

MERLIN FAMILY IN AMERICA

In a period of seven to eight years, between 1906 and 1913, a family from Dubrovna came over from Russia to America, and settled here in Atlanta. Our father died in Dubrovna. Our mother and seven sons and one daughter came to America.

The Mother: Esther Risha Merlin

The Children: Lazear Ari Merlin. His wife, Ida Reva, and children.

Yeruchim Merlin. His wife, Eta, and children.

Beryl Merlin. First wife, Annie; second wife, Ida, and children.

Daughter, Fraidl Merlin Maziar. Husband, Nathan Maziar, and children.

Michel (Mitchell Julius) Merlin. Wife, Bessie, and children.

Morris Merlin, Wife, Gertie, and children.

Dave Merlin. Wife, Sophie, and children.

Yitzhak (Itchi) (Edward) Merlin. Wife, Leah (Lena), and children.

Nine souls we were. Now, October, 1967, there remain of us only two brothers: Mitchell (the author) and Dave.

We were all born and brought up in Dubrovna, Mulliver Gebernia, in White Russia, by the Dnieper River.

We owned only one room house, and as a child I remember that my father undertook to build onto the house "three walls", which made our house quite a large dwelling.

Our house was on a street which was in its width from the Dnieper up to the market; and lengthwise it extended to the larger city, Orsha, seventeen miles from the "long street" in Dubrovna all the way to our house, which was at the dead end of the street. Behind the house we had a really large garden, and in the front of the house a small garden with two trees, and it was fenced in.

I do not know the number of people who lived in our town, but I do know that we possessed a high (and cold) Shule and five Shulen surrounding it, all of which was called the "Shule-Hauf". In all we had 18 Shulen and schools, and everywhere the houses of learning were full of students.

The greatest majority of our people were workers; very few merchants. Most of them were weavers of talaisem (prayer shawls). Many made the "block" for tvillen, and some were writers of the words to insert in the tvillen.

In almost every house there were weavers stools. There were some gvirim (wealthy people) who bought the prayer shawls from the weavers, and they sent these to the market to sell. The best weavers were the artists who could weave the 60's, 70's and even 80's (threads per inch). This meant they could weave many threads into each inch of material. These weaver-artists were sought out by the wealthy buyers, and they were always busy. Everything they produced was bought.

We had about five or six weavers stools in our house. Every adult weaved, and even some girls were hired to work with us. But we were not of those who had steady work. We looked for someone to buy our prayer shawls, but almost nobody wanted them. The trouble was that the raw material which came from Moscow was very good. There was a fixed price, and every store would buy it in exchange for merchandise, but when we put our work into them and made the prayer shawls nobody would want to buy them.

As I grew older I could see that our father was a sick man. He could not work. In the summer he would sit in our front garden trying to catch his breath. In the winter he stayed in the house. His ambition was that at least one child of his should become a Rabbi. I became the one who was chosen. The teachers and then the principle of the Yeshiva encouraged him. My father had to pay tuition for all his sons. Our food was always scarce. An aura of poverty existed in our house. I was sent away to the nearby town, to a Yeshiva, and there I ate "days". (Ed. This meant I was supposed to be given a meal in a different family's house each day of the week. This was a customary way of seeing to it that students— who were generally poor— would get a good meal every day). Often there were "days" missing— no place to eat on a certain day— and I had to go hungry. I was ashamed to let someone know of this, and often was hungry.

I remember that my father learned from the Chumesh and read prayer books constantly. Often he would wake up in the middle of the night and study and "kretz" (groan). When I asked him why he groaned he would say that was his "golos burden", which meant that ever since the Jews lost their Temple in Jerusalem and were scattered throughout the world away from their own land, his Jewish soul could find no rest.

Our father was a wise man. People (Jews) would constantly come and ask his advice, and would come to him to settle their disputes. He would always give the verdict for the good of all. People also came to him to "ward off the evil eye". Actually his ability to drive away evil was left for me especially.

Our father died at 48 years of age, the 22nd Shabbat of the year 1900. The oldest son was in Kremenchick with his wife and child. Yeruchim got married. Beryl was in the army, and I was left the oldest one at home. I became the leader of the household. I was forced to give up my studies in the Yeshiva.

When I look back I recall that we children lived in harmony together. There was even among us a certain discipline because we were careful not to mention our sick father. We felt a great respect for our parents and a special empathy for our mother who constantly cared for the children. She cooked and baked and was always busy, without rest.

It was recorded in the books of the local government that Yeruchim and Beryl were twins. According to the law one of them had to go into the army, and this lot fell to Yeruchim, but Beryl felt that Yeruchim could help our father better so he volunteered to go into the army so that Yeruchim could remain at home, and so it was.

I can remember the serene atmosphere of the Sabbath and Yom-tovim when our father, after dinner, went to his room to rest, and my mother sat down in our three-walled (additional) room to read to a few women the Chumesh (bible) in translation from the women's prayer book, and the women enjoyed it immensely and had a good cry when it was appropriate. Our mother was also the reader in the women's part of the Shule for those who could not read.

To conclude, I remember the Sabbaths after eating when all of us children would remain to sing zmiris (songs). The windows were open and many neighbors came in to

listen and sing with us heartily and with pleasure. The part of the town on both sides of the Dnieper were settled by Jews, and the banks of the Dnieper and the ends of the town were settled by the Goyim.

A short time after our father died and I became the head of the family a big factory for weaving was completed by the IKO (an organization of benefactors) to help the workers in Dubrovna in their poverty and need. We called the factory "Baron Hirsh Factory". An engineer from Moscow came and he became the manager in the factory. His name was Rosenfeld.

In the first place he paid us with coins (instead of the paper which was redeemable for food in the food stores). In general there was no money (coins) in Dubrovna. He raised our standard of living a little, and everybody was quite happy. For instance, it took from two to four rubles per week for a family to exist in poverty, and he paid six to seven rubles.

At the time the factory was completed they needed a finisher (one who prepares the pattern), and they hired me because I knew how from preparing the pattern for weaving talesem (Prayer shawls), I don't remember my father ever weaving, but he prepared the threads, and this I learned from him.

From the beginning I copied the first finisher and earned a normal amount as did the other workers. I soon realized that it took too long for me to prepare the pattern for cutting, and I went to speak to the head manager though it was hard to get to see him. I spoke to him in Yiddish, and he to me in Russian, but I made him understand that there must be a quicker way to make the pattern if we could only figure it out. If he would only give me the length of the pattern and the formula I would figure it out. He did this and I worked it out and my wages were increased substantially right away.

In the factory they were already making various materials for clothing, using several colors, and though we were making more pay the manager was quite satisfied. As a third finisher I took in my brother, Yeruchim, and my sister also came into the factory as a finisher. We threw away the weavers stools from our house, and my mother had only to prepare meals for us and that is all. They spoke to us in the town— that we were buying bread in a bakery, and that we ate meat every day and not just on the Sabbath and holidays. The finishers worked with their hands, and the work was done in the same building where the office was. When the manager walked out of the office to go to the factory every morning he never failed to stop and talk to me a few minutes. A respect developed from him to me. Then he found out that some of the Socialist Proclamations distributed in the town and even in the factory were written by me, and he fired me from my job.

I again installed a weavers machine in the house and began making talesem. It didn't take Long and the manager told my brother that I should come back to work. But when I did he no longer stopped by to talk to me.

It was at that time that all the people in the town, especially the youth, were becoming "isten" (Ed. various revolutionary movements of the time, such as Socialists, Labor Zionists, etc.), mostly "Bundisten", but also various revolutionary parties, and everybody was against the government. Everyone knew that sooner or later he would be arrested, the suppressions increased every day, and whoever could wanted to go to America, to a free land.

I had already saved up enough money so that when Beryl ran away from the army I gave him enough money so that he could go to London, and I would go there to meet him

later. It took longer than I had anticipated, but eventually I got to London. We worked there and saved enough to be able to go to America, with the hope that we would be able to bring our whole family over.

My brother Beryl was more worldly than I, and more important he was more sturdy so that when we had saved enough money he went to America. We had already heard in London that for a Jew to become employed in a weaving factory would be most difficult. Therefore, while I was in London I learned how to work on a machine, which was at that time a new method for making clothing.

Beryl had by then arrived in New York and obtained work, and then I went to New York to join him. In 1906 an economic crisis developed and it became harder to obtain work and save money. In spite of this I worked a little at a time at cloaks and we managed to purchase tickets, paying for them weekly, and sent them to our family in Dubrovna.

At that time an office was opened, supported by wealthy Jews, to distribute immigrants throughout America so that they would not all have to live in New York. Beryl went to this office where he was well received, and they advised him to go to Atlanta. There he would find work, or he would be able to peddle in the "country". We decided that he would go to Atlanta, and that I would follow later.

When the cloak season ended and there was no more work I went to Patterson to see whether I could find some work weaving. There were weavers from Dubrovna there who were working in the factories weaving, and even some who opened shops of their own for weaving. But there was still a crisis, and there was no work to be had for me. Then I went to Passaic, where there were new factories for weaving. There were long line of workers seeking work, I among them. They wrote down everyone's name and said they would let us know when there was work. I gave them my name and address. To this day I have not heard a word from them.

IN ATLANTA

I too went to the "Removal Office", told them that I could find no work, and that I was ready to join my brother. They sent me to Atlanta also. My brother Beryl used to ride the bus, and would get off about 50 miles from Atlanta and there he would peddle at the farms where he sold them various articles (necessities) which he had bought in Atlanta on credit and sought to sell them for cash money. But as there was a crisis the farmers wanted to purchase the merchandise, but paid with butter, eggs, and chickens as they had no money. As I was peddling with small things (notions) for general use from house to house, Beryl had no choice but to send me from the small towns to Atlanta so that I could sell the things for cash.

During the first five days of the week I would peddle in various parts of the city. In every part of the city I already had a grocery store where I would stop and eat lunch. Saturday was the best day to stay on Decatur Street, there to sell my merchandise to the passersby. At one store the proprietor told me one time, "I can see from the way you talk and from your bearing that you are a fine young man and willing to work. I want to sell my store. I will teach you. You have peddled enough. You will pay me weekly or monthly". That was Wolf Shetzen, on West Fair Street. Now it is in the government housing project, and there are several stores there too.

When Beryl came home we talked it over and decided to accept his offer. We had succeeded through living sparingly to also save a little money, and the credit extended then to immigrants was "spread out" so that it could be repaid over a period of time; in a short time after I bought the store Beryl also bought a store and we were partners until he got married.

Among the newcomers in New York the news spread that we were in business, and as the crisis still existed even in late 1907 there arrived in Atlanta our "landsleit" from Dubrovna who came in the tens of numbers to us. Our credit was good, and through the small private banks we could borrow up to a thousand dollars to pay back in a year. As most of the newcomers were young unmarried man we bought stores for them. We also lent them cash money from time to time, and so each one lived sparingly and paid back the borrowed money. That method of helping to put new immigrants "on their feet" is still often used today.

The result was that we assured all the newcomers from New York that they could eat and sleep with us until they could become established for themselves. That was the beginning and the cause of so many new immigrants in Atlanta becoming grocery store owners. I know of other cities in the South where the first immigrant became a shoemaker and it followed that most of the others also became shoemakers. In other cities the first immigrant opened a clothing store and the others followed in the clothing business.

THE WORKMEN'S CIRCLE

The Workmen's Circle Branch 207 (Arbeiter Ring) was organized in 1908. We sought to enlist as members all the newcomers who were "isten" (Socialists, labor Zionists, etc.) from Russia and Poland. Our goal was to work on a cultural level and we did this in full measure. However, it is not now my purpose to write a history of the Workmen's Circle. At that time the trend was toward self-education and assistance to each other within our group.

There were already many members with families who badly needed help financially. There were also others who could not repay \$20 per week regularly to borrow money in a small bank. Even so we already had certain members who had worked themselves up so that we could borrow \$1000 on our co-signatures (and also lend outright either \$50 or \$100 to help those who needed it), assuring the bank that they would pay it back. When these people had paid back half of their loans we could borrow another \$1000, using part of it to repay the original loan, and so on.

After borrowing the original \$1000 to help the first person, it worked out that by the time he paid it back there was another who needed help and we took out another loan for him, with some of us co-signing, so that he could get the loan. This became a sort of system, and it worked out that very few of these people we assisted could not repay their loans so that the money was lost. Then we began again with another \$1000. Our theme was without exception. We told the borrower that we could help him and that we were certain he would pay it back. And so he did. Then we would ask if he was ready, in turn, to co-sign so that another person could get a loan. Years later I remarked at an open meeting of our Branch that I did not know of a single person who had not at one time benefited from some kind of help from our Branch.

Gradually our family came across the ocean to us. When our mother arrived with Fraidl, our sister, and Itchi (Edward), our younger brother our whole life changed for the good. We had already prepared a residence for them to live in a certain style. I not being married, and Morris were living together. We felt very happy however, Lazear Ari and his family had not yet arrived. That was what we were waiting for.

Fraidl got married and my mother went to live with her. We went to visit them during the week, but especially on Sundays for the whole day. Our mother visited us very often in our stores and would take money from us to send to her poor sister in Dubrovna. Yes, even while in Dubrovna she felt it was her duty to help her sister who was poorer than we, I remember when we lived there that when my mother went to the market to buy something for herself on those occasions when she could muster a little money, she would stop on the way home at her sister's who had a house full of

children, and there she would leave some food, and then come home. We all knew of this, except my father, but none of us children ever said a word about it,

In 1913 Lazear Ari came over with his wife and four children. We were all happy. The whole family was here. And even though we all worked hard to make a living the family was close and together as it should be. For Lazear Ari it was harder. He did not want to work on the Sabbath which was then the most important day in the week in the grocery business. We bought a store for him, and he kept it open all week except Saturday, but opened it Saturday night. The result was that the store folded. Eventually a delicatessen was purchased for him on Capitol Avenue in the thickest part of the Jewish neighborhood, near the Jewish Educational Alliance. He was well received in the Jewish community. He helped to build the Shule on Capitol Avenue, and he never worked on the Sabbath or Yom-tov. He lived a highly satisfying life until the old age of 86 years.

At the time that a part of our family was left in Dubrovna to live (our mother, Fraidl, Dave and Itchi), Fraidl, and Dave worked in the factory and they could make out all right. Their goal, however, was to come to America. So we who were here sent the necessary papers to Dubrovna. We gave all of our inheritance— the house and everything else— to our sister, Fraidl. That way she was able to sell everything to come to America.

Our mother lived very well satisfied in Atlanta with Fraidl, her husband and children. She would also come often to visit her other children. She became acquainted with other women, especially in Shule, and these friends would come to her home to enjoy a few hours together.

In a whole family coming over to America and getting settled there were many moments of joy as well as of tragic instances, and often too comic-tragic happenings. One comic instance I would like to relate here. When Fraidl, mama, and Itchi arrived in Castle Garden, where the immigrants were inspected, the officials and doctors would talk to each person in his own language. Fraidl and Itchi were immediately passed through, but Mama was held back. It took a little time to examine her eyes. We knew this and understood, and were satisfied, and then forgot it.

Once, at a later date, when our mother and a few women were talking in Fraidl's house she told them that when she went through the examination upon arriving in America the government men spoke to her in Yiddish and asked to whom she was going all the way in Atlanta. When she told them that she was traveling there to the Merlins, her children, they then immediately let her through.

Our mother felt quite content. She sent money and letters to her sister and received letters in return until... until the beginning of the first World War. The mail from Russia was discontinued abruptly. There were no more letters from Dubrovna, and Mama became uneasy. We all assured her that the war could only last a few months. That is what everyone thought at the time. But as each month went by she became more concerned and worried, and she changed completely.

She would sit for hours at a time in her room, often in silence. One evening when we were all sitting in the dining room talking pleasantly our mother came out of her room upset and tearfully asked us How can it be that they won't let a letter through from a sister? Why don't you get together a "minyan" (group of ten) Jews and go to the Czar of this country and ask him how he can allow that sisters cannot keep in touch with each other for such a long time. How can he allow it! Such agony, such pathos was in her question that we were gripped by more pain than we could bear.

The first death-episode in our family! It was right after Pesach and Yeruchim died, a very young man, leaving a family of several children, one a mere Infant, and his widow. This was a severe jolt to us. It made a shocking impression. As he had left a grocery store, his widow asked that I go with her to a lawyer. The lawyer told Eta that she is entitled to everything that was left by her husband. She did not have to pay any of the debts that were due by him. She did not want to hear of this. She said she would work in the store and pay all the debts. The lawyer argued with her, saying that her first responsibility was to take care of her small children. The government gives her the right. I understood that the lawyer was right, but I did not want to say a word when I knew that she was willing to work and pay. She appointed me as executor; she took over ownership of the store, and she worked and she brought up all her children.

At the present time all of us original Merlins have multiplied and become intertwined with our families. We are here In Atlanta and in Miami mostly, and also in other cities. From the eight of our generation most have gone to their eternity. The children and the children's children do not know who they are and how they came to America, They are here and that is enough. I hardly believe that anyone has ever recorded the story.

The fact is that when the first generation was living I believe that there were about 100 Dubrovner in Atlanta. We used to send money to Dubrovna after the War (World War I), each to his own people. One time we undertook to send a large sum of money through the new Soviet government to the entire population of Dubrovna, including the Goyim, so as not to create any ill feelings toward the Jews there.

I don't remember the sum, but it was a very large sum, and they never received it. After a time one of the leaders from Dubrovna came to America and he also visited Atlanta. We called a meeting of all the Dubrovner. He was an excellent speaker. He spoke a long, long time and said that they, the government, knows better who is in need, and that if they didn't give it to the people in Dubrovna then it is certain that it was needed more elsewhere.

We did not know yet at that time what the Soviet government would become, which was supposed to be the great hope of humanity.

After the second World War we tried to find out something about our Dubrovna, and as a last resort telephoned the Postmaster there. But we did not get an answer. We heard that Dubrovna had become a small village. The Dnieper wa so diverted that the town was left without the Dnieper. At any rate no Jews were left there.

All of us and all the generations that will follow us are truly happy and lucky that we ran away from Russia and that we came to the new and free America. America, be blessed for all the good that you gave to all of us.

(signed) Mitchell J. Merlin

Atlanta, Georgia, October 18, 1967