

'An utterly engrossing book' Nigella Lawson

Hadley Freeman House of Glass

The story and secrets
of a twentieth-century
Jewish family

'Remarkable and gripping' Edmund de Waal



HOUSE OF GLASS

The story and secrets of a twentieth-century Jewish family

Hadley Freeman

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Dedication

*For my father, Ron Freeman,
and my Grandma Sala*

Epigraph

‘Getting this hysterical about [anti-Semitism] on the other side of the world is sane?’

‘When she talks about it, it’s not on the other side of the world, it’s on the next block.’

‘And that’s sane?’

‘I don’t know what it is! I just get the feeling sometimes that she KNOWS something, something that ... It’s like she’s connected to some ... some wire that goes half around the world, some truth that other people are blind to.’

ARTHUR MILLER, *Broken Glass*, 1994

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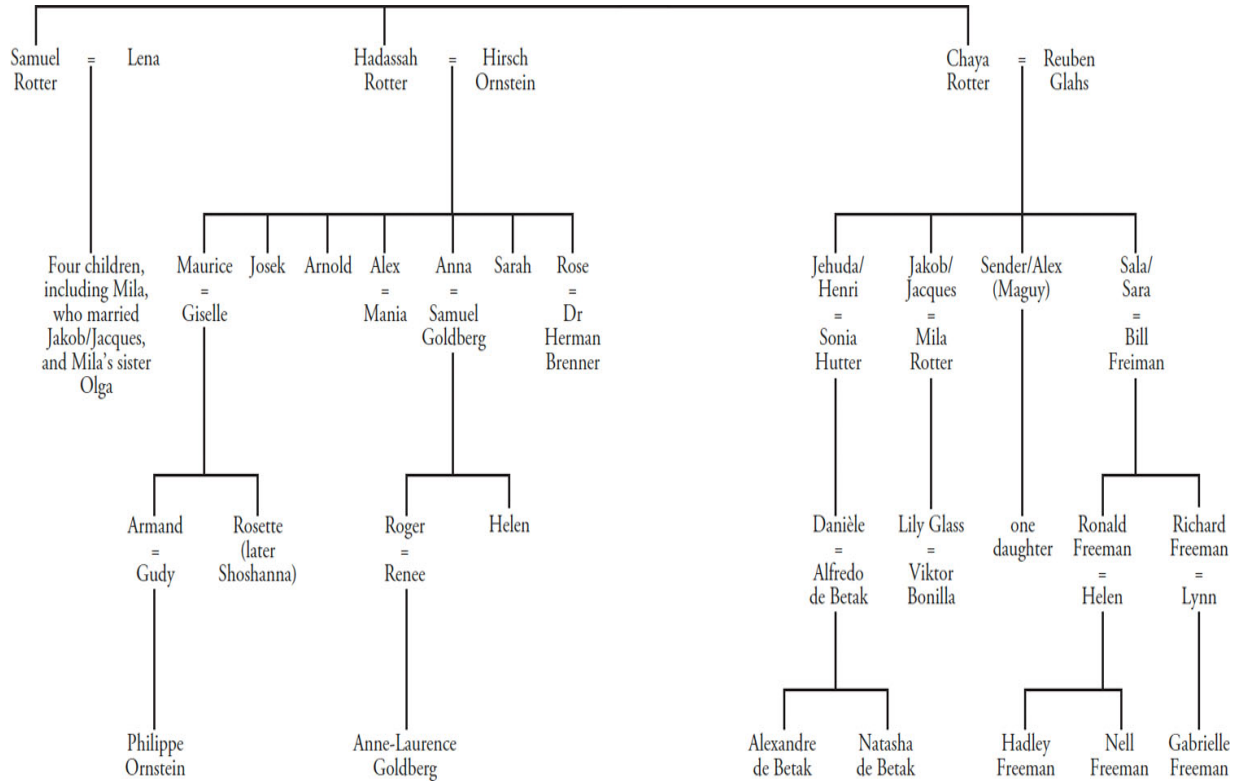
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FAMILY TREE





Sala eating lunch in Deauville, under Alex Ornstein's umbrella.

INTRODUCTION

I STOOD UP to shut the closet door and that's when I spotted the shoebox, right at the back, behind a pile of leather handbags. It was burnished red, although it looked almost grey, covered in over a decade's worth of dust. Surely, I thought, it would just contain another pair of slightly battered kitten-heeled sandals. But still, I'd come all this way, I might as well look inside. So I sat back on the floor, pulled it out and opened it. I did not find shoes. Instead, it was filled with the secrets my grandmother had managed to keep all her life and some years beyond.

The road that led me to rifling through my grandmother's closet a dozen years after she died began, for me, twenty-three years earlier, in 1983 when I was five years old. That was the year my parents took me to Europe for the first time to meet my French family: my grandmother's oldest brother and his wife, Henri and Sonia Glass, another brother, Alex Maguy, and their last surviving cousins, Alex and Mania Ornstein. My grandmother, Sala, also joined us there, flying over from her home in Florida, where she lived with her American husband, my grandfather, Bill.

My dad was keen for us to meet them all, perhaps to balance out our family tree: where my mother's side was fruitful, with its abundance of American aunts, uncles and cousins scattered generously around the United States, from Washington DC to Cincinnati to Seattle, my father's side was comparatively barren. Until this trip it had consisted in my mind solely of my grandparents and my uncle, my father's younger brother, Rich, all clustered together in Miami. I knew my grandmother had had to leave her relatives behind in France when she escaped what was vaguely described to me as 'the war' and this, my father said, was why I didn't have much family on his side. He didn't explain where the family was on his very American father's side, and I was too young then to think to ask why.

My mother's family was warm, rambunctious and close, and I always looked forward to seeing my cousins, who I thought of as quasi-siblings.