mysterious Polish relation of my father’s called Adaś, hinted at a bigger family of which we had no knowledge.

On the surface, at least, my father seemed a calm, solid and dependable presence, in many ways the perfect English gentleman! Looking back, I’m convinced that the only way he was able to achieve that apparent equanimity was by suppressing all that pain – a means not only of protecting us, his children, but also himself. Indeed, I vividly remember sitting in the room with him when he was having chemotherapy (not very long before he died in 1994, not of the cancer itself, but of a heart attack), acutely aware that if I was ever to pluck up the courage to ask him about that past, now was the moment. Yet - scared of ruffling that calm surface and of causing him distress - I was completely unable to do so.

That was back in the early 1990s. In 2012 I visited both Łódź and Warsaw and was able to find out a little more. Leads remained to be followed, yet I clearly wasn’t yet ready to follow them. And then in October 2023 Gintaras Česonis of the Kaunas Photography Gallery, who initiated a touring exhibition of my mother’s photographs in the Baltic States (starting in Kaunas, it travelled to Riga, both towns with links to my mother’s family, and then to Klaipeda, where she partly grew up), introduced me to Polish curator Adam Mazur, who had expressed an interest in taking the exhibition. Little did I know that Adam had recently become the director of a fine new cultural space in Łódź, and little did he know that Łódź had been my father’s hometown!

By another extraordinary coincidence, his subsequent suggestion that I curate a display about the Bohm family story to accompany the show of Dorothy’s photographs came just around the time that my sister and I were clearing out our mother’s lovely London home in the wake of her death in March 2023. In the course of this always painful but necessary task, we discovered a small wooden cabinet with its door (accidently on purpose?) turned to the side, which contained a cache of family photographs and other items of which we had been completely unaware. We can only surmise that they had been brought to England by our paternal grandfather but also perhaps by our father. Although we did previously have a handful of photographs, it is this precious trove of objects which have made the present project possible. Equally, the exhibition itself has acted as a timely prompt for me not only to scrutinise the material already in our possession more carefully but also to put out feelers to other family members in Israel and the USA and to embark on further archival research.

That research is still a work in progress. Deep dark holes in my knowledge of the Bohm family story remain and always will remain. Inevitably, this is especially true of the twenty or more family members - not just my father’s mother and sister, but his two uncles Josef and Pawel and their families as well as members of his mother’s family - who did not survive the Holocaust. But over the past two years or so, the information and insights I have gleaned about the extended Bojm/Lewkowicz family have gradually coalesced into something resembling a tantalising if illusory familiarity. That I now at last feel able to call my father’s mother Teresa not just my father’s mother but my grandmother (whose name after all is my own middle name) and my father’s sister Hanna my aunt feels like a small but deeply significant turning point.

**DEDICATION**

This project is lovingly dedicated both to the family I never knew and to the family that continues to grow and flourish in the present – above all, to its very youngest members, Bobbie, Louis and Orin.

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I should also like to thank Varda Lusthaus in Jerusalem, granddaughter of Bronia and daughter of Biruta (whom I know fondly as Rutli) for her willingness to ask her mother for further information about the family - and also for her help in making it possible to include the lovely portrait of Bronia as a young woman in the current exhibition. Clive Poyser, Noemi’s eldest son and Bronia’s grandson, who sadly died in February this year, was most helpful to me in supplying an early photograph of his branch of the family. My thanks also go to USA-based Mady, Sara and Jessica Hymowitz, great-granddaughters of Tauba Bojm who settled in the New World in 1920, for supplying so many unfamiliar photographs, both pre- and post-war, of the extended family.

Above all, I must thank Gintaras Česonis and Adam Mazur for their commitment to making this double tribute to my parents a reality. Adam’s colleagues, Magda Milewska, Maja Wójcik, Serhiy Sokurenko and Daniel Kiermut have also been a pleasure to work with.

Last but not least, I’m grateful to London-based artist Caren Garfen who has generously allowed me to include her moving and meticulously crafted artwork *Cut It Out* in this exhibition. Its focus not on my particular family but on the Jewish presence in Łódź’s pre-World War Two textile industry stands as an important reminder that the story of the Bohm family is just one of many others that could and should be told and remembered in the present.

Monica Teresa Bohm-Duchen

London, March 2025