

## ■ PATERNAL FAMILY CAUGHT UP IN ONE OF RUSSIA'S BLOODIEST CHAPTERS

# Lisa abandoned master's to turn history into book

BY SIMON YAFFE

**J**EWS never had an easy time of it in Russia. Forced into certain areas by the tsarist empire and beget by pogroms, the Russian Revolution, in 1917, seemed to give some hope to the country's Jewish population.

After all, many of the Bolsheviks' leaders were Jewish, such as Leon Trotsky (born Lev Bronstein) and Grigory Zinoviev (born Hirsch Apfelbaum).

Vladimir Lenin had Jewish ancestry, too, on his mother's side.

Yet communism took many years to disseminate across the Soviet Union.

And, in present-day Ukraine, as well as elsewhere, the revolution unleashed a long, bloody and antisemitic civil war fought by numerous warring factions, including nationalists, anarchists, tsarist loyalists and communists.

Journalist Lisa Cooper's paternal family was caught up in the events which led to many Jews fleeing the country.

And her fascination with her



**TIMES GONE BY:** Pearl, right, with her mother Ettie Leah and siblings Sarah and Naftula in Pavlovitch in 1905



**TRACING ANCESTORS:** Lisa Cooper

heritage led to her writing *A Forgotten Land: Growing Up In The Jewish Pale*, which was published two years ago.

In it, Lisa traced her grandmother Pearl Unkow's early life in the town of Pavolitch, in modern-day Ukraine, through to her emigration to Canada.

Pearl was born into a family of grain traders.

"With this month marking the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution, it struck me as interesting that not much has been said about what happened in other parts of the country, apart from Petrograd," said Lisa, who lives in Cornwall.

"The usual narrative states that the Bolsheviks took power and, all of sudden, Russia became communist.

"But in areas where many Jews lived, it was not like that, at all. It was years before the Bolsheviks consolidated its power."

In the area where Lisa's family lived, Jews were targeted by many different groups.

"There were the Ukrainian nationalists, all of whom were antisemites," Lisa explained.

"One of its main leaders was a man called Symon Petliura and, earlier this month, a statue of him was put up in the city of Vinnytsa.

"The White Army were the worst of all — it plundered and stole land.

"Some of its soldiers would

knock on doors and ask for food, while others would just barge in and demand it, as well as money.

"The Bolsheviks, out of all of them, were the least antisemitic.

"Lots of Jews joined them because they saw it as a way to end discrimination.

"However, once the revolution took hold, it bred more antisemitism because many of those in civil authority were Jewish, so there was a lot of resentment."

Lisa was raised in Norwich after her father, Meyer (known as Morley), moved there to teach European history at the University of East Anglia.

Her mother, Susan, was from a Cambridge Jewish family.

Lisa's grandmother, Pearl, had moved to Los Angeles from Canada and Morley, on a visit there in the early 1980s, recorded his mother's memories on to a number of cassette tapes.

At the time, she was studying for a master's in Russian history at University College London's

## Jews welcomed Germans with open arms

School of Slavonic and Eastern European Studies.

Lisa explained: "I knew I had this interesting Russian background, but had not known a great deal about it.

"When it came to writing my dissertation, I thought, 'Wouldn't it be interesting to use my family history?'"

"Once I found out the whole story, I felt I couldn't turn it into an academic work, so I abandoned my master's and decided to turn it into a book."

Just months after the revolution, a three-year civil war was fought to decide who should control Russia.

And, by early 1919, those who were harbouring Jews would be shot or killed, although there were some Ukrainians who helped their Jewish friends.

And, interestingly, the German Empire occupied areas of Ukraine — with the Jews welcoming them.



**ESCAPED:** Pearl Unkow

Lisa explained: "The Jews welcomed the Germans with open arms because the Germans were not antisemitic.

"Jews had, of course, fought for Germany in the First World War.

"The Jews understood German, too, because they spoke Yiddish."

Times were particularly tough for the Jewish community during this time — as exemplified by what happened to Lisa's great-great grandfather, Berl Shnier.

She said: "One day, soldiers from the White Army bashed down his door and locked my great-great-grandmother and one of her children in another room.

"They searched the house for money, but Berl would not give them anything, so the soldiers pushed him to the floor with their rifle and kicked him.

"Then, they took off his leather belt and hanged him from a meat hook. Thankfully, the belt snapped."

Life was just as tough for his granddaughter Pearl.

Lisa continued: "My grandmother traded and bartered to get enough food to feed her family.

"She became a black market gold dealer and used to travel all the way to Kharkiv carrying gold and would come back with hard currency.

"She was a tiny lady and, after three years of it, broke down and couldn't take any more."

Pearl already had relatives in Canada, so with the help of Jewish agencies, she received a visa, passes and transit to Winnipeg.

It was there that she met and married Itzik Koiperschmit, who was also from Ukraine. He Anglicised his surname to Cooper.

Pearl's brother, Naftula, a yeshiva boy, was conscripted into the Red Army, but escaped with a cousin and ended up begging on the streets of Bessarabia, in modern-day Moldova.

It took him three years to reach his sister and relatives in Canada.

Lisa, whose brother, Ivan, lives in Leeds, felt that although the idealism of communism sounded wonderful, the reality was far different as the years passed.

"The revolution meant many people thought that there would be freedom for everybody and no more discrimination," she said.

"But, for the Jews, under Stalin, antisemitism rose again and

## They hanged him from a meat hook

never really dissipated afterwards under Khrushchev and Brezhnev."

The 48-year-old, who is married to Freddie and has two children, children Jonah and Mia, visited Pavolitch for the first time in 2005 with her father.

She remembered: "My dad was brought up with his mother's stories of this place, so it was emotional for him to be there.

"I had imagined a grim place, but it was actually very beautiful, with a rolling landscape, a big lake and an old mill next to it.

"The old synagogue was still standing, too.

"My grandmother had spoken of a pogrom which had taken place and we met a 95-year-old who remembered it.

"She would have been a little girl at the time, so it was amazing to listen to her."

# Drake's 'barmitzvah' birthday party

**RAPPER** Drake celebrated his 31st birthday party on Monday with a fake barmitzvah.

The Canadian superstar, whose real name is Aubrey Drake Graham, called his party 'Aubrey's re-bar mitzvah'.

He chose the age of 31 for the event as it is 13 reversed.

After an intimate rooftop dinner with friends and family

in Los Angeles, Drake relocated to the nightclub Poppy with friends, including Leonardo DiCaprio, Jamie Foxx, Tobey Maguire and Odell Beckham Jr.

To underscore the theme, Drake posted an image of his 'barmitzvah board' — seemingly original from 1999 — to Instagram on Monday.

Drake has an African-Ameri-

can father and Jewish mother. He attended a Jewish day school in Toronto and parodied his bar mitzvah while hosting *Saturday Night Live* in 2014.

Meanwhile, an Israeli-American talent manager and a top Brazilian model renewed their marriage vows under a chuppa in Rio de Janeiro surrounded by Hollywood celebrities.

Jerusalem-born Guy Oseary and wife Michelle Alves, who is not Jewish, held the ceremony before a crowd that included Madonna, members of U2, Elon Musk, Chris Rock, Demi Moore and Ashton Kutcher.

An Israeli rabbi, Eitan Yardeni of the Kabbalah Centre, co-led the open-air ceremony on Wednesday.



**SIMCHA:** Drake's barmitzvah board from 1999