

JGS Program Reports

By Mark E. Strauss

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Joint Meeting of the Jewish Genealogical Society
of New York and Genealogy Institute at the
Center for Jewish History

“A Forgotten Land: Growing Up in the Jewish Pale”

Speaker: Lisa Cooper

It is often said that every family has a story. Unfortunately, many family histories are lost forever because either the stories are too painful to share, the family has no interest in the past or like the fourth son at the Passover Seder, some children do not know how to ask. The reference to the fourth son at Passover makes me think that in addition to the Jewish obligation to teach the next generation the Story of Passover, we should also be more attentive to sharing the powerful stories in every family's life.

Lisa Cooper, an artist, writer and journalist based in Cornwall, UK, was fortunate that like the “Wise Son” at the Seder table, she and her father shared an interest in the details of her grandmother's history. Based on recorded conversations that Lisa's father, Morley Cooper, had with his mother, Pearl Cooper (née Unikow), about her early life in Ukraine, Lisa wrote *A Forgotten Land*, which started out as a master's dissertation in Russian history, but ended up as the story of her grandmother's life in the Russian Empire in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, set within the wider context of pogroms, World War I, the Russian Revolution and civil war.

At the October program, Lisa recounted some of Pearl's fascinating stories and read excerpts from the book, with commentary on the historical background and the dynamics of the family. Lisa opened the program with the following declaration:

“My talk will be different from many genealogy presentations you may have experienced elsewhere. The overriding interest of most genealogists today tends to be on the discovery of family records, especially as documents from Eastern Europe have become more widely accessible, online, and information about the shtetls has also become more available. Many of you have unearthed family documents that have helped you learn where you came from. However, I believe that records can only give you a piece of the narrative. The other two things

that you need are photographs and actual family stories.”

Lisa then referenced the family portrait, circa 1914, from the front cover of her book. “This book is my grandmother Pearl's story,” Lisa explained. Pearl is the twelve-year-old girl in the middle of the photograph, with the long hair. Pearl was born in 1902 in the town of Pavolitsch (a.k.a. Pavoloch) about 120 kilometers southwest of Kiev in present day Ukraine. She lived in a period of great upheaval and terrible suffering, but it was also a period of “*resiliency, bravery and hope.*” As Lisa declared, “Pearl's story is the story of ordinary people trying to lead ordinary lives in an extraordinary time.”

In the early 1900s, Pavolitsch was a melting pot of different nationalities and religions. Pearl spoke Yiddish with a smattering of Russian, Ukrainian and Polish. Pearl's father, Meyer, was a religious scholar. Pearl's mother, Ettie Leah, died when Pearl was six years old, with three other young children: an elder daughter, Sarah, a younger son, Naftula, (Nathan) and the youngest daughter, Rachel, who was a baby when her mother died. After Ettie Leah died, the family moved in with Pearl's maternal grandfather, Berl, a prosperous grain dealer, and his wife, Pessy, to their spacious family compound in Pavolitsch, which also served as a warehouse for the family's grain business.



Baba Pessy
circa 1928

Much of Pearl's early recollections were of family life shared with her grandparents. In addition to her own siblings, there were two cousins living with the family, who were also orphaned quite young, leaving them all, for the most part, in the care of their grandparents, and most directly in the care of the matriarch of the family, Baba Pessy, who was quite a typical Jewish grandmother, who looked after the needs of the entire household as well as some aspects of her husband's business.

As Lisa read an excerpt from Pearl's reflections, she described Pessy as “a tiny energetic woman, whose life's sorrow was reflected in her eyes.” Although Pessy gave birth to no fewer than 13 children, only two made it to adulthood. And of the two daughters who did survive, marry and have children of their own, both died as young mothers, leaving Pessy to raise their families.

Despite these tragedies, this sorrow did not impede her.”

“Baba would never let a second go to waste. She was the linchpin of the family. Every morning, she would rise at daybreak to milk her cow, light the fires, and then set to work on the kitchen floor, scrubbing the flagstones until they sparkled. As her children and grandchildren washed and dressed, she prepared the table for breakfast. The kitchen was her domain and she ruled it as swiftly and efficiently as grandfather ran his warehouse. In quiet moments, she was always found in the kitchen, knitting and cooking, a ball of wool trailing across the floor.”

Beyond family life, Lisa described how the family dealt with pogroms, war and revolution in the Russian Empire in the first quarter of the 20th century. Much of the unrest in this period stemmed from earlier conflicts in the 19th century, most notably, the assassination of Czar Alexander II in 1881. Although Jews were not directly responsible for the assassination, a month later a wave of pogroms spread throughout the Pale of the Russian Empire, which affected hundreds of Jewish communities.

Lisa read another excerpt from the book, in which Pearl described how shortly after the assassination, rumors began to spread that “It was Jewish Revolutionaries that had killed the Czar, and it was time for revenge. Inebriated mobs pulled down market stalls smashed shop windows and kicked in the doors of Jewish businesses in cities throughout the Pale.”

Although the first pogroms occurred in 1881, Lisa described how waves of violence against the Jews were repeated every few years, and how a second major round of pogroms began again in 1905, which was also the year that the first major signs of revolution were felt.

“Although the Revolution didn’t begin until 12 years later, cities began to experience uprisings and strikes by workers in the street, waving red banners. Lots of Jews joined in the marches, protesting against the discrimination that affected them in their daily lives, and once again, like 1881, the Jews were seen as the ones responsible, and this caused an anti-Semitic backlash, more bloody than the earlier ones.”

Lisa went on to describe how in addition to raids on Jewish shops and businesses, the so-called “Black Hundreds,” the Czar’s vigilante groups, also killed Jews in their own homes and hacked people to death in the streets. Most of the violence was restricted to the ma-

jor towns and cities. Small towns, like Pavolitsch, were generally spared.

Everything changed in 1914 when the First World War broke out, when Lisa’s grandmother Pearl was 12 years old. Although the battlefields were thousands of miles away from Pavolitsch, the war still had a profound effect on the family and the lives of everybody who lived there. “The prosperous life that her grandmother had lived up until that point was shattered for once and for all,” Lisa read.

In another reading from the book, Lisa described how all over Pavolitsch, young men were worried that they would be conscripted into military service. Many men tried to evade conscription at all cost. Thankfully, as a religious scholar, Pearl’s father was not called up to fight. Lisa went on to explain that avoiding conscription was not new to Jewish families in the Russian Empire. Fifty years earlier, Pearl’s maternal great-grandfather, Akiva, had all of his teeth pulled out to avoid being taken into the Czar’s army. On Pearl’s father’s side, the family name Unikow was taken because her paternal grandfather was adopted into a non-Jewish Ukrainian’s family as their only son, which allowed him to avoid conscription in the Russo-Turkish War in the 1870s.

Lisa also described how the war had a detrimental effect on Pearl’s grandfather’s grain business and his business dealings. After 1914, the nearby train station where Berl had traded and exchanged information on grain prices was no longer being used for commercial services but as a point of mobilization for military service. This created uncertainty in the markets, compounded by severe inflation. However, thanks to Pearl’s grandfather’s ongoing business, the family was still able to put food on the table. This was not generally true elsewhere. Many people were finding it difficult to feed their families and as the war dragged on year after year, the hardships increased for ordinary Russians. In the major cities, these hardships led to massive unrest, which culminated in the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the abdication of Czar Nicholas.

Lisa explained that at first, small towns like Pavolitsch were relatively insulated from the revolutionary fervor. After Czar Nicholas was forced to abdicate, it initially seemed like a black cloud was lifted from the heads of Pearl’s family. In another excerpt from the book, Pearl described how, with the coming to power of Alexander Kerensky and the provisional government in July 1917, “They filled a power void left by the abdication of Czar Nicholas, and represented everything we could have ever hoped for.” The Pale of Settlement, the area

where the Jews were forced to live, was dissolved in a single blow. Censorship was abolished and Pearl's grandfather was able to devour newspapers and points of view which were not previously available for public consumption. For a short time *"the family was hopeful and ecstatic."*

Nevertheless, as Lisa went on to explain, Kerensky's leadership was all too brief, ending in the Bolshevik Revolution in October. Nobody knew much about Lenin and his fellow revolutionaries. One of the first things that the Bolsheviks did was extract the Russian troops from the war. This is something that had a huge effect on places like Pavolitsch. Over the weeks that followed, the railways teemed with returning soldiers from the front, many ravaged with disease. Additionally, over time, throngs of armed thugs began roaming the lands and it became impossible to distinguish them from the returning soldiers.

Additionally, Lisa described how one of the first decrees issued by the Bolsheviks affected Pearl's family. They started requisitioning grain from the countryside to feed the workers. In addition to taking grain from the peasants, they appropriated the supplies from the grain merchants, including Pearl's grandfather who was viewed as a "class enemy." A local militia, led by a neighbor's son, was sent to liberate the grain from the family's warehouse. In a short time, they shoveled it onto carts and carried it all away, and the family was left with nothing. *"It was clear to Pearl and her family, that their lives would never be the same again."*

Although the Bolsheviks had gotten Russia out of the war, Lisa explained that they failed to deliver peace, and the Russian Revolution gave way to anarchy and civil war. Marauding groups with different allegiances began to roam the land. The Cossacks became a dominant force in the region again, and a wave of new pogroms against the Jews was initiated. Unlike earlier ones, which mostly affected the cities, this time the pogroms hit close to home. By 1919, every small community, including Pavolitsch, was suffering. Pavolitsch was the scene of many battles and atrocities from 1918 to 1920. Lisa described how in one incident five huge men broke into the front door of the family's home looking for money and valuables. As the house was searched, Pearl's grandfather was pistol whipped and was hung from a noose with his own belt from a meat hook in the family's kitchen. Fortunately, the belt snapped and Pearl's grandfather survived.

After this incident, by 1920, the Bolsheviks had secured power and the pogroms subsided. However, the family's



Pearl, Sarah and Rachel circa 1924

source of income had been extinguished and it had to resort to selling its remaining valuables on the black market to survive. Lisa described how Pearl took on the role of finding food to feed the family. To enable the family to survive, Pearl risked her life to reach illegal markets where she would sell or barter food and other household goods to keep the family alive. Additionally, Lisa told a story about how Pearl became a black-market gold dealer.

In 1924, Pearl's grandfather gave her every last penny the family had to enable her to leave the Soviet Union to join cousins who had immigrated to Winnipeg, Canada, and where she subsequently made enough money to bring her remaining family to North America. By the end of the decade, Pearl had met and married Itzhik Kopperschmit, (later Anglicized to Cooper), started raising her own children and created a life for herself and family in Canada. In the mid-1950s, Pearl moved to Los Angeles, where she eventually shared an apartment with her younger sister, Rachel, until Pearl's death in 1988.



Baba Pessy surrounded by her grandchildren in Winnipeg circa 1928

At the conclusion to the program, Lisa explained how her father, a historian, worked with his mother, Pearl, to record the conversations in Yiddish, which were subsequently translated for Lisa by her father when she was researching her master's dissertation on the Russian Revolution. Lisa invited anyone who cared to listen to some of the original unedited recordings that were made into a BBC program, by visiting the following link, where they can be heard: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3cswsp3>

Additionally, Lisa has created a blog where additional commentary about topics relating to Jewish history in Ukraine and more widely in Eastern Europe can be found: <https://www.lisa-cooper.com/blog>

Lisa's book, *A Forgotten Land: Growing Up in the Jewish Pale*, can be found on Amazon.

Prior to the program, I communicated with Lisa and asked her to provide me with some take-aways that she wanted her listeners to gain from her program. The following was her response:

“As I don't really consider myself a genealogist – more a writer and storyteller – I don't have key take-aways in the same way as a researcher who is sharing information to help others find documents relating to their own families. But what I would emphasize is the importance of stories in helping to give a flavor to the kind of lives our ancestors lived. Documents and even photographs on their own, while they can reveal important information about one's family, can rarely provide this insight. I am

very lucky to have such a wealth of stories from my own family, passed on by my grandmother who was herself a great storyteller; and my father who recorded her telling her stories. But many of the experiences, the descriptions, the fears and frustrations that my grandmother described are universal to life in any Eastern European shtetl.”

Mark Strauss is a retired architect and urban planner. Until this past year, he was a Senior Partner at FXCollaborative, in New York City, and he was also past president of the American Institute of Architects New York Chapter. He has written six articles for the Jewish Genealogical Journal, AVOTAYNU. His latest article, “Finding Buried Treasure on One's Family Tree,” was published this past summer and documents how finding his maternal great-grandmother's death certificate led to a discovery that a branch of his family descended from a rabbinical dynasty and a Jewish king of Poland.

Notes from All Over

FGS Recognizes Two Veteran Jewish Genealogists with Awards



Miriam Weiner makes photo copy of her grandmother's birth record located in the Priluki Town Hall, Ukraine, 1991

The Federation of Genealogical Societies (FGS) has recognized two prominent Jewish genealogists with prestigious awards.

Miriam Weiner was awarded the Rabbi Malcolm H. Stern Humanitarian Award, which “recognizes the lifetime contributions of a rare individual whose positive personal influence and example have fostered unity in the genealogical

community, provided leadership to its individual members, and helped make family history a vital force in the community at large.” The awards committee noted that “Weiner has been described as the genealogist who lifted the ‘Archival Iron Curtain.’ For years, she has actively worked to make previously inaccessible records available to those interested in researching the history of their ancestors.”

Gary Mokotoff was awarded the Loretto Dennis Szucs Award, which “recognizes the contributions of an individual whose positive personal influence and extraordinary service to FGS and the genealogy industry have gone above and beyond the norm, impacting the overall benefit to the genealogical community at large and spreading the awareness of family history to the general public.” Mokotoff was cited “for his many years of dedicated service and for helping to revolutionize the way we do research. He became involved in genealogy in 1979 and has spent many years serving the genealogical community in many leadership positions. Mokotoff is the publisher of AVOTAYNU, the International Review of Jewish Genealogy. He used his computer background to develop some of the earliest databases for Jewish genealogy.”

We are very proud that Miriam and Gary are both long-time members of our society.

The full announcement including other award recipients can be found at <https://tinyurl.com/FGSAwards2020>.

Source: Press release