

My Father's Escape from Pre-Shoah Anti-Jewish Massacres in Ukraine

Background: My Father and His Home in Ukraine



My Father's name was Samuel Levin. At least that is what is reflected on his US citizenship certificate and that is what he was called from then on until he died in 1974. But his name in the Old Country was totally different. Somehow our family name, "Levit" had changed when my Father's older brother Jacob or Jake (*Yonkel*) had come to the United States in 1909.¹ But nothing in any record gives any clue as to how my Father's first name became "Samuel" and unfortunately I never thought to ask. But what was his *real* name? The manifest from the ship that brought him to America shows that his name was "Ovchia Levit".

His US citizenship certificate indicates that he had previously been known as "Ovshea Leavitt". My Father had told me that his name in "the Old Country" was "Yashieka", which I now understand may have been a common diminutive of the more formal "Ovshea" or "Ovchia". But to me he was always known as Samuel or Sam.

He was born in Koshevate², a small *shtetl* in the Pale of Settlement³ in Ukraine, then part of the Russian Empire sometime between 1899 and 1902. At my Father's funeral his best friend from the Old Country told me that he had been born in 1899, so that is what I now use. Some would say that he was Ukrainian or Russian, but he would always say that he was Jewish. It just happened that he was born in Ukraine. For reasons that should become apparent, he would never have considered himself otherwise. He was one of 16 children born to Harris (*Hersch* or *Gersch* or *Zvi*) Levit and his wife Dora (*Dvorah* or *Deborah*) Noskoff (or Noskov as her family was known as in Ukraine). He and three of his siblings along with their parents came to the United States in 1922.

Koshevate was always a mysterious place for me. For years I searched for some reference to it but found none. I only knew that it was located somewhere south of

¹ When Jake had left for the United States he had planned to send for the rest of the family as soon as he earned enough money to do so. Unfortunately, World War I broke out in 1914 and the family could not leave Ukraine for a number of years.

² Koveshevate is the Russian name for the village. My Father pronounced Koveshevate as "Ge-shov-et-a". According to Jewish Genealogy other variations include Kivshovata [Ukr], Koveshevata [Ukr], Koshevatoye [Rus], Koszowata [Pol], Koshevata, Koshevaty, Kivshuvata and Kiwszowata. The anglicized version of the town's name "Koshowater" is the name ascribed to the town on the only publication about the town I was given by my Father, a souvenir program from a fundraiser for the *shtetl* residents in 1948.

³ The area (472,000 sq. miles, slightly larger than Texas, Oklahoma and New Mexico together) established by the Tsars in the late 18th and early 19th century to restrict where Jews could live in Russian Empire. It included most of Ukraine and parts of Poland, Belarus and Lithuania. 4 million Jews and 30+ million non-Jews lived in the Pale in 1900. It was abolished in 1917 with the fall of the Tsar.

Kiev. Finally, with the wonders of *Google Maps* and with the help of a group of people whom I met through a genealogy website called *JewishGen Family Finder* (<http://www.jewishgen.org/jgff>), I located it. A group of people led by Brad Teplitsky, an attorney from Canada, had acquired translations of eyewitness accounts which described "pogroms" that took place in Koshevate, a *shtetl* in the Kiev Oblast near the town of Tarasche in the *uezd* of Taraschka. This location jibed with my information. Brad sent the accounts to me and I renewed my search on *Google* and in the *JewishGen Communities Database*. I was able to confirm what my Father had indicated. In examining the translated accounts which I include below, I also found out more about my own family's suffering at the hand of the pogromists in the Russian Civil War.

Koshevate is a small village of about 1500 people located in the Tarashnaya District of the Kiyev (Kiev) Geburnia (i.e., province) or oblast about 65 miles south of the Ukrainian capital city. No Jews live in Koshevate today. In 1897 the town had 5663 inhabitants of which 1265 were Jewish (22.3%). Koshevate was not unlike other *shtetls* in the Pale of Settlement, an area largely located in Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania and present day Belarus to which Jews were confined by Tsarist Russia. It had unpaved streets, no sidewalks, one or two room wooden or clay brick houses with thatched or wooden roofs, most with dirt floors, all with no electricity and no indoor plumbing. People of the *shtetl* were poor and not well educated but most were artisan-craftsmen in a variety of professions and small business owners. At the outbreak of World War I local Jews owned the mill, the pharmacy and 37 shops. The cosmopolitan Jews of Western Europe and the larger cities of Ukraine and Russia looked down upon them as "country bumpkins".

When my Father was growing up, he had witnessed several pogroms in Koshevate. I presume these pogroms were part of the 1903-06 pogroms that broke out in Ukraine. He told me that his brother, Velvel was shot down in the streets during a pogrom when my Father was very young. Velvel was either the next youngest brother before my Father or he may have been his younger brother. My Father said that the murder of Velvel occurred while he and my Grandmother were watching. There was nothing either could do. They had hid in the fields to escape the attack and just had to be quiet and lie there. Only afterwards were they able to come out of hiding. My Father told the story fairly matter of factly, with limited emotion. It was as if he was telling it to me to be thankful for where I lived and that he had not remained in the Old Country. My Father told me about this pogrom and other *tzuris* (troubles) that he had experienced in the Old Country. I really did not appreciate how horrible the situation was until I began to learn more about the attacks on the Jews of his *shtetl* and read the eyewitness accounts of the pogroms in Koshevate, the family's *shtetl*. He along with his parents and those siblings who came to America had been terrorized beyond belief and had seen horrific acts that I am sure stayed with them forever. They rarely talked about them and when he did, the details of the terror were left out. Now I understand why.

Civil War Pogroms in Koshevate – Eyewitness Accounts

In 1917, the Jews in Koshevate were still impoverished but their lives were about to get worse. The czar had been overthrown in February and a new provisional government was put in place in Moscow. In Ukraine a new nationalist government, separate from Russia was proclaimed. By October the Bolsheviks (communists) gained control in Russia. Seven months later World War I was over in Russia but the Russian

Civil War was just beginning. Many in Ukraine wanted Ukrainian autonomy and several different groups, laid claim to its sovereignty. The Red Army wanted to establish a Bolshevik regime. All hell broke loose.

I did not comprehend the extent and ruthlessness of the anti-Jewish massacres in the post Revolution Civil War until I began to research my family history and delve more deeply into the subject. Between 1918 and 1921, records show pogroms against Jews in 524 towns in Ukraine. Only recently with the opening of former Soviet archives has the full extent become known. I have seen estimates of the number of Jews killed in this period ranging from between 50,000 on the low side to as high as 300,000. Older documents show that there were 1,236 recorded pogroms and excesses. 493 were carried out by Simon Petliura's soldiers (followers of the Ukrainian Directorate government) who claimed that the Jews were Bolsheviks; 307 by independent Ukrainian warlords who claimed that the Jews were both Communists and followers of Petliura; 213 by A. I. Denikin's Army (the White anti-Communist army) who claimed that the Jews were at once Communists, capitalists and Ukrainian nationalists; 106 by the Red Army who claimed that the Jews were bourgeois capitalists and 32 by the Polish Army who claimed that the Jews were Ukrainian nationalists and Communists. Each separate group found a reason to attack the Jews – but many times they did not need a reason. My Father described the horror of gangs or armies loyal only to themselves roaming across the countryside. When one group left, another arrived and the Jews of Koshevate were caught in the middle as they had been for centuries.

My Father was working in Kiev in 1918 or early 1919, when he heard the Bolshevik leader, Leon Trotsky speak. He said that Trotsky was the most inspirational speaker he had ever heard. After hearing Trotsky's speech he thought that a new world order was coming where the people, not the aristocracy, would control. My Father determined to return to his *shtetl* to help this change take place. At the same time he had heard of the pogroms that plagued the Jews of Ukraine and he felt that he had to return to his family.

The three separate eyewitness accounts⁴ describe of the terror and tragedy that my Father's family suffered in the post-Revolution Massacres. When I began to read the translations I focused on the general tragic story of the attacks on our people. These witnesses filled in details of some of my Father's stories, they named names and they vividly described the people and the events. They were the personal experiences of my Father and his family but based on my limited research these accounts reflected the experience of all or most Jews of Ukraine in this period. As I read through the accounts, I identified with the victims of the pogroms, both those who died and those who

⁴ The actual accounts are three of about 50-100 accounts on reel 22 of 42 microfilms called "Evreiske pogrom na Ukraine, 1918-1921". I have a copy of the reel. They are in Yiddish and I was told that the originals are in a museum in Kiev. I do not know who the actual authors were. I have used one of the accounts as the main story with the second interjected to fill out the story. I have tried to keep the content in place. Where appropriate I have modified them for grammar. Last names of the victims are in all capital letters for ease of recognition. The text of the original accounts uses the term "*mestechko*" the Ukrainian word for village with a predominantly Jewish population. I used the more familiar Yiddish term "*shtetl*". I also changed the spelling of the *shtetl* from Koshevatoe in the original text to Koshevate to be uniform with the rest of this document. The third account describes a massacre of a group of Keshovate residents when they tried to leave the *shtetl* in 1921, the year my Father and his family began their trek to the United States.

survived. The accounts revealed a true reign of terror where horrible, inhumane acts resulted in death and destruction and where each act of terror engendered a fear of more terror. I asked myself "How could my aunts and uncles -- whom I knew to be gentle and good people -- how could they have survived and retained their sanity?"

I felt compelled to reread the statements. As I read the second time I paid better attention to the details -- the place names, the names of the leaders of the pogroms and the names of the victims of the pogroms. I looked at the names of the victims which the author had listed. I felt the hair on my neck stand up as I realized that among the victims mentioned were two of my uncles, Volko (*Volke*) and Mordko (*Mordecai*). I realized that not only could I identify with the victims, but that the pogroms had become personal to me. I had lost two uncles whom I would never know because of the brutality of these anti-Semites. These are my family's experiences and they are horrific.

The Revolution – Celebration Followed by Pogroms

In the beginning of the Revolution our days in Koshevate went well. Different celebrations were held as they were in other shtetls and towns. We began celebrating our freedom.

However, in the beginning of December 1917 different bandits⁵ started showing up. They organized gangs and started robbing local shops. After some time they also came inside houses and took what they wanted. All those who tried to oppose them were beaten and had to give up their possessions accumulated during their lives. Eventually, the district administration of Koshevate decided to organize self-defense – Free Cossacks -- to protect the town from these acts of outrage. Thanks to them the pogroms stopped for a while.

At this time in the town of Teresche (Tarascha) that was located near our shtetl, rumors spread that soon there would be a pogrom at the market. Then the guards of Teresche invited the guards of Koshevate to help them. The guards of Koshevate /25 self-defenders – 21 Russians (Ukrainians?) and 4 Jews -- went to help their friends. In Teresche they had a fight with the pogrom-makers where the self-defenders failed. During the fight two were killed, a Jew/self-defender and a Russian/pogrom-maker. Some of the pogrom-makers were from Koshevate. When they came back home they spread rumors that Jews had killed the Russian who perished during the fight on purpose. As a response to that all the peasants accused the Jews of killing their brothers and asked blood for blood.

Most of Jewish population started to panic. There were local robberies especially of those families whose children had been in the self-defense group. The peasants had asked for blood for blood but after long negotiations they agreed to take all the possessions of the Jewish self-defenders' parents. Only this they said could calm the wife and children of the killed Russian pogrom-maker. The families left their homes, were scared for their lives and moved from one valley to another but they couldn't find the shelter anywhere and they were always afraid to be noticed by bandits.

At this point as I read the account for the third time I began to better appreciate the terror that my Father and his family had experienced but I had only begun to scratch the surface of the horrors of the pogroms in their *shtetl*. I once again focused on the story as it unfolded and the fear that my Father and his family must have felt.

⁵ The text of the account uses the term "bandit". I feel that it was more than likely the Yiddish word pronounced "bon-deet" which referred to any thug or murderer.

1918 - Additional Pogroms

After this the locals calmed down a little bit but not for that long a time. In the beginning of 1918 local pogroms took place. It stayed in our memories forever, especially the murder of a mother who left 5 little children behind one of whom was still a baby.⁶ That evening at about 11 pm the gang had come up to another house where one couldn't hear anything but dead silence. They started shooting and broke the windows with their sabers; inside the house there was only one very old woman with her 18-year old daughter and 22-year old son. They started screaming very loud asking for help but the Jews couldn't get there in time to help. The bandits broke into the house asked for money and beat up the unlucky people. From all this screaming, shooting and fright the house residents fell unconscious and bandits did what they wanted in the house – they took everything that was in the house and left for other cottages where Jews lived. The Jewish population ran outside of their houses shouting to help the others but the bandits started shooting into the crowd causing the death of the mother mentioned above. The result of this night besides the murdered woman included many robbed houses and many wounded and beaten Jews.

March 1919- Yatsenko's Pogrom

Many nights like this one followed with robberies and other acts of outrage but without other deaths. This continued until March 1919. At that time a gang of villagers-rebels came over led by Yatsenko. . . This gang killed 3 people and wounded many more. The gang was described as constantly drunk and that they were robbing the place and beating people unmercifully. . . Upon arrival they demanded two wagons full of weapons from the Jewish population. The Jews couldn't provide the weapons because they didn't have any. Then the rebels did searches; during those they put whatever they liked into their pockets. After they couldn't find any weapons they took people from the streets hostage – they didn't feel sorry for anyone – women, children, and old people. They threatened them with death if two wagons full of weapon weren't delivered. But after a lot of requests of the Jewish population they softened and let their hostages go. They stayed in the shtetl for a while. During all this time the Jews were in panic.

Almost two years had passed since the October 1917 Revolution. The Jews of Koshevate had seen one pogrom after another. As I read the accounts, I could not believe that my Father had lived through these crimes against humanity. These stories were not about strangers for whom I could express sympathy. They were my family's history. I read on and the stories' impact on my family became even more difficult for me to comprehend.

June 1919 - Grebenko's Pogrom

Some time passed and in June 1919 a gang called Grebenko's platoon returned to the shtetl. When the Jews saw them they tried to run away wherever they could – to the woods, to the field, some to the ravine and many gathered together with their families in one little house.

. . . Grebenko's platoon had started robbing the Jews upon arrival and didn't stop until they left. The terror became the worst toward the end when they beat, killed, wounded and killed a rabbi and his wife – Itsko Shulimovich GERZON and Dvosya – his wife. . . We were looking forward to Comrade Grebenko's coming as our protector, but it was the opposite. Upon arrival soldiers started acts of outrage and plundering. It happened in the evening. All the night they visited Jewish houses beating, raping and robbing without mercy. Every day they came; 10 or even 20 times, it was

⁶ The woman's name according to another eyewitness was Rachel PODOLSKAYA.

unbearable. Jews couldn't stand it anymore. They left their houses to the mercy of fate and ran away, hiding in the bushes or wherever, where they spent the whole night. Everywhere there were people with small children, the mothers wanted to throttle because they were scared to be noticed by bandits. Many parents didn't know where their children were and children didn't know where to hide. They were looking for their parents.

The night was rainy, it looked like October: it was raining cats and dogs, pouring onto poor outcasts hiding outside. With trembling hearts we listened to the screams and groans of beaten and wounded people, who prayed for help but to our greatest sorrow we couldn't help them being scared for our own lives. From everywhere we heard the sounds of breaking windows and gunfire mixed with screams and moans. It made us very scared. We listened to every sound or a rustle of a leaf waiting for the same fate.

It went on like that till the morning. In the morning everything became quieter. Poor exhausted Jews thinking that everything was fine in the shtetl, dared to leave their shelters and go to the shtetl. But they were met by bandits, who took the rest of their clothes, beat them almost to death and left them lying naked on the ground. All day long they continued their acts of outrage.

You can imagine what we felt when the locals joined the barbarians. They showed them places . . . [where Jews were hiding] . . . , led them from house to house and were even more wicked than the barbarians. All day long we were lying there without a bite of bread. We were very thirsty but we didn't dare leave our shelters because we were scared. The houses stood empty, they took everything they could, even every little tiny thing.

It continued like that all the time they were there. In one of the evenings . . . we heard machinegun-fire. It happened in one of the houses where people of that street were hiding. The bandits broke into the house, started beating, killing and raping poor women. Jewish youth with women and children tried to stand up to the enemy but it turned out to be even worse. A terrible fight began. The bandits placed a machinegun in front of the house and opened fire. There were many wounded and beaten in this house that day. It is impossible to name everyone.

On the ninth day some other rebels came to the shtetl and they demanded that all the Jews gather in the synagogue. But because only a few Jews were in the shtetl the rebels went to places where the Jews were hiding and whipped them as they took them to synagogue. When all of them were gathered they demanded an impossible sum of money. Along with this they placed a machinegun in front of a synagogue. If their demand was not fulfilled they would start fire. But because they didn't have all the money, the Jews gave what they had and promised to bring the rest in two days. When the Jews were on the way back several rebels started to shoot. Among the victims there was a young man – Zalman Blinder.⁷

A Young Girl's Terror

As I read this account I thought I had recalled the name "Zalman Blinder" from another eyewitness account that Brad had sent me and that I had looked at earlier. I opened it on the computer and read a harrowing tale told by a woman who had been a young girl at the time.

It was dark. Scary images popped up in my head from everywhere. I was sitting at the window and staring outside with fright. I didn't see anybody. It was very quiet. Suddenly I heard dogs bark. My heart was pounding, as if you could hear it from a mile distance. It seemed to me that they were coming and then I became all ears and heard dogs barking. I calmed down a little bit and stared at the darkness and the light of the moon. A shadow flashed by and it seemed again that they were

⁷ The dead also included: Shlema Usheroov KUSHNIN, Leib Benyumov REMESHKOV and Shlema Yankelev RESHETNIK.

coming. I had the same torture again and the same thoughts, but everything went away and it was quiet again. I was sitting at the window and waiting for something, something very frightening -- something that I was even scared to think about.

The clock struck 10, my brother and his friend came back. They had gone to find out who was wounded in the evening when they had started shooting at the Jewish crowd. They had crawled by the ravines and the valleys so that the bandits wouldn't notice them. They had found out that a wounded young man Zalman Blinder was laying alone and crying for help but there was nobody in the village except one young girl who gave him cold water. They had returned home to take a towel and some absorbent cotton for bandage and to find some alcohol. They found all that at our house and our neighbor's house and left the house to take it all to the young man.

Suddenly I, still sitting by the window, saw six men with the rifles and to my greatest horror they stopped my brother and his friend. Their first word: "Jew, give me money!" My brother replied: "I don't have any money, let's come inside and I'll give you some. But no, they didn't want to go and commanded him to knock on one other neighbor's door. . . He refused to do that but the bandits were hitting him with rifle butts and threatened to kill him if he didn't carry out their order. They had him knock on the door and asked the people inside to unlock it but he gave a hint that there were bandits with them. Inside the people in the house started jumping out of the windows – children and old people, hurting themselves but they didn't stop and tried to run as far as they could and hide.

Those six men entered the house and started gunfire and whipping people. They took everything those people had, raped all the women who were in the house. They raped one young girl before her parents' eyes and all the people who were in the house. She begged them, on her knees, kissed their hands and feet and asked them to leave her virgin, but nothing helped.⁸ After that the girl looked like insane for 3 months. But I saw how they broke into my neighbor's house and that was it. I sat mesmerized by the window waiting for something, something scary. I heard bloodcurdling screams, cries for help, noise, crying, and gunfire.

After that I couldn't take it anymore, I ran into the next room and yelled: "Run away!" I stormed out. On tiptoes I ran to the backyard trying not to be noticed, broke a hole in a fence, ran through one more garden, then one more, then to the valley, tripped, fell, got up, tripped on somebody again. I jumped off of that man with horror but when I recognized my brother in that stranger. My joy was endless. I fell into his arms and started crying. "My brother, you are still alive!" The situation was tragic but my brother said: "Let's run away from here before the bandits came."

I didn't think much, but started running away from there with all my might. I jumped over the fence, to the garden, on the hill from there, and then to the valley, where I stopped. There we found more Jews who barely escaped death. We just sat over there and waited for the morning hoping that our situation would change. We suffered a terrible night. We heard a sound of breaking windows, howls of horror, cries, and screams. I sat as if I turned into stone, in one position. Only my heart was beating and it felt the coming of something scary, something disgusting, and it looked like they'd come and we would suffer the same fate.

Suddenly a shadow flashed by. Probably, somebody was coming. With a drawn sword a murderer came up to me. Oh how hard, how difficult it was to survive that sorrow. I thought "Oh God, help me. Oh, help me". Yes, he didn't see me. He passed me and left me unnoticed. With a trembling heart I listened to his every step, and, my God, what a horror! There was a peasant boy-shepherd pointing at me. The bandit turned around and ran toward me. I wrapped my arms around my head not knowing what to do. I got up and ran. I was running for a long time. Bullets were flying over my head, but I have no idea what was happening to me at that time. I had only one thought in my head – to run away. But suddenly a strong hand fell onto my head, it felt as if a

8

I assume that she was subsequently told these details.

30pound rock fell, but it was not. It was a murderer's hand. I yelled as hard as I could: Help! But there was only silence around.

The young woman's story abruptly ended there. She obviously survived to provide her statement but I do not know who she was. I reflected on what she went through. I could not relate. Her night of terror had happened only 25 years before I was born in a town where my Father's family was then living. I was thankful that I had been born in the United States.

I was drawn to continue reading the original account to see what next happened. A brief respite from the terror was followed by more pogroms which, if possible, seemed even more intense than before. As I read on, I began to question how could they take all of this? And then it got worse. I read of the murder of my uncle Mordko who was listed almost as a statistic among a roll call of several other victims of the genocidal marauders. I grew angry. I pressed on with reading the accounts.

A Brief Break in the Terror

On the 11th day they left for the town Teresche. Only after that, suffering from hunger the Jews dared to leave the places where they were hiding and went to the village to ask for some bread. Some of the people felt sorry for poor sufferers and gave them some bread while the others kicked them out of their yards even setting dogs on them. It went on all day long. Through the night the Jews were afraid to stay in their houses and gathered several families in one house.

But soon to our great joy, the Soviet regime came, the rebels ran away and everything calmed down a little bit. . . .

July 1919 – Zelenovtsev's Pogrom – Mordko's Murder

The night went well but in the morning we heard horses' stomping and regimental music. The Jews were happy because they thought that their defenders came but how terrified we were when discovered that these were barbarians coming back!

Eight days passed before the gang of Zelenovtsev showed up. On the 9th day the rumors spread that the gang of Zelenovtsev was somewhere around the shtetl Koshevate. The people of shtetl were very worried. They had just cast off one yoke when another one was on the way. But people still doubted that the gang was coming so everybody was still in the shtetl. Only a half an hour passed when the gunfire in the shtetl started. People without thinking stormed out of the shtetl wherever they could. All the ravines, bushes and valleys were full of Jews. Some were hiding in wheat; some ran to other villages like Krutaya Gorba, Makovetsk, M. Boyarka, Lisyanka, and Berezyanka. Some people who didn't manage to run away stayed in the shtetl.

The gang of Zelenovtsev came in. They were killing, chopping, cutting everybody without regard to age. The first one they saw was a 17 year old boy. They took off his shirt, beat him almost to death, crippled him and just kept repeating: "Zhid, . . . (Jew) . . . Communist!" But the poor boy became dumb from fear and didn't know what to answer. His poor mother followed her son, fell on the ground screaming, pulled out her hair and clothes and asked them not to kill her son. But it was all for nothing. They cut off his head before her eyes.

They didn't stop in our shtetl. They were going to a bigger village Berezyanka but while going they emptied all the houses, beating and raping the rest of the people. On their way to Berezyanka they caught up with seven Jews who had escaped. The young man asked to let them go offering all they had – clothes and money but murderers didn't want to hear about it, placed them in line and started shooting one after the other. There were 4 killed and 3 wounded among them. The march lasted till midnight.

After gang of Zelenovtsev left the Jews, tired and cold from the rain and the torture that lasted for 3 days could return to shtetl on the 4th day. This day was one of the fatal days. In the evening the peasants came and said that there was nobody in the shtetl anymore. Then the Jews sent some of their people to find out what's happening in the shtetl. Soon our people came back with the news that there were a lot of murdered, one of which was a rabbi with his wife.

Many of us went running to their shelters. Then everybody ran toward the village screaming, to look for their families. They didn't find anything inside their houses except bare walls and the killed and wounded. But there were no more murdered that day.

Zelenovtsev's gang . . . didn't stay long in Koshevate because he was running away from the Soviet troops but his gang managed to kill 10 people, including [my Father's brother]. . . Mordko Gershkov LEVIT⁹ . . . and leave behind a larger number of wounded and beaten and some raped women . . .

All over the shtetl one could hear terrible mourning and crying of widows and orphans. The Jews who had spent 3 days without a bit of bread couldn't find any food in the shtetl. They followed house to house trying to find any bread but it was for nothing. This time the peasants refused to give them any.

Some Jews died of hunger, the others were the wounded ones who didn't get medical treatment on time and had to finish their lives. The Jews, who managed to survive, spent their time suffering greatly. They suffered from hunger because they couldn't find any bread. They lived only by the dried bread that sometimes other Jews from the shtetl Boguslav and the town Teresche sent to them. That kept them alive for other sufferings.

. . . The Jews of Koshevate had been robbed again and their homes destroyed again. They started leaving their shelters again to bury their dead and to help the beaten and wounded . . . That day we were scared to bury them not knowing how far away the bandits were. The rest of the day was filled with outrage of our local militia that was designated by the Soviet regime. That's why the Jews could bring their people to the cemetery only a day after.

After this pogrom the Jews became very poor, they were wearing terrible rags, didn't have a single piece of bread. To earn some bread to eat the Jews had to work for peasants as unskilled laborers. They were digging the ground, chopping wood and for all that they were paid very little.

I reflected on my family's experiences. They were targeted because they were Jews. While the killings occurred indiscriminately, they occurred indiscriminately among Jews. This was a foreshadowing of what was to occur a generation later when the Nazi machine raced through Ukraine and with the help of many Ukrainians almost annihilated the Jews of that country. My Father and his family were in the middle of it. I thought, "How many people realize that tens of thousands of Jews were killed in 3-4 years after the Revolution just because they were Jews?" The anger that I had experienced upon reading of my uncle Mordko's death had changed to a resolve to let others know of this genocide. I knew then that I had to tell this story.

I returned to the eye witness accounts and found yet more pogroms and another one that hit home with me: another of my Father's brothers, Volko was murdered in yet another pogrom in the fall of 1919. My resolve to tell this history intensified and as I read further I was encouraged to find reference to the organization of a resistance group

⁹ Levit was our family name and the middle name "Gershkov" means son of Hersch. Shimon-Volfin Iosifov SPEKTOR, Mordko Gimelev GUBENKO, Iosif Pinev BLINDER, Gersh Mordkov SHEHTMAN and Berko Gershov KOSYAKOVSKY were the others killed in this pogrom.

– something that my Father and his brother Harry had talked about. This, too, was an essential part of my family's story. I returned to the accounts of horror.

October – December 1919 – Denikinty Pogroms; Volke's Murder; The Jewish Guard

It went on like that until October 1919 when the pogroms started again. This time there were 3 killed and many beaten and wounded . . . It was the same story as before. They rushed into shtetl and killed and beat the Jews unmercifully. This time 3 people were killed including . . . [my Father's brother] Volko Gershkov LEVIT.¹⁰ . . . In addition to that the bandits burned houses and local shops, which made the Jews panic even more.

One of those attacks resulted in the organization of the Jewish guard. This was at night. In one of the houses where several Jewish families gathered together they heard gunfire. Everyone, who was in the house at that time, got up in panic and started listening to every noise. Suddenly they heard footsteps. Looking through the window they saw a man who approached the house. In that house there was one rifle without bullets. A young man who was in that house in a great fury ran outside with a rifle in his hand, grabbed a bandit and started screaming for help. Then Jews from all the parts of the shtetl came running to help that young man. All that night youths with that rifle guarded surroundings, then more people joined them and that's how Jewish guard started. Thanks to the guard everything calmed down a little bit in the shtetl. It went on like that until Christmas.

During first days of the holidays the Denikinty gang was falling back through our shtetl and they took our last possessions. But it is not worth mentioning. In general we had the same as what was happening in other towns and shtetls at that time. Thanks to the guards the winter was calmer than the past summer.

My Father had told me a similar story of how the shtetl was able to withstand the attack for a while. My Cousin Albert told me that his father, my Father's brother Harry, had told of a similar story. My Father said that one of the young men had returned to the shtetl from the Czar's army with a handgun. It was the only handgun in the shtetl. Albert said that it was a shotgun, a handgun and a separate ammunition belt that fit neither weapon. How, I don't know, but my Father said that somehow, a group of young men were able to capture one of the members of either the Whites or Reds or Cossacks. They blindfolded him and brought him to the shtetl hall or some kind of public building. But the leaders of the shtetl were smart. They made sure that a number of people visited the captive in his "cell". More importantly, they made sure that each person was armed with the shtetl's one handgun, giving him the impression that the village was well armed. After several hours they released him and told him that if his group ever attacked the shtetl they would be met with armed resistance. Albert said that the would-be attacker was actually a spy sent by the pogromists to the shtetl for reconnaissance. The spy had pretended to be a building inspector and villagers sized him up correctly. As he inspected each house, the villagers would transfer the weapons and ammunition from one villager to another so that each house appeared to be armed.

I resumed reading and saw that the resistance group had had some success, if only for a few months. I questioned, "How much longer did this terror go on?" I returned to the eye witness accounts and realized that the attacks continued for a good bit of the following year.

¹⁰ Isaac Donovan GOLDBERG and Man Aronov BRODSKY were the others killed in this pogrom.

April 1920 – Fighting Back; Petlyurovtsy, Poles, Bolsheviks, etc.

In April 1920 before the Bolsheviks' retreat about 50 Poles joined a gang who called themselves Petlyurovtsy. Our guard which counted only 26, without paying attention to the gang's numbers, told them to clear off the shtetl. The bandits who were scared of the guard left.

Immediately Jews chose 2 representatives and sent them to Teresch Revolutionary Committee for help, but they didn't help us in any means. In 2 days after the bandits left they sent a patrol that consisted of 8 people who started fire at Jewish pickets. Being really worried the guards caught one of the bandits who told the guard everything about the patrol's organization. On the second day at a fair the same gang showed up and tried to seize upon the Jews. Our guard, despite the lesser number, attacked the bandits and won the fight and the bandits retreated.

In several days the Bolsheviks retreated and the Poles came back. Upon the Poles arrival the bandits came back and disarmed the guards . . . They forced the Jewish guards to give up their rifles. The Poles soon left but Burchuk with his gang stayed for 3 weeks during which time they continued beating and robbing the Jews and demanded a contribution from the people. Finally, the Soviet troops drove them away after which it again calmed down a little bit.

The Jews of the Koshevate had experienced a lot of pogroms and while they couldn't live in peace and were in a panic mode almost all the time, by summer 1920 life was coming back to normal. There had been no rumors about bandits for a while and people started to settle down again. They even began preparing food and clothes for winter.

I was encouraged but as I read further I found that the pogroms continued throughout the year.

July 1920 – Pyhovka and Other Pogroms

But the quiet didn't last long. In July 1920 the gangs started coming again and then a series of pogroms occurred. One day at 8 pm rumors spread that a gang was nearby. People were terrified and began to run toward the town of Teresche (about 12 versts or 8 miles from Koshevate) because they didn't have any shelter. The weather was pretty bad. The sky was covered with clouds and it started raining. In darkness parents couldn't find their children and children cried looking for their parents. Suddenly it poured rain. They were wearing rags and they didn't take any other clothes with them, they were soaking wet. The first ones, young and healthy came to Teresche at noon but many of them still kept walking till 2-3 pm. And old and weak just went to the valleys where they laid for the whole night on the ground; they had nothing to cover themselves from rain. On the next day they found out that the gang didn't go to Koshevate, all that was just a provocation. Then the people returned to the shtetl.

But less than a week passed and on Saturday afternoon the Jews of Koshevate were taking a Shabbas nap. The day was cloudy. Suddenly they heard gunfire. And the bandits rushed into the shtetl. This was a gang called Pyhovka. Once again the people again began to run to Teresche. It was raining again. The same tragic exodus took place as had occurred the previous time. But it was even more tragic because the bandits opened fire and managed to stop many of the people from leaving. Nine people were killed and a large number were beaten and wounded.¹¹ . . .

¹¹ The dead included Usher Leibov KUSHNIR, Gersh Nuhimov BUDKEVICH, Mordko Yankelev KRAVITS, Moishe Ziselev POLTORAK, Leib Moshkov SVERDLIKOVSKY, Nehama Shmulevna KRAVETS, Udyia Idlevna MASLOVSKAYA and Man Meyerov SIVIRINOVSKY.

Only on the 4th day the Jews started coming back to the shtetl. They were picking up dead bodies, wounded, and helping the needy. The rest of Jews who ran away to the town of Teresche little by little started coming back to the shtetl. Our life returned to almost normal.

Autumn 1920 – Budenny’s Troups; Tsvetkovsky and Gryzl

In the same year in September a division led by Comrade Budenny marched through our shtetl. The march lasted from Thursday till Saturday and everything was calm. On Saturday the march ended but some parts of the division stayed here and they started robberies. Everything happened in the morning. At about noon the riders from the town of Teresche came and started killing people. All the Jewish population hid wherever they could: in valleys, gardens and even in churches. But the bandits managed to find them everywhere and were beating them to death. They took the rest of the Jews’ possessions, set several houses on fire and left. Everybody was in panic. Many Jews were leaving their houses and moving to other shtetls . . .

. . . In December of the same year (1920) the gang of Tsvetkovsky and Gryzl showed up. They killed 24 people.¹² At the same time other local bandits also killed another 12 people.¹³ These attacks forced the Jews out of Koshevate forever. They had to run away toward Boguslav and Tarasch, where they stayed hungry and ragged without a shelter.

In all, over 50 Jews, all identified by name -- including two of my Father’s brothers, Volko (Volke) and Mordko (Mordecai) -- had been killed in these pogroms between 1917 and 1921. My Father told me that Volke left behind a wife and children. He had been in Koshevate visiting his parents when he was shot and killed while fleeing during the night. The bullet struck him in the throat. Alone and injured he remained in hiding until he bled to death.

Neither my Father nor his siblings dwelt on those horrific days. Like survivors of the Shoah who refused to talk about its horrors for years, they seldom talked about it as they pursued their dream for a better life for themselves and their children. The eye witness accounts help document how my Father’s family and so many others suffered at the hands of anti-Semitic thugs in Ukraine during the first quarter of the 20th century. They are an invaluable source for me to better understand what really happened. I am thankful to have had the opportunity to read them. I only wish that I could have shared them with my Father and his siblings before they died. Perhaps they could have shed additional light on the events. But then again why should I have opened up horrific memories that they felt were better off unspoken about?

When I was a young child my Father would often listen to Yiddish music and sing Yiddish songs. He told me that his favorite song was “Eli Eli”, an operatic like aria written by Peretz Sandler for the Yiddish Theater. This powerful, mournful and

¹² The dead included Tsedzi Nusenev GUBENKO, his father Nus, Duvid Eilev GUEVICH, Mot Refulev LISNOVSKY, Haim Moshkov KAGAN, his sons Menashe and Rahmil, daughters Dvoira and Masya, Gersh Bedkov KRAVCHENKO, Iosif Aronov BRODSKY, Shlema Naftulov KOZLOV, Vasya Vengrovna LEBEDINSKAYA, Shai Moshkov SPEKTOR, his sister Freida, Berko Itskov BLINDER, his wife Reizya, Avrum Pinev BLINDER, Moshko Yankelev HODOS, Ben Ovseev GERSHMAN and Ita Moshkovna HODORKOVSKAYA, her daughter Rizya and sons Leib, Yankel and Itsko.

¹³ The dead included Avrum VILINSKY, Srul SPEKTOR, LEIBOV, his wife Hanna, daughter Gitel, Srul Dorfman, Elya Eilev KLEIMAN, Toli Avrumov LISCHINER, Iosif Yankelev LISCHINSKY, Gersh Dunidov LUKOV, his wife Dvosya, Haim Eievich BERDYANSKY, Rosa Gerschkovna BUDKEVICH, and Bandion Shaevich BLINDER

haunting melody with dramatic lyrics, “My God, My God! Why have you forsaken me?”, was performed by a number of great cantors and opera singers of the first half of the 20th Century (as well as Perry Como, a popular Italian American singer). The melody and lyrics haunt me as I reflect on the horrors in Koshevate almost 100 years ago.

Postscript: The Levin Family’s Journey to America

Just like the people of the fictional Anatevka in *Fiddler on the Roof*, my Father’s family left Koshevate and joined many others just to find a home. They traveled by horse and wagon. By this time it was late in 1920 or early 1921 and the goal was to get to Rumania to wait until my uncle Jake could send for them. My grand-parents, Harris and Dora and their two daughters, Sonia and Rose along with their sons Aron (later known as Harry) and my Father made the trek to America. Their flight from their home in Ukraine was a story experienced by so many during the early twentieth century. While I can relate to some of what my Father told me, the horror, reality and extent of the persecution they suffered as revealed in the other eyewitness accounts above are beyond my comprehension. Nevertheless, picking up and moving to an unknown country, thousands of miles from your home, across an entire continent and a wide ocean was daring to undertake.

The rest of the family – perhaps a half dozen or more surviving brothers and their families -- stayed behind. I do not know the basis of the decision to limit the numbers who were to leave or where they may have gone after my Father left Koshevate. Those who remained in the Old Country were all older than my Father and I think were older than my Uncle Harry, then about 30 years old. Perhaps they had become more established and had families they felt that they could not leave. Unfortunately, in the years after my Father left, those who came to America lost contact with them and I have no further information about them. I just know that I am thankful that my Father chose to leave.

In any event, after receiving the transportation funds from Jake, they packed up the wagon with what they could and along with others, in what he described as a wagon train, began the treacherous travel west to Bessarabia, then part of Rumania and now the independent country of Moldova. I always wondered why my family had no heirlooms from the “Old Country”. Perhaps nothing was left. Perhaps they had no time to pack anything more. I do not know exactly when they left. I think that it was in early 1921 but whenever it was, they did leave and it took until May 1922 for them to reach America.

My Father told me of several heart stopping occurrences along this trip. In one, the “wagon train” reached a fork in the road. One road led down the hill into a valley and the other followed the ridge of the hill. My Father indicated that while some urged going down into the valley because it was shorter, he and his family decided to stay at the top of the hill. This decision saved their lives, as those who went into the valley were attacked and suffered many casualties. My Father and his family were unscathed.

Another eye-witness account tells the story of events that occurred in the Taraschka uezd near Koshevate on June 29, 1921, less than a year before my Father, his parents and three of his siblings reached America. I think that this account describes

what happened to the people that my Father had said had gone down the hill. Haim Shpichinetsky (a village leader) described the horrors of that evening as follows:

I left Tarasch at 5 am escorted by 6 guards and 2 horse-wagons with the passengers counting 25. At about 7:30 am we reached the turn to the village Prussy that is near the village Bulkuny and saw that about 700 steps ahead in front of us, 4 horsemen were robbing a horse-wagon that had been moving in front of us. As soon as bandits noticed us they started running towards the woods. First I thought that it was their patrol but when I yelled: Stop! And they didn't, we opened gunfire. Without returning the fire, they kept running toward the woods.

At the edge of the woods one bandit, who was shot, fell off his horse. We fired once more, jumped on our carriages and ordered our horses to move as fast as possible. Our goal was to pass the mountains that had covered us on the left side and move to the middle of the valley so that we would not be surrounded. But as soon as we moved about 1000 steps we saw that a chain of horsemen was moving toward us from the hill closing our way to retreat.

Then we rushed back toward the woods yelling at our troops to stop. We hoped that they would find a better position to open fire at the horsemen. But they didn't wait for us to hide. They outran us and were moving toward our wagons with the passengers who were hiding in the woods. The bandits then switched their attention to the unarmed passengers.

We reached the forest and spread all over the place. I personally ran to the woods through dirt and puddles. I grabbed one of the passengers – a girl from the village Koshevate and hid in a puddle surrounded by bushes. The bandits at that time were killing unarmed passengers, but didn't find me. Some other guards took our horse-wagons with all our possessions and left. I stayed hidden not knowing what to do for about 2 hours till our troops [presumably the Red Army or local militia from Tarasche] came.

When I got up I found out that 11 people were killed, 3 wounded and 3 more ran away. It is interesting to note that the bandits were dressed in military overcoats. They were armed and had Red Army badges and some of them even had communist's badges. They were furious and yelling: Slava!! (Glory!) They started cutting and beating everyone – Jews and communists. The murdered ones were chopped into pieces and it looked like some of them were tortured. It is important that they weren't robbed. It was just a desire to kill, to torture.

I am fortunate that my Father and his family did not descend into this valley of manslaughter. They proceeded on and reached the border with Romania. They had no passports or visas. They just knew they had to leave Ukraine and the USSR. The USSR prohibited emigration but apparently, Romania had a policy that if someone was not caught coming into that country, they could remain whether they were legal or illegally there. Aron (my Uncle Harry) made arrangements for the family to be smuggled into

and
cover
a
river,

to



Romania. The family gathered their possessions crossed the river by raft by of darkness at night. After precarious crossing of the they arrived in Romania. They immediately went to Bucharest where they waited to get visas to come America. They only had the limited funds that my Uncle

Jake had sent. My Father told me that his brother Harry was a smart business man. My Cousin Albert told me that he had been a merchant trader, a salesman who had traveled to Poland and other areas buying and selling goods when he lived in Koshevate. This was an era of unbridled inflation in much of Europe, especially in Rumania. Harry kept the monies in US Dollars and as the value of the Rumanian currency diminished, the value of the Dollar increased. The family was able to live in Bucharest for over a year on the funds that Jake had sent.

Finally, they received their "papers" permitting them to come to America. It was fortunate that my Father's family was able to come when they did. Concerned about the number of immigrants who had come in from eastern and southern Europe, i.e., Italians and Jews, Congress had passed the Emergency Quota Act of 1921 limiting immigration from any country to the US to an amount equal to 3% of those from that country already living in the US as of 1910. In 1924 under the National Origins Act, the limit became more restrictive to 2% of those who were living here in 1890. Since most Jews had come to America after 1890, this meant that tens of thousands were denied entry each year.

The family managed to get to Cherbourg, France. I think they took trains but I am not sure. The family boarded the SS *Majestic*, a White Star steamship in Cherbourg. They traveled in steerage (called third class on the *Majestic*) and arrived in New York at Ellis Island on May 16, 1922.¹⁴ At that time the ship's manifest indicates that my Father was then about 22, his brother Harry was about 30 and his sisters, Sonia and Rose were listed as 15 and 9 although I was told that they were really younger. Both of my grandparents claimed to 58 years old.

The family then came to Wilmington, Delaware where Jake had made arrangements for them to live in an apartment on the second floor of 941 Poplar Street at the corner with 10th Street. The 900 block of Poplar Street then and today is lined with row houses, each no more than 15 feet wide. 941 has two stories with three rental units, one retail store and two apartments and includes a total of 1530 square feet - much more spacious than the house in Koshevate. It was built in 1899. The neighborhood then was an immigrant neighborhood with Jews, Irish and others. Today and throughout my life, it has been an African American neighborhood. Curiously, for all 40 years I practiced law, all of my offices were located within a few blocks from this small apartment in a row house where my Father and his family spent their first night in America.

I can only imagine the feeling that my Father and his family felt when they slept their first night in the United States. Was it relief? Gratitude? Anticipation? They had been through unimaginable terror and they were finally at peace. Victims of the worst of mankind, could they look forward to a life free of harm, a life of opportunity, a life of freedom? What would the future bring? It had to be better than the past.

Jake owned a corner grocery store at the corner of 10th and Poplar when my Father and his family arrived in Wilmington. My Father described the walls of the store as lined with shelves that went to the ceiling. Even though he spoke no English, my

¹⁴ I recently discovered that this was the maiden voyage of the SS *Majestic* which was at that time the largest passenger ship in the world. It remained the largest until 1937. It was the flagship of the White Star Line. The White Star Line had owned the *Titanic* which sunk 10 years prior but the *Titanic* was not as large as the SS *Majestic*.

Father was expected to work in the store on the day after he arrived. He was taught two words, "show me" and he went to work. He also could count money as his family had used US money while in Rumania. When a customer asked for an item he would say "show me" and wait on the customer. If the item was on a shelf that was too high, my Father used a stick with a clamp on the end which could be operated by squeezing a lever at the bottom of the stick. He would reach the item, clamp on it and retrieve it for the customer. Gradually he learned English. In addition to working in Jake's store, my Father took a job at Topkis's underwear factory which was located several blocks away near Second and French Streets. In 1929, the stock market crashed and the Depression was about to begin. That same year my Father opened his first grocery store at 1824 Scott Street in the Forty Acres section of Wilmington - an Irish Catholic neighborhood. My Father's 45 year career as a grocery man had begun.

My Father became a United States citizen on March 21, 1932. A dozen years prior he and his family had been subjected to horrific pogroms in his home town of Koshevate. As I said above, his name change to Samuel Levin was noted on the back of his Certificate of Citizenship. But more than his name had changed. He had been transformed from a terrorized victim of anti-Semitic thugs into a free citizen of the greatest country on Earth. In 1932 the population of the United States had grown to about 125 Million. Herbert Hoover was President of the United States and the Country was in the depths of a Depression which would not end until World War II broke out some 9 years later. "Talkies" had only recently supplanted silent films, electricity and indoor plumbing was now common in urban areas. The US now had 700,000 miles of paved roads to accommodate the over 21 Million automobiles then on the road - over twice the number of automobiles on the road when he had come to the United States in 1922. Telephones were more prevalent than ever but most homes did not have a phone and many of those who did, had a two party/lines, i.e., a line that they shared with others. It was a world apart from Koshevate, his small shtetl in Ukraine.