

Conversations with Aunt Norma

Mother was born in Tchgelna, Russia -- small town in the Minsk state. The earliest thing that I remember about my mother, her mother died when she was nine years old and her father couldn't keep her because he had no food so he gave her to rich people. She was supposed to play with their children but they took her to the kitchen and she was working with the maids. This is where she learned how to cook. When she was 15 years old she fell in love with my father, and her father was against it. His father was a blacksmith. Her father used to make bricks for building, so he thought he was higher than the blacksmith and didn't like the shiddach. But my mom was very determined to marry him and then she took sick. So finally her father gave her permission to marry him. They had six children. They moved to the town where the grandparents were -- Charoneiste. Approx 20 miles away. Then my mother and father decided that my father should go to America.

My father went to America in 1913 in December. We didn't go with him because my mother was pregnant -- the baby was born in March. Names of brothers and sisters -- Borach, Michole, Brache (Beatrice), Nachame, Yirsel, and Avremel. Avremel and Yirsel died. One from typhoid and one from measels. Borach was killed in 1940 by the Nazi's. They took all the Jews in Pasochna to a nearby city and they gassed them all. My brother was among them and my aunts and uncles and cousins. My sister Brache was a twin. Her twin, who only lived six weeks, was named was Rachul.

She only lived six weeks.

My mother used to work in the fields and in the winter made whiskey. This is why she was arrested. And then she escaped from prison and she went to a Jewish family in the area and told them about it. This family got in touch with me and I went to meet mother in a nearby town.

When my mother was in prison a few Jewish families came to visit her and they would bring her some food and she would always give some to the guards. One Jewish family told her that they live right across from the prison and she is free to come there. One morning she got up and told the guard that nature called. The guard had enough confidence in her to let her go herself. She only had a petticoat, an undershirt and a scarf and she walked right out. At 5 or 6 in the morning she knocked on the door of the Jewish family and made them take her in. The family hid her there for three or four days until there was an opportunity to send her out with a horse and wagon. She went back to Nusdeh and she was there about a week. In the meantime the police came and they started to search for mother. Two days later I got word that I should go to this town, Nusdeh -- I was only 12 years old. I walked ten or fifteen miles. When I got there I asked where the Rabbi was and mom was at the Rabbi's house. Another family kept mom and me for about a week or ten days. Mom was very shaken up, if they caught her they'd kill her right away.

Now we decided the only thing to do was to go to Poland. Our state, Minsk Guberniya, in 1918, was divided in two. Half to Poland and half to the Russians. In 1921 we came to Poland. The first time I went with my mother. My sister was left with another family and we'd send for her later. While we were going the guide was killed. The bullet that killed the guide went right by my nose. He drew us all together, then pulled me to him and the bullet went right into his stomach. Mother and I were hidden in bushes. At day break they left. We crawled on our stomachs to a farm house. The dog started to bark and the farmer came out to see what was going on. We told the farmer what had happened to us. He let us wash ourselves and gave us some food. He then took his horse and wagon and took us back to the town, Niszed, where we met the guide. We had given \$20 to the Rabbi to be given to the guide when he presented a note with our signatures that we had gotten there alright. The Rabbi gave us back the \$20 to make arrangements with another guide.

A week later we tried again and we were successful. When we got to Poland, in Niszed, my mother took very sick. She spent six weeks in the hospital. They gave her an injection and poisoned her arm. People from Niszed took me in until mom came out of the hospital.

In 1922 a declaration from the Polish government came into effect. All foreigners from Russia had to go back to Russia. My mother made some false passports and the Polish government didn't

bother us.

We spent about a year and a half in Poland, six months later my sister came, my brother Borach didn't want to go to America. My father sent us some money and some papers. We took a train to Germany, then Holland, and finally to Antwerp, where we waited for three weeks. We came to America December 18, 1923 when I was 15 years old.

When we arrived we found out that the quota for wives to join their husbands was all filled. They wanted to separate us. We stayed with mom for two weeks at Ellis Island. The stay was horrible there. My father came and took us out and mom came out a week later after she was bonded.

We stayed in New York about three weeks and then we came to Philadelphia. My father had a house for us prepared.

My mother had two brothers here and a sister here. Milton came accidentally. He went to Poland speculating, buying some merchandise and selling. He came in 1920. He met up with some people who didn't have any mothers or fathers. They advised him to take a boat to America as an orphan.

I got a job in a sweat shop where I learned how to sew. The first week I earned four or five dollars. A year or two later I joined the union, I was very active in the union (International

Ladies Garment Union -- ILG) fighting for better conditions.

I went to school at night and this is where I met my husband in 1924. Due to Izzy we joined the Sholom Aleichem Juden Club. There were lectures, discussion groups and picnics.

Izzy was a printer. We got married in 1929. Our two sons were born in the Depression. We lived with my mother and dad for five years. When I was pregnant with Velvul we moved out because we needed more room.

Our first move was to Strawberry Mansion in 1934 (1819 32nd street). The apartment had one bedroom, a kitchen and a bathroom. When we lived there Izzy was making \$27 or \$28 a week. Then he got a raise to \$35 a week. At the end of 1934 my son William was born.

Prior to our coming there German Jews had been living in the neighborhood. In 1929 and 1930 a lot of them started to move out to better neighborhoods and the middle class, workers started to move in to Strawberry Mansion.

In 1942 our quarters got a little small, so we moved two blocks away over a butcher shop (2000 North 32 street). There was a bedroom for our children and we had a bedroom and a kitchen and

a living room. I felt rich.

Stokely Elementary School was right around the corner. I was active in the school as a class mother and vice president of the school association. The teachers and students were mostly Jewish. There were a few hundred children, mostly Europeans--Russian, Polish, Hungarian and German, in the school, about 95% of whom were Jewish.

The area of Strawberry Mansion offered us a lot. First of all it provided playgrounds in the park for the children where they could play sports like baseball, basketball and tennis. The Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra performed for free throughout the summer at the Dell. Important personalities and opera stars would be invited to perform. It was such a treat for us to hear Paul Robeson. It didn't cost us a cent. Lilian Ponds also came.

When my older son, Alan, started high school on Broad and Olney streets we thought about moving to that area. But the children didn't want to leave the Strawberry Mansion area.

During World War II we were very active in the Russian War Relief. Also at that time the children were in the Boy Scouts.

In 1947 we bought a home at 33rd St (2546) and Strawberry Mansion. We lived there about eight years and were very happy. My dad and mom had moved in with us because mom wasn't well. My

dad died six weeks later, due to a kidney problem, at 65. This was a shock because my mother was the sick one. Mom stayed with me for a few years and then she went to stay with my sister Bea because Bea went to work and mom wanted to help her out. Mom stayed with Bea for 22 years. When Izzy retired I insisted that mom come live with me. Mom fell in my bedroom and broke her hip. I nursed her for 19 months. Mom went into a nursing home and died there 15 months later. Four years later my brother Milton died. And a year and a half later my husband died.

In 1952 or 1953 the real estate people started bombarding the neighborhood with letters and telephone calls asking us to sell our houses. They stated that we could get a good price and that people wanted to buy houses in the neighborhood. Blacks started coming in at that time. Many people decided to sell their homes, mostly because some homes were too big. 33rd street had four bedroom houses, after children got married the houses were too big. As people moved out, some undesirable elements also moved in. For example, our next door neighbor moved out and a "call girl" house was set up in the residence. When my son was in Korea I didn't worry as much about him as when he came home and was exposed to this. When he would come home at one or two o'clock in the morning I would sit near the window and watch him coming home. So, as soon as we learned what kind of neighbors we had we sold our home and moved to the Northeast.

From Strawberry Mansion people moved to the Northeast and

Mount Airey. Eventually Mount Airey also became predominantly black. I was very unhappy in the Northeast for quite a while. Strawberry Mansion was very convenient. We had a bus going on 33rd street that would take me to town, to the Academy of Music, and to the Museum. In about 15 minutes I was in the center part of the city.

In Strawberry Mansion most of the stores were on 33rd street, mostly food stores, clothing shops, butchers, drug stores, in a one or two block area. All the shopowners were Jewish. I only had Jewish neighbors. All of us were in the working class.

We had a Reform synagogue on 32nd and Montgomery streets. About half a block away there was an Orthodox synagogue. On 33rd street and Diamond there was a beautiful Conservative synagogue. On 31st and York there was a small, little synagogue. Between 32nd and 33rd, on Huntington, there was another small synagogue (it had around 150-200 people).

We did not have a community center. People had functions in rented halls. We had a meeting place called the Working Club. At our once a week meetings we would have entertainment or take up some problem.

Most of the wives were employed. We had a day nursery on 33rd street (around 2200), run by the Jewish Federation. Children



were brought in around 7:30 or 8:00a.m. and the mother could go off to work and pick up her children at the end of the day. Most of my friends had their children in the nursery.

My women friends worked in dress factories on Arch street in town. The whole Garment industry was from Broad and Arch until about 2nd and Arch and then maybe up to Race street. They lived in Strawberry Mansion and took the number 9 bus in to town.

Many of the men were cap makers, made men's clothing, hung wall paper, were painters, upholsterers. A lot of them worked in the textile factories.

In 1930 I was selected by the ILG union to be sent to Bryn Mawr College for leadership training. There were 110 women from all over the U.S. and from England, Scotland, Germany and other places. From Philadelphia there were five women. I spent two months there. We had lectures, English, Politics, and Science classes. We had a cafeteria and we weren't happy with the food. So we got together a counsel to fight for more food. People from the area would come to help us with our work and our spelling.

I was married already one year when I was selected to go to Bryn Mawr College. Izzy let me do this. While I was there I was selected for a scholarship to Brookwood College (a labor college), but I didn't accept it because I wanted to go back to him.