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THE MERLIN FAMILY CIRCLE
64TH ANNIVERSARY REUNION

AUGUST 16-18, 2013
ATLANTA, GA

BUS TOUR OF ATLANTA

Merlin Bus Tour script

Aug. 17, 2013

Compiled by Howard Pousner

We welcome you to our first ever Merlin Bus Tour and are pleased to have you along as we explore the city that has been home to Merlin family members going back more than a century. Atlanta has grown like kudzu, and so have the Merlins, our relatives now scattered across the country. This tour pays tribute to our parents and grandparents and great-grandparents, the fine folks who came before us and put down roots in this great city, the capital of the South. Today, we will check out the places where they lived, the nice homes where they raised the next generation of Merlins; the synagogues where they prayed and hosted Bar and Bat Mitzvahs and weddings; and a special place where the Merlin Family Circle, founded in 1949, socialized, Jews who were collectively helping nurture Atlanta into becoming the bigger and more sophisticated city it is today. We'll also dine at the Varsity, an Atlanta landmark, the world's biggest drive-in restaurant, where the food is neither kosher nor particularly good for you in an eat-your-veggies sort of way. It's just good.

We'd like to dedicate this excursion to our cousin Archie Merlin, who helped revive the Merlin Family Circle after many decades of inactivity and who served on the executive committee until his death this year. Archie is absolutely with us here in spirit today.

Let's start our tour with a bit of context about how the Merlin family came to call Atlanta home -- seven sons, a daughter and a mother, who arrived from Dubrovna, Russia, after stops in New York, between 1906 and 1913.

One of the sons, Mitchell Merlin, wrote a detailed, excellent family history in 1967 that is the contemporary family's main link to its humble White Russian roots. The background on the Merlins in Dubrovna you will hear today was excerpted completely from there.

Dubrovna was a small, river-side town where most of the adults were tallit (or prayer shawl) weavers. The Merlins lived in a one-room house, later expanded as the family grew, at the dead end of a main street that went up to the Dubrovna market and then extended to the larger city of Orsha, 12 miles to the west.

The Merlins were poor, in part because Israel, the father of seven sons and one daughter, was sickly and unable to work. But they were hardly the only ones struggling in Dubrovna.

Morris Merlin recounted, "Our food was always scarce. An aura of poverty existed in our house."

Israel Merlin, who was described as a wise and devout man who townspeople would seek out to settle disputes, died young, at age 48, in 1900.

Meanwhile, anti-government sentiments were brewing in Dubrovna, a town rich in shuls and schools but little else. That was true for minority Jews across Russia.

Michell wrote in the history of the growing ranks of Socialists, Labor Zionists and other "ists." "Everybody was against the government," he recounted. "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."

Mitchell, who had done well at a job as a finisher in a new weaving factory in Dubrovna, gave his brother Beryl money to go to London after he ran away from the army. As planned, the brothers eventually met up there.

"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," Mitchell recounted in the family history, which, by the way, he wrote in Yiddish and then had translated to English by a family friend. (You can find it on the Merlin Family Circle web site and there will be copies of it at the dinner tonight.)

Beryl journeyed to America first, presumably through Ellis Island, finding work in New York. Mitchell soon joined him. Mitchell worked in a clothing factory, and, little by little, he and Beryl saved and bought tickets that they sent home to the other family members in Dubrovna.

How did they all wind up in Atlanta?

It wasn't a Merlin Family strategy, more a matter of the logistics of the Great Jewish Migration. Mitchell recalled that while still new in New York, Beryl went to a resettlement office supported by wealthy Jews to "distribute immigrants throughout America so that they would not all have to live In New York."

Beryl "was well received, and they advised him to go to Atlanta," Mitchell wrote. "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."

Once in Atlanta, Beryl did exactly that -- riding 50 miles outside of town to sell various household necessities to farmers that he had bought on credit. He, in turn, often extended credit to his customers, most of them cash-poor themselves.

Meanwhile, Mitchell, who did his peddling in the city, soon was offered the chance to purchase a store downtown by a business owner who admired the young man's drive.

In short order, both brothers became Atlanta store owners and immediately started bringing over family members and a succession of unrelated young Dubrovna men in search of a new life for themselves and their families.

Mitchell Merlin's history does not record one of the darker chapters in Atlanta's history in 1906, the year Beryl arrived. The Atlanta Race Riot occurred Sept. 22-24, 1906. White mobs killed dozens of blacks, wounded scores of others and damaged property.

Local newspaper reports of alleged assaults by black males on white females were the catalyst for the riot. But a number of underlying causes lay behind the outbreak of mob violence, according to the New Georgia Encyclopedia, including substantial growth among the black population that created competition for jobs between black and white workers. Also, Jim Crow laws widened the gulf between the races, who lived in segregated neighborhoods. And candidates for the 1906 governor's race played to white fears of an emerging black upper class. Atlanta's image as a thriving New South city was tarnished, but the damage was not permanent. The city's population soared from 89,000 in 1900 to 150,000 only a decade later.

Martin Luther King Jr. was born in 1929 in a neat yellow house in the segregated Sweet Auburn neighborhood just east of downtown. His boyhood home is now part of the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site and is open to tours by the National Park Service that sell out most days.

To be sure, the arrival of the first Merlin in Atlanta in the same year of the Atlanta Race Riot is a disconnected coincidence. But it speaks to two themes that define Atlanta's character then and today: opportunity and race.

Today, Atlanta is a huge, still-growing city, with a population of roughly 5.5 million in the 28-county Atlanta Metropolitan Statistical Area.

Though every Atlanta Merlin will kvetch about automobile traffic in a metro area with overburdened roads and an inadequate rapid transit system, most folks are very happy to call this place home.

Like many other long-time families, the Merlins have prospered here, enjoying the leafy beauty and Southern-sweet-tea vibe while reaping the career and business opportunities that come with off-the-charts growth.

Our tour today will concentrate on several older intown neighborhoods where the earliest Atlanta generation of Merlins came to reside after they began to achieve professional success.

Much of the city's slickest growth has steered north from downtown, where the Merlins, among thousands of other immigrant Jews, settled initially. In the early part of the 20th century, the Jews tended to live and work and pray together in an area just east of downtown near where Turner Field, home of the soon-to-be 2013 World Series champion Atlanta Braves (!), now stands.

A landmark in that area that absolutely would demand a visit if it still stood is the old Jewish Education Alliance, formed in 1910, the precursor to the Marcus Atlanta Jewish Community Center in Dunwoody, one of the city's hottest neighborhoods today.

The Alliance, which operated near downtown until the late 1940s, was for nearly four decades the hub of Jewish life here. Families congregated there for social, educational, sports and cultural programs.

It gave people, some of whom were recent immigrants from Russia, Poland, and Hungary, a strong sense of community. For newcomers, it became a refuge, with programs to help them acclimate.

Our cousin Sandy Epstein recalls a couple of notable pieces of family history relating to the old Jewish area, that was forever altered by construction of the Downtown Connector expressway and Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium..

L.A. Merlin, the oldest child of the family, yet the last to come from Russia, arrived to find houses in the Jewish community boarded up. The reason: The Leo Frank case was underway and Jews in the city were afraid of a pogrom.

Settling in, L.A. was set up in the grocery business by his brothers.

"However he was very observant and would not operate the store on Saturdays, and, since that was the big shopping day, the store failed," Sandy recounts. Then his brothers helped him start a kosher deli on Capitol Avenue between the gold-domed state capitol and the old Atlanta-Fulton Stadium/

"The deli thrived and was a communal center for the Jewish community," Sandy said. "L.A. lived next door to the deli. On Friday night, L.A. and his wife, Chaya Rivka, would host big Shabbat dinners where many of his brothers and sister would attend. They were happy affairs with a lot of food, children and enjoyment."

That home was important in my own family's history. When my father, Seymour Pousner, moved to Atlanta at the end of World War II to marry my mother, Rose, there wasn't enough housing stock to accommodate all the returning soldiers. So my Mom's Uncle L.A. gave or rented them part of his rambling downtown home. Some time later, my folks had their own place built in the Morningside neighborhood that we are on the way to visit.

Shearith Israel

This synagogue was founded in 1904 by a minyan of Eastern European immigrants, who named their community Shearith Israel, meaning "Remnant of Israel." That was in acknowledgement of their status as pioneers in the American South, and of their dedication to the tradition from which they had come.

For two years they prayed in one another's homes, and in 1906 they began meeting in an antebellum Methodist Church on Hunter Street downtown. The congregation moved into its first synagogue building in 1929, near what's now Turner Field,

After World War II, the Shearith Israel followed the shift in Jewish northward and settled here on residential University Drive in 1946, the first synagogue in DeKalb County.

In 2002, it became affiliated with the Conservative movement. Steve Merlin was congregation president for a time.

Today, the shul claims to serve more than 400 families. Its rabbi is Hillel Norry.

Anshi S'fard & L.A. Merlin home

Sandy Epstein recalls: "The house we are driving by on Highland Ave is where L.A. Merlin lived till his death in 1959. He lived three doors down from the Anshi S'fard synagogue where he was president for life.

"After he died, his son and my uncle Laib Merlin became president for his life. At that time the average member's age must have been well over 70. Now, however, the Anshi S'fard has a much younger membership and is trying to revitalize itself."

Atlanta's oldest Orthodox synagogue was founded in 1911 to provide a home for Hasidic worship and fellowship for Jews from Poland, Spain and the Ukraine who had settled in the city. The congregation is amid a search for a new rabbi.

Fraidl Merlin home

In his family history, Mitchell Merlin recalled, "When our mother arrived with Fraidl, our sister, and Itchi (Edward), our younger brother, our whole life changed for the good. 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."

I also remember visiting my grandmother, Fraidl, on Sundays, but long after family matriarch Esther Merlin had passed. In fact, I think I was only 2 when my grandfather, Nathan Maziar, died. So my recollections are of visiting my grandmother, who was a very driven woman who raised my mother and her siblings (five children in all) while also running the family grocery store.

My grandfather of course was involved too, but Fraidl was the true businessperson. Her husband Nathan was a very scholarly sort who was a steady presence at the public library. I recall when we visited Fraidl that it also meant spending fun time with my many first cousins, whose families also routinely visited on Sundays -- a backyard full of yelling young Maziar kids.

Dave and Mitchell Merlin homes

Merlin Dorfman, a grandson of Mitchell and Bessie Merlin who now lives in California, recalled out-of-town visits to their home here as a child:

"I can't say exactly when or why my grandparents moved from Formwalt Street to Rock Springs Road. ... I expect that Dave Merlin (who was married to Sophie) moved to Rock Springs Road and offered the garage apartment to them, but I don't know for sure. ... The residence was above the garage, which must have been a burden for my grandparents, who were in their 70s and 80s.

"I remember the general layout of the unit. I remember being fascinated by my grandfather's Yiddish typewriter and mimeograph machine and by the general clutter of his office (in which was a couch that I slept on, if it wasn't too hot -- if it was, I slept on the screened-in porch). I remember there was always a seltzer bottle in the refrigerator!

"My grandfather was still working -- probably part time -- when they moved to Rock Springs Road. He worked at the Hyman Meltz insurance agency downtown. For many years I was the proud owner of a stapler with the Hyman Meltz logo on it.

"When I traveled to Atlanta with my parents, we always spent a lot of time visiting relatives. (And of course there were dozens!) I'm told that I could remember many names when seeing relatives again, but could never remember Tanta Fraidl. (My mother would say something like "You remember Tanta Fraidl," and I would say no.)

"I loved the fried onion rings at the Varsity and my grandparents always made sure that I got there at least once per visit.

"I was only in Dave's house a couple of times. I remember that there was a full-length portrait of his mother (my great-grandmother, Esther), posing by a waterfall in the Dubrovna area, hanging on a wall in the house. His daughter Libby, a pharmacist as I recall, didn't live there but often came to visit. She drove a really cool two-seater car."

Morris Merlin home

Ronnie Merlin fondly recalls: "I clearly remember going to visit Bubbie and Zadie (Gertie and Morris Merlin) on Argonne Avenue. We not only visited them, but two doors down lived my mother's parents, Grandma Rose and Papa Sam Zaban. We would always see both sets of grandparents almost every Sunday.

"I can still remember racing with my brother Steve, to see who could run fastest from one of the houses to the other. (Steve did not win!) The houses are still here, but have changed dramatically. I remember there was always the aroma of good food when we walked in to Bubbie and Zadie's house.

"I can also remember going with my father to Merlin Grocery Company or Merlin, Inc. on Decatur Street, I think. I remember an employee there named Charles Turner. He was always so nice and he loved to take me on a ride around the warehouse, while I stood on the float they used to move cases of groceries. I can still remember the seeing and being amazed at the cases and cases of all kinds of groceries that were on the shelves.

One of my favorite memories of all time as a child was wishing and hoping for Uncle Archie Merlin to come visit us on Spring Valley Lane. Whenever he came by, all of my friends would run over to our house, because they wanted Uncle Archie to take us for a ride in his Red Corvette convertible.

"He never disappointed any of us. He would love to tell us to load up the back seat with as many as we could, and he would then drive us up and down the street while we would all be laughing and acting as if we were really something. He loved doing this and we loved him for it."

The Varsity (lunch!)

Billed as the world's largest drive-in restaurant, the Varsity is, well, big -- 2 acres big, big enough to accommodate 600 cars outside and 800 hungry people inside.

On football Saturdays, when the weather is good and Georgia Tech is playing at Bobby Dodd Stadium, which happens to be just across the Downtown Connector, up to 30,000 customers will move through the gargantuan fast-food emporium.

Waiting on them will be 34 servers behind the 17 registers on the 150-foot stainless steel countertop, all hailing customers with the traditional "What'll ya have?" as if they're tired of waiting for folks to make up their collective minds.

On the Friday before a football Saturday, the Varsity loads up with a ton -- yes, literally 2,000 pounds -- of onions for onion rings, with more than 3,500 pounds of potatoes sliced for long, oily, delicious french fries.

Did you want a turkey burger, veggie burger or some other healthy choice today? Sorry, you've come to the wrong place!

Of, and we know of at least one Merlin connection to the Varsity, other than many who have done their parts to support it dating back to its opening in 1928: Dave Merlin's grocery supply business sold the Varsity drinking glasses with the famed football punter embossed on them.

They are precious Atlanta collectibles now, sometimes found on eBay.

The Progressive Club

The Progressive Club was a Jewish social organization that was established in 1913 by Eastern European Jews who felt unwelcome at the Standard Club, where German Jews were predominant. Now it's one of several buildings that collectively serve as the headquarters for the Turner Entertainment networks.

The old building that housed the Progressive Club was the site of endless Jewish gatherings, a place where families could relax together, enjoying the pools, tennis courts and more.

As Marilyn Tuckman recalled "going to the Progressive Club pool with Elaine and Jerry (her twin sister and brother). Mom would drop us off, along with the maid in her starched white uniform, and Mom would go into the club and play canasta or mahjong. The maid would sit on the side in the shade with all the other maids. We would order lunch, that being a time when we could not go into the water for 30 minutes to an hour after eating!

"Aunt Rose, Aunt Ida, Aunt Sophie and Aunt Sonni hosted a bridesmaid luncheon at the Progressive Club on Saturday, April 10, 1965, which was the day before my wedding. (Her finance) Mike's parents and grandmother hosted a brunch at the Progressive Club on Sunday before our 6 o'clock wedding that evening at the AA. The brunch included all the aunts, uncles, wedding party and out-of-towners, I'm guessing around 75 people. No one in the family would consider any place else.

"I also remember going to a few Merlin Family Circle events at the club. It was a big part of my life growing up in Atlanta!"

Ted Turner also has some fond memories of this site. The old Progressive Club edifice is also the building where he began his career as a media mogul. It was already the home to his nationwide superstation, TBS, when CNN was launched in 1980. Starting that year, Turner was a constant presence in this building. Then, in 1987, CNN moved into the new CNN Center downtown. When Turner returned here for the dedication of a Hollywood Boulevard-style sidewalk star in 2004, he fondly recalled the days when he lived in an apartment at the far end of the second story of this building.

The Temple

Founded as the Hebrew Benevolent Congregation in 1867, The Temple stakes a claim to being Atlanta's first official Jewish institution. It grew out of the Hebrew Benevolent Society, which had been organized in 1860 to obtain a burial ground and provide relief for the Jewish poor. In 1875, the congregation built its first permanent worship place, in downtown Atlanta. During Rabbi David Marx's 51-year tenure, which ended just after World War II, he pushed The Temple further into classical Reform Judaism.

The current shul was designed by the Atlanta classicist architect Philip Trammell Shutze, perhaps best known as the designer of the Swan House, considered by many to be Atlanta's most beautiful home, in Buckhead. This location of the Temple opened in 1931 and has been expanded several times.

Set back on a deep lot far from the bustle of Peachtree Street, it even appears a bit mansion-like, with its entry portico featuring four grand columns, a motif the architect carried to the dome rising on the roof above .

The shul made international headlines in 1958 when white supremacists, angered by The Temple's vocal support of civil rights, placed 50 sticks of dynamite by its north entrance. The damaged part of the building was rebuilt.

And the shul, then led by Rabbi Jacob Rothschild, did not back down. In fact, in 1964, it hosted an integrated gala dinner to honor Martin Luther King Jr. for being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

The current senior rabbi is Peter S. Berg.

The AA

This past January, the AA celebrated its 125th anniversary.

An 1886 story in the Atlanta Constitution reported: "There are in Atlanta a community of Israelites, principally from Poland and Russia, who do not subscribe to the reformed or American ritual ... and who have services of their own."

It was an Orthodox congregation when it built its first building downtown in 1900 -- the hard to pronounce Hebrew name translating as Congregation of Brotherly Love. It joined the Conservative Movement in 1952.

After outgrowing several other sanctuaries and educational centers, it moved into its current edifice here on the northside, where many of its members had migrated, in 1958.

The senior rabbi is Neil Sandler.

Chastain Master Grill

The 268-acre Chastain Park, the largest park in Atlanta, was laid out in 1933 on the grounds of two alms houses, one for whites and one for blacks, which sheltered the city's poor.

Many of the park's buildings were built by the Works Progress Administration. The 6,000-seat concert amphitheater was the dream of Troy Chastain, who was, at the time, supervisor of public buildings for the city of Atlanta. The venue opened in 1944, and the former North Fulton Park was renamed for Chastain after his death in 1945. The park offers many other recreational opportunities, including golf, hiking, horseback riding, swimming and tennis.

The park also is home to the Master Grill where the Merlin Family held reunion-picnics in the '50s and '60s.

The grill area is undergoing a long-overdue restoration. But many Merlins who grew up attending reunions here recall it fondly, including Ronnie Merlin, who remembered:

"I will never forget going to the annual Merlin Family Circle Picnics at Chastain Park. It would always be hot outside, but there was plenty of food and cold drinks. We kids would run around and through some seemingly large cave, and just have fun being together with family. I have since learned the cave was about 10 feet long, but, my, did it seem much larger back then. I also remember wanting to see and take a ride in our cousin Libby Merlin's red For Thunderbird.

What a car!"

The Merlin Family Circle held a few reunions here after it reformed in 2000. The joke then was that some of the very just-off-the-boat-looking Russian men that we've never been able to identify in old Family Circle photos may still be living in that cave!

OK, so now our tour of Merlin sites in Atlanta is complete. But our history of the Merlin Family Circle is a work in progress.

For instance, a genealogist at Atlanta's Breman Jewish Heritage Museum recently confirmed that Dubrovna, the little village that was the Merlins' Russian home is now part of Belarus (and it's now spelled differently: Dubrowna). Google searches have turned up some photos and scant information that suggests the settlement survives today, as frozen as ever in winter. The Dnieper River around which it no doubt sprouted up had been diverted from town even by the time Mitchell Merlin recorded the family history in 1967.

The bigger nearby town of Orsha, still intersected by the Dnieper, seems to have modernized and prospered by comparison, probably because it is situated along a major route between Moscow and Western Europe.

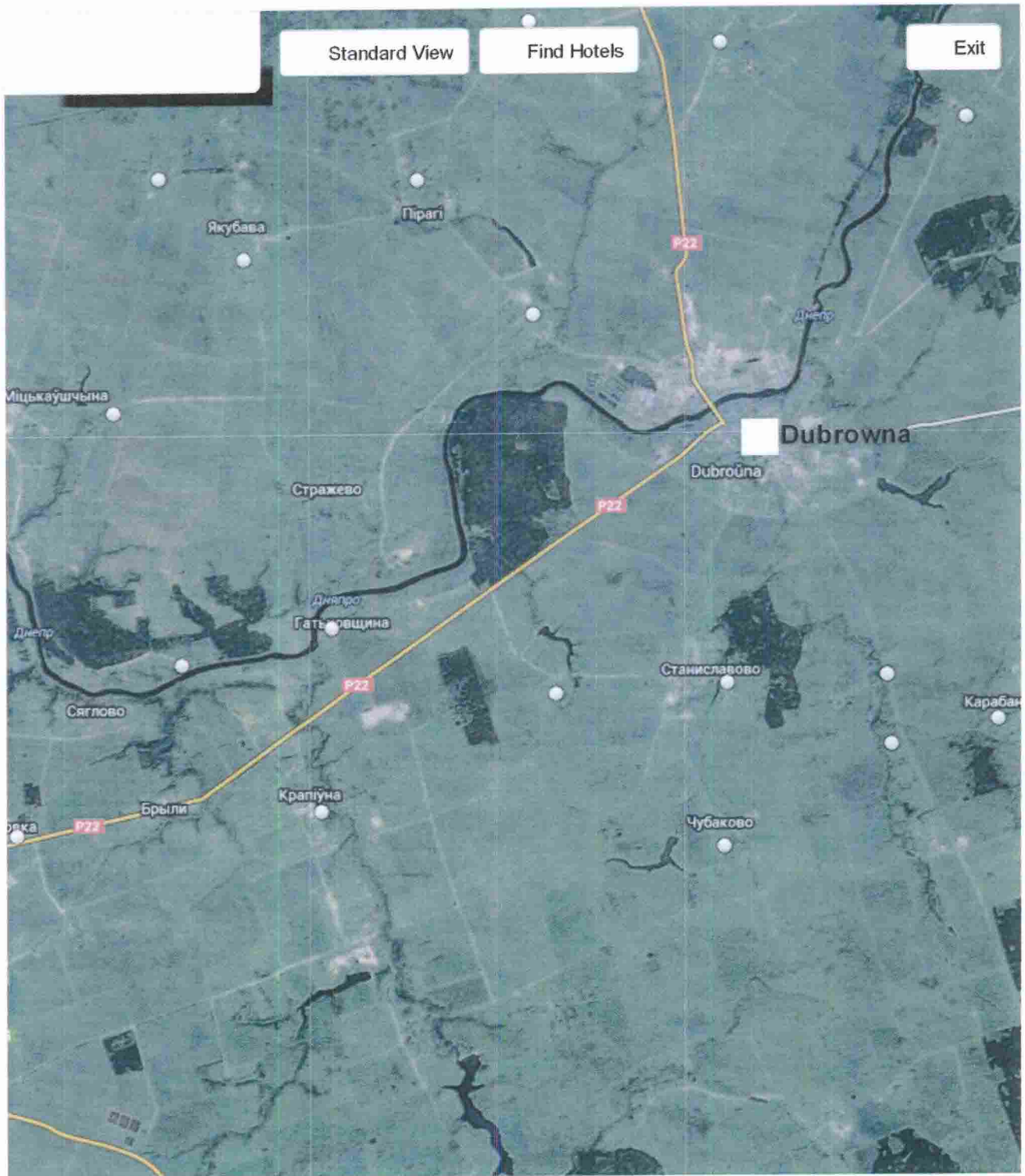
Another Web search found these startling figures, which bear more research: Before the Great Migration of Jews from Russia at turn of the 20th century, there were more than 700,000 Jews in the area now constituting Belarus; in 2009, there were 13,000.

Guess you can't go home again.

Not that Mitchell cared to. He concluded his Merlin history with this:

"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."

As we head back to the hotel, we invite you to share with the bus any memories or stories you heard from your relatives about their lives in Atlanta.
Even better, if you have Merlin tales to tell, please type them out and send them to a Family Circle board member, so they can be added to the family history and kept for posterity.
Thank you for your interest, and we look forward to seeing you tonight at the Garden Hills Recreation Center.

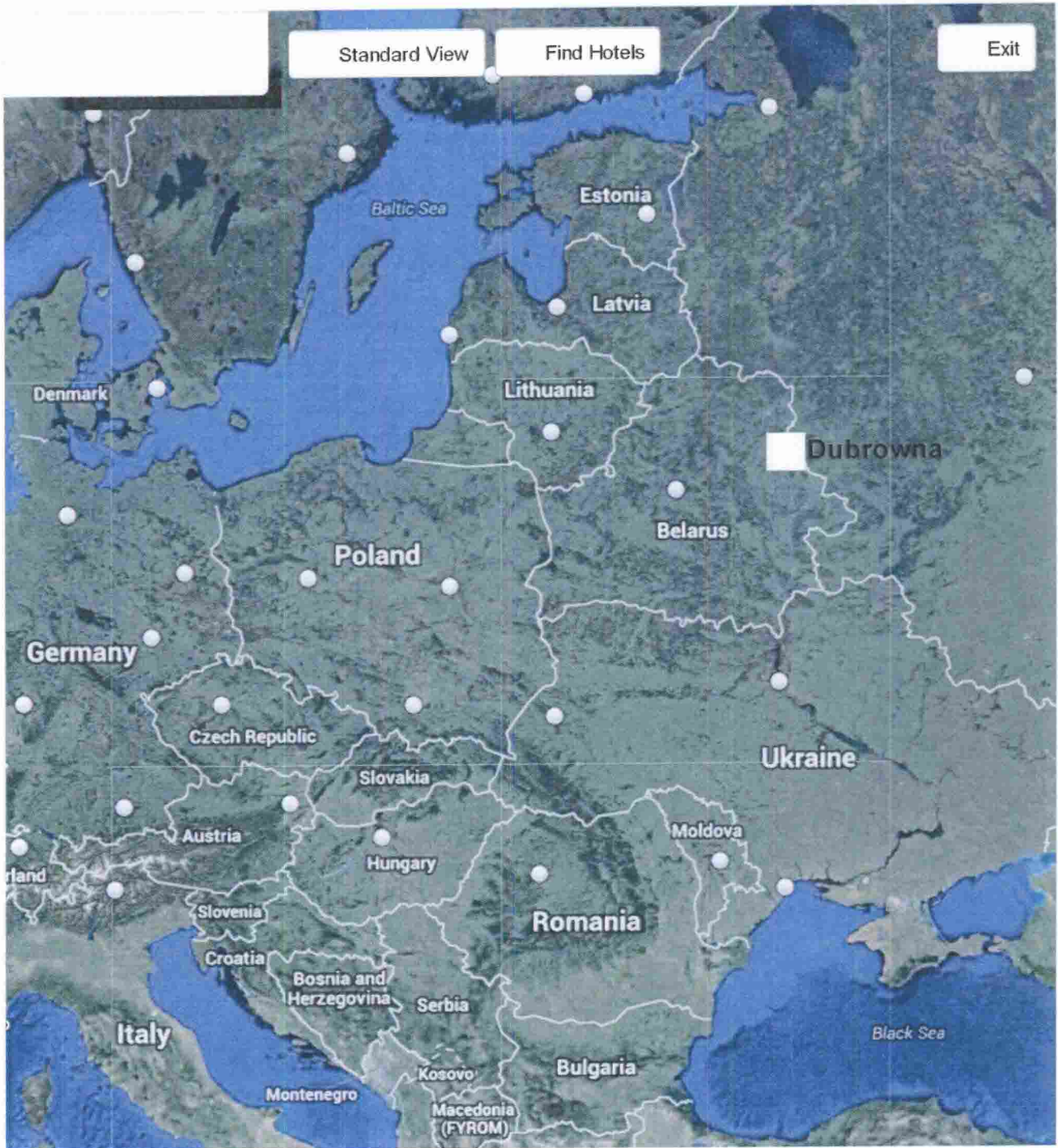


Dubrowna is in [Vitebsk Oblast, Belarus](#) and has about 8,000 residents.

Standard View

Find Hotels

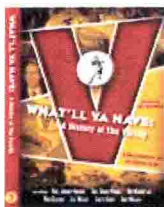
Exit





Varsity History

The History of The Varsity
The Varsity Timeline
Varsity Lingo
PBS Special



Now available in our gift shop!



The Varsity Lingo

"What'll ya have? What'll ya have? What'll ya have? Have your order in your mind and your money in your hand!" is the constant chorus one hears above the crowd noise when you walk into The Varsity. Here's a list of lingo so you know they got your order right.



Our HISTORY

A great story, 75 years in the making.

Hot Dog	Hot dog with chili and mustard
Heavy Weight	Hot dog with extra chili
Naked Dog	Plain hot dog on a bun
MK Dog	Naked dog with mustard and ketchup
Regular C Dog	Hot dog with ketchup
Red Dog	Naked dog with Ketchup
Yellow Dog	Naked dog with mustard
Yankee Dog	Plain dog with mustard
Walk a Dog	Hot dog to go
Steak	Hamburger with ketchup, mustard and pickle
Chili Steak	Hamburger with chili
Glorified Steak	Hamburger with mayo, lettuce and tomato
Mary Brown Steak	Hamburger with no bun
Naked Steak	A plain steak
Varsity Orange	The original formula
N.I. Orange	Varsity Orange with no ice
F.O.	Frosted Varsity Orange
Joe-ree	Coffee with cream
P.C.	Plain chocolate milk always served with ice
N.I.P.C.	Chocolate milk with no ice
All the Way	With onions - Can be a hot dog, chili, steak, etc
Bag of Rags	Potato Chips
Ring One	Order of Onion Rings
Strings	An order of french fries
Sideways	Onions on the side

