

Rachel Piza
Joshua Piza's 11th child

1837-1916

Rachel, the seventh daughter, and youngest child of the Joshua Pizas was born in 1837 when her father was in his sixtieth year. She was her mother's favorite child. As she grew up, she had neither the vivid beauty of Judith nor the delicate features of Sarah; but she had a pleasant agreeable face, a graceful carriage, and a disposition so obliging that she was loved by all. There was nothing that her capable fingers would not attempt, and nothing that they attempted that they did not do well. In those days of the elaborate coiffure, she could arrange hair with *chic*; and she could tie a bow with more elegance and coquetry than anyone else. If a ball was to be given in the evening 'Achie' would be occupied from early afternoon in arranging the head-dresses of her friends, and up to the last moment would be busy adding the little touches to their costumes that would make them more fetching. She was equally successful with her own appearance. They had a quaint little custom in St. Thomas, of borrowing from one another personal accessories. The morning after a soirée, there would be a steady stream of Negro servants at the Piza household sent by their mistresses to tell Miss Achie that Miss Henriquz, or Miss Usorio, so greatly admired the lace ruche – or the couronne of

flowers – that she wore at the party and she would like to borrow and copy it if Miss Achie could spare it. But the girl could seldom oblige, as by then her laces were smoothed out flat in her drawer, and the flowers untwined and put away. For, according to the whim of the moment, she draped her laces and arranged her wreaths for each occasion.

When she was eighteen she fell in love with an Englishman, a brilliant young fellow who completely fascinated her. They became secretly engaged. One day she discovered that he boasted to his friends of his conquest and allowed them to spy on his love-making. She would see him no more: she joined her sister Rebecca in a vow never to marry.

Somehow this vow did not seem to interfere with her popularity. She had the opportunity to marry any number of the young men of St. Thomas, – eleven, to be exact. She rejected them kindly and invariably suggested to her suitor some other girl whom she said would make him happier: several of her friends married her rejected suitors. (But Hannah Piza could not resist letting their mothers know that Rachel had been their first choice). Among the young men that she refused were Julius Wolf, the son of Major Wolf who quelled the rebellion in Santa Cruz, and was decorated by King Christian for his bravery; Mordechai Maduro, known as 'Massa', (the brother of Solomon who had married her sister Esther); a relative of her brother-in-

law Herman Meyer (who afterwards married a Miss Da Costa and called himself Da Cost Meyer). There were also a Mr. Rosenbaum and a Mr. D'Azevedo.

When she was twenty-three years old and still refusing all offers, Hannah got tired of it. She was not going to have it said that any of her daughters was left 'on the shelf'. The suitor of the moment was Solomon Delvalle, of an excellent family, a solid young man two years Rachel's senior. He was considered so trustworthy and able that when he was only nineteen his employer, Mr. Ozorio, sent him to England to buy for the firm. At twenty-five he had a splendid position. But Achie was still romantic about her first, unworthy, lover (who had turned out very badly indeed), and would not have him. Poor Solomon Delvalle was so broken by his rejection that his mother came to plead his cause. Hannah 'had it out' with Achie, and on the threat of permanently withdrawing her love from her youngest if she persisted in refusing this excellent young man, finally prevailed on her to accept. Everyone said it was her mother that loved him. Rachel's oldest sister Judith, herself tragically mismated, openly encouraged the girl to please herself alone. But Achie never had cause to regret her decision, for Solomon was a highly respected, honorable man, a loving husband and an excellent generous provider.

They settled down in a home of their own and began raising the family which ended by being the largest of any of Joshua Piza's children's. Their first child was a daughter whom they called Judith after Solomon's mother; then came a son named Benjamin for his father; then a daughter Hannah, after the Matriarch.

In 1865 the successful young Solomon, deciding to branch out in new countries, departed with his family for Barranquilla, Colombia. But in passing through Panama he was hailed by Samuel Piza, the important and prosperous merchant, ever on the lookout for promising young men to run his affairs for him. He and Mordecai Maduro were induced to stay in Panama as major partners. In 1865 and '67 Achie gave birth to a son Joshua and a daughter Delia. The business thrived and those wide-awake young men made plenty of money. They had the foresight to put in a huge supply of flour, which they were able during the scarcity, to sell at the highest of prices to the whole Spanish Main, when none was being exported from the United States, then in the throes of reconstruction after the Civil War.

Old Hannah came to visit them in 1867. That must have been a great event in her life as it was the only time she had left St. Thomas since she came there from Curaçao as a young woman of twenty-three. It was a fortunate time for her to be away, for that was the year of the worst earthquake and tidal wave in the

history of St. Thomas, when all the inhabitants had to seek the hills to avoid drowning. Hannah spent six months with Achie and Solomon. Then the Delvalles left, taking her with them. They stopped at Jamaica on the way back to St. Thomas, for three months, while Achie was giving birth to son Jack. While there Solomon was particularly attracted to a young lad of poor parents, Nathaniel Brandon, and although at the time he had six children of his own, he sent this boy to Europe for two years to be educated at the cost of a thousand dollars.

They returned to St. Thomas and the Delvalles remained there for four years. Their seventh and eighth children Percy and Eda were born in the same place as the three eldest. Before her birth, Eda was promised as a gift to Emily and Isaac Delvalle, Achie's sister- and brother-in-law, who were childless. In the fullness of her own prolific abundance, she pledged her unborn baby. But before the birth, her two year old son Percy died miserably, by choking to death on a bit of wood. The mother felt she had been punished for thinking of giving away anything so sacredly hers as a child. She disappointed Emily and Eda was reared by her own mother.

Solomon considered establishing himself in London; so the next year he took over his family, and they were cordially received by Jacob and Bendita Piza, their brother and sister-in-law. The newcomers first stayed at the Hotel Alexander, which

they liked so well that when their next son was born they named him Alexander. But Achie objected to the climate and could not accustom herself to the dark foggy weather, which frightened and depressed her. They had taken a house in the City to be near Solomon's office, and thus, living in the smoky town, instead of in the suburbs where most people resided, she felt she could not stand it. So they returned to St. Thomas.

All the children of old Hannah were married and had gone to live in other countries. The old lady, now paralyzed, did not have one of her nine children near to cheer her declining years. Rachel, ever the most devoted, declared she would not leave St. Thomas again while her mother lived. So it was there that David, Rey and Daniel were born. The older children, who had resided for many years in larger cities, chafed at the confinement, and protested against the insularity of their surrounding; but their mother was adamant in her decision to remain there. She had recourse to 'making a vow' – which was a habit of hers when determined not to be swayed from a serious purpose. As a girl she had made a vow not to accept the diamond heart her mother had broken the Sabbath to acquire, until a like amount had been given to charity; she had made a vow in Panama not to buy lottery tickets, while all those around her were being demoralized by the lust for quick gain; and now she vowed that if her mother lived to be a hundred, she would not desert her. Solomon traveled to and fro as his business

required; but Rachel and the children stayed near her old mother, who fortunately for youth (which must be served) lived only three years after their arrival.

The family moved back to Panama, where there was now a large colony of West Indian families enjoying the boom which began with the putting through of the French Canal. Estelle, the thirteenth child was born there. It does not seem surprising that after this heavy burden of child bearing, poor Achie almost collapsed. She was so weak and ill that she could not take care of her infant, which fell into the eager, loving hands of the childless Emily for succor. So it was that Fate at last provided this child-hungry woman with an object for her maternal longings. For the frail and delicate mother was taken to California for a change of climate, and the infant left with Emily and Isaac Delvalle was never reclaimed.

The climate of San Francisco agreed with Rachel and she got back her strength. She was enthusiastic about its equability, and soon after her arrival from the voyage which had been planned merely as a health trip, she announced to her husband: "This is where I want to live!" And that is where they did live. She adored the brilliant sunshine, and she had a kind word even for the moist 'tule' fogs. They were so different from the heavy 'pea-soup' variety that her driven them from London. A son Joe was born, fifteen months after Estelle.

But helpful as the climate was to Rachel, so was it harmful to Solomon. He was, all unknowing, a victim of Bright's disease; for in the tropics it had remained dormant. The dampness of California soon made him worse, and he died in 1882 at the age of forty-seven.

The widow and her twelve surviving children were left comfortably off. The Panama business was thriving, and the eldest son, 'Benny', with his cousin Brandao Casseres managed it. Or should we say *mismanaged* it? For soon there was a crash and the firm failed. The attention it should have received had been devoted to one of Panama's most beautiful matrons. Just before the bankruptcy, Josh Lindo, a nephew of Rachel's, succeeded in transferring certain valuable properties to the children. This act saved the family from complete ruin, and they could always count on a small income. One house on the Main Street, valued at \$25,000, yielded \$500 a month in those prosperous days of the French Canal. But alas, this enterprise existed only from 1879-1889. Conquered by yellow fever and impoverished by the graft of a few men the visitors were forced to retire, leaving the graveyards full and their machinery rusting. From that time until the Americans cleaned up the swamps, evicted the mosquito and built the canal early in the new century, there were very quiet times in the business life of the Isthmus.

Most of Rachel's children married. Benny, his wild oats sown, married his second cousin, the pretty Avelyn Maduro. He never made a success of business; while he was an interesting talker, he was not very practical. It was only after he was past middle age that he began to get along moderately. The vivacious Hannah at nineteen married young Harry Goldsmith, whom she had met first as a child in London. When he came to Panama as a young man, they fell in love and soon wed. Their fortunes failed and Hannah proved herself unusually capable and resourceful. She was the admiration of all for the gallant spirit she showed. Delia married her cousin Sam Lindo, the handsomest of Bienvenida's children. They spent most of their wedded life in Hamburg. Achie *believed* in marriage almost as fervently as her mother had: but it was her sons that she was most anxious about. In her later years she hesitated to have a victrola in the house, because she did not want her boys to be so content in their mother's house that they would not want to settle in homes of their own.

Judith, the eldest daughter, was an attractive girl and very popular. She often seemed on the verge of becoming engaged, and then surprised people by *not* doing so. When she was nearly forth, she entered into correspondence with Aaron Cortissoz of Philadelphia. His aged sister in San Francisco was her friend, and Judith used to sit with her and read, or write her letters for her. Often her correspondence was with Aaron. He, a

bookbinder twenty years older than Judith, and more than once a widower, was so attracted by her letters that without even seeing her he proposed marriage. Delighted as she was by his literary style and fine sentiments, and enamored by the romance of an unseen admirer, – still Judith hesitated. Finally she agreed to meet him in Chicago, and so that they recognize each other, sent him half of a rosette of ribbon to wear while she retained the other half. Determinedly she prepared to meet him, but – cautiously – she bought a return-ticket to San Francisco. (If she did not like him she would seem prepared – undisappointed – and ready for the trip back.) But Cortissoz was sure of himself and came with the wedding ring in his pocket. They were married immediately, and lived quietly in Philadelphia for nine years, when he died. Judith outlived him four years.

Jack married May Newfield, and Daniel Nell Wicherly in San Francisco. Estelle, the pretty daughter in Panama, became the second wife of her cousin Josh Maduro. David married Susan Petit of New York. Two daughters, Eda and Rey remain unmarried. Their mother carefully secured their future by buying for them the married children's share of the Panama properties.

Achie's widowed years were active and broad-minded. In contrast to the pious girl we showed in an early chapter refusing to accept the gift her mother bought for her on the Sabbath, she

had developed into a woman who attended an interesting church service as often as a synagogue. In appearance she was always neat and well groomed. It was a principle with her to look crisp and fresh even in the early morning. She accomplished her housework energetically and serenely. Her daughters showed anxiety lest the housekeeping be too much for her strength, but she said, "you don't know what a satisfaction it is to be able to do it!" She did not work by the clock, but was liable to take a notion at any hour of the day or night to paint the floors or the furniture. But if she had anyone working for her, then she did watch the clock – to see that he did not remain one minute after hours.

Of her two single daughters, Eda was in business, and Rey who had had her beautiful voice trained abroad, had returned and was giving singing lessons. She had aspired to the stage, but her mother was unalterably prejudiced against it. So Rey had to give up all thought of a career.

Rachel's later years continued to be active and busy. Her step was as light as a girl's. When she was seventy-seven she joyously reported to Rey that a conductor had remarked to her as she tripped gaily from the street-car, "Madam, it's a pleasure to see how you get off that car – there's many a young one couldn't do it like that!" She hated dependence, and dreaded the

idea of being a care to anyone. She often expressed the wish to 'die in her boots'.

And so it happened. The day after her seventy-eighth birthday she started out for a walk and a little shopping.

"Don't be later than twelve-thirty", called Rey as she was leaving.

"I'll be home as usual, on the tick of the clock" replied her mother.

But she never came home. Instead, Rey was summoned by telephone to the hospital where the old lady had been taken. She had fallen from a sudden heart attack in a department store. She died very soon.

"Old age", said the physician in charge.

Reprinted from: *The Chronicle of Joshua Piza and His Descendants*, by Vida Lindo Guiterman, New York.

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