



Myrna Rabinowitz

I grew up in Montreal in the now trendy, hip area of Mile End but during my childhood it was predominantly a Jewish area filled with Holocaust survivors. My parents were Holocaust survivors from Poland who survived because they escaped to Soviet occupied Poland after Hitler invaded Poland in 1939 and they were then deported to labour camps in Siberia. After Germany broke the non-aggression pact with Russia, the Jews were free to leave Siberia and my parents managed to take a train all the way to Tashkent in Uzbekistan where I was born just after the war ended in 1945. We spent a couple of years in a DP (displaced person's) camp in Austria and from there we travelled to Montreal by train and ship and arrived in 1948.

We had no family in Montreal at first but my parents managed to sponsor their three surviving siblings and soon I had cousins to play with. One of my earliest memories is my first day of kindergarten, which was very traumatic since I spoke only Yiddish and I was not yet 4 years old. When I was 6½ years old my darling sister was born. My parents worked hard and my home was filled with love and music, mainly Yiddish and Hebrew, and I loved to sing along. I learned how to play the piano and loved creating melodies. For my 15th birthday, my parents bought me a guitar and I began playing and singing folksongs with friends and soon started performing in Yiddish and Hebrew at the Jewish seniors' home. After high school I studied to become an elementary school teacher and taught for a few years in Montreal.

In 1967 I travelled out west with friends and fell in love with Vancouver so after I got married in 1968 and my husband wanted to move to Vancouver, I was very enthusiastic. We travelled across the snow covered country by train in December 1968 and after three days, we were thrilled to see green grass and tall green trees!! I started substitute teaching in elementary schools around Vancouver but felt very unfulfilled. I joined the Jewish Community Choir and continued playing guitar and singing with friends, which I always enjoyed. Luckily I found a job as an English as a Second Language Instructor to a group of Czech adult immigrants at a private school. Having grown up as a refugee and immigrant myself, I had a strong affinity for my students and my work felt like a mitzvah. After my daughter Aliza was born in 1972, I became certified as an ESL instructor at UBC and started to work part time.

In 1974 we moved to Richmond and I had my second daughter Shawna in 1976. We joined the Richmond Delta Jewish Community Association which then became Beth Tikvah Synagogue in 1977. Daniel Siegel became the first rabbi of Beth Tikvah and I so enjoyed Daniel's davening style and approach and became close friends with Daniel and Hanna and their children. In 1979 my husband and I divorced and I moved back to Vancouver. By that time, Daniel and Hanna had left Richmond and Beth Tikvah and had started a Shabbat chavurah out of Hillel House at UBC where Daniel was the Hillel Director. The Hillel Minyan became Or Shalom.

In 1981, I met my beloved Barry at Or Shalom and we were married in 1983. Our home became one of the 4 homes where Or Shalom met for Shabbat services for a couple of years. It was a very loving and exciting period in my life. With encouragement from Daniel and Hanna, I started writing niggunim for prayers and leading services. At that time, I was teaching ESL students for Vancouver Community College as well as running a volunteer tutor training program called Homefront Learning which we started in 1980 for the Vietnamese refugees. I was also teaching Yiddish part time at the Peretz Shule to both adults and children and was leading a weekly singing group for seniors at the Jewish Community Centre.

In 1985, our son Yoni was born and brought us a great deal of joy. Our daughters Aliza and Shawna adored him thoroughly. Life was full, busy and wonderful. I was teaching part time and taking care of our baby and 2 daughters and singing as always. In 1987, Hanna Siegel, Harley Rothstein and I (Shir Hadash) released our first album '*Or Shalom - Songs of the Heart*' of our original prayer melodies that we had created and used at Or Shalom. It was a very exciting project and was very well received in Vancouver and in the wider renewal communities. At that time there were very few Jewish spiritual music albums available especially within the Aleph renewal communities. Sadly, Daniel and Hanna left Vancouver in 1987 but Or Shalom managed to survive and over the years thrive. In 1990, Hanna, Harley and I recorded our second album '*And You Shall Teach Your Children*' of our original prayer melodies and songs. In 1991 I met Moshe Denburg at Or Shalom and joined his Jewish World Music band Tzimmes and by 1993 we recorded our first album '*Sweet and Hot*'.

In 1994 we lived in London, England where Barry got a job for the year working on an interesting engineering project. Although our son Yoni was not happy living there, and Barry worked very hard, it was an exciting opportunity and we enjoyed seeing the sights every Sunday. Friday nights were spent with my dear cousin

and her family and Shabbat was a real day of rest. The second half of the 90's was a very busy time with family, work, Or Shalom, performing with Tzimmes and recording 2 more Tzimmes albums, (*'A Lid for Every Pot'* in 1995 and *'Klezmyriad'* in 1998) and very sadly, the loss of both my parents.

The new millennium and the next 2 decades brought many changes: I retired from my full time work and worked part time training new ESL teachers; we moved into our condo near Granville Island and Kits beach which we love; our 3 children were married; in 2010 our first grandson was born; and now we are blessed with 6 grandchildren.

When I retired from full time work, I joined the Or Shalom board. Although I am a founding member of Or Shalom and have led services and been on the ritual committee for many years, I had never served on the board before. I was secretary for 2 years and then co-chair for 2 years and have a deep appreciation for the work that our board members do for us. Yasher koach and thank you to all those who serve on the board and serve our community.

As for my music, in 2007 I released my first solo album *'Hashiveinu'* of my original Hebrew spiritual music. And in 2012, I fulfilled a long time dream and recorded my solo Yiddish album *'Lullabies and Longings'* of both traditional Yiddish songs as well as my own original songs.

I have just celebrated my 75th birthday and am filled with deep gratitude for all the blessings in my life, my wonderful husband Barry, my 3 loving children, Aliza, Shawna and Yoni, my 6 amazing grandchildren, my precious sister and extended family, my dear friends, my music and the incredible Or Shalom community that sustains and nourishes me.