

Interviewed by Lucille W. Brown  
Schenectady, New York  
July, 1974

Dvora (Dora) Freeman Shamos was joined by her daughter Beatrice Albert for this interview. Gail Brown, the interviewer's daughter was also present.

Born in Ternivka in the Russian Empire in 1884, Dora was the youngest daughter of a pious businessman. Her mother died when she was seven and she was raised by her older sister and then two successive step-mothers. Married at 18, she longed for a freer existence where she could educate her children. Dora emigrated to Atlanta, Georgia in 1911, following her husband Jacob who had preceded her there in 1908.

Lucille Brown: I'll ask you some questions and you'll answer them and then we hope to put these tapes in the library at Union College for the history collection. Tell me your name for the tape.

Dora Shamos: Dora Shamos

LB: And could you tell me where you were born?

DS: I was born in Russia in a small town.

LB: What was the name of the town?

DS: The town is [Ternivka](#). (The original transcript has the name of the town as Pernivka, but searching for this name resulted in no known shtetls. The closest equivalent sounding name that is near to Uman - as Dora mentions later in the interview - is Ternivka or Ternovka.)

LB: And what section of Russia, what province?

DS: I couldn't tell you the section; it is the southern part, I think.

LB: Is it in the Ukraine?

DS: Ukraine.

LB: And could you tell me what year you were born?

DS: I couldn't tell you that either because my mother died when I was seven years old so nobody told me when I was born, but they told me it was Hanukkah. You know what Hanukkah is?

LB: Yes. Do you know what year your mother died?

DS: The year my mother died? I don't either. We didn't count the years.

Beatrice (Bebe) Albert, Dora's Daughter: Now Mama, we figure you're going to be 90 years old this year.

DS: Well, I was seven the year when my mother died.

BA: In 1884 - you figure that you were born in 1884.

DS: Well, all right.

LB: You figure you're 90 years old.

DS: I don't know, they told me that. I don't know that either.

LB: You lived in Ternivka. And how many people lived in your town?

DS: About 300 families.

LB: And were these Jewish families?

DS: The town is made from Jewish families, and around the town is the Gentiles - the outside of town.

LB: And so you lived in a [shtetl](#) of Ternivka?

DS: I lived in the shtetl of Ternivka.

LB: In your shtetl there were 300 families - what kind of work did the Jewish families do?

DS: It was no schools there but they - tradesmen, they bought and sold things. It was no schools there and the people learn in the shul. They learn Hebrew, the [Talmud](#) and that's all. Of course, they could write Yiddish and in Russian and learned themselves. There was working people there too; schusters (shoemakers) making shoes and schneiders (tailors) making dresses and suits and hachoyens (?), blacksmiths and this they make a living out of it.

LB: So you had tailors and blacksmiths and you had shoemakers? What else did you have?

DS: Then we - most of them lived on the air; the luftmenschen (those without a definite occupation).

LB: They lived from the air.

DS: That's right, every two weeks was market day. Peasants come to town to buy and to sell, so the people were grocery people, were people which had dry goods, and ready made clothes for the peasants and the peasant brings the grain and the eggs and the chickens and they buy from the Jews the stuff what the Jews got.

LB: Was it buying? Was there money exchanged?

DS: Money, yes, yes. Money was changed, but they were selling horses, the people were selling cows and pigs and things like that.

LB: Who would buy a [pig](#)?

DS: Some Gentiles would buy; they would buy from each other.

LB: How many people were in your family?

DS: My father was a bookkeeper and ah, ich hab shoin fargessen (I have forgotten).

BA: A grain...

LB: A grain miller or a dealer?

DS: No, he wasn't a miller. He was in a big mill where they're making flour. So he was the cashier and the bookkeeper there. So he made a living.

LB: He made a good living?

DS: Yes, he made a good living and his children never worked anywhere.

LB: How many children were there in your family?

DS: We were six and I was the baby.

LB: You were the baby. So there were six children and your mother and father, right?

DS: That's right.

LB: Did you have any uncles or aunts or grandparents?

DS: Oh yes, I had an uncle. I haven't got an aunt in our town. We had very much relatives besides the sisters and brothers when they got married and (had) children. I was the baby.

LB: Did they stay in the town when they got married?

DS: Yes, yes. Some of them got business. They got flour stores, you know, for groceries and things like that.

LB: How many boys were there in the family?

DS: Two.

LB: Two boys and four girls. What kind of house did you live in?

DS: We lived in a beautiful house, a pretty house. It was a wooden house. Most of them didn't have floors, just the ground, but my house was with floors. It was a nice house.

LB: How many rooms did you have?

DS: When I was born, all the children were married but two - a brother and sister. Then the sister got married when I was little and she went away. So we had four, five rooms.

LB: What kind of rooms? What were the rooms used for?

DS: We had a big dining room and a front room together. Then we had bedrooms. We had three, four bedrooms and we had one kitchen.

LB: What was in your kitchen?

DS: A kitchen was like a kitchen. The stove was built in with rocks and stones and [built in stove](#). We haven't got any stoves like that.

LB: Did you have the Russian oven stove? The kind where you slept - what is that platform called?

DS: On the top yes, yes. We had that kind of stove; oven.

LB: Oven, that's an oven. And your mother cooked in there?

DS: Cooked in the stove and the top was hot, and we baked our own bread, our own challah for Shabbos. Bread for the weekend, and for the week.

LB: Did your mother have any help in the house?

DS: When I was little I don't know whether she had help or not because I was little and I don't know. Later on, we had help - a maid coming in once or twice a week to clean up the house.

LB: Was she a Jewish maid?

DS: No, was a Gentile.

LB: Was she a young girl or an older woman?

DS: Middle age.

LB: And did your mother pay her in money?

DS: Sure, she wouldn't work for nothing.

LB: No, what I mean is did she pay with food or...

DS: No, with money. They came to wash the clothes. They take the clothes to themselves - at that time there was no way to wash the clothes inside. They took the clothes to the river and washed it at the river. So the Gentile girl came every week and took the clothes away and brought it back clean. She would dry it in her house or outside. You know, they had places to dry clothes.

LB: So your family was well-to-do?

DS: Well, medium size; not too wealthy, not too poor.

LB: Were there rich people in the town?

DS: Oh, yes. The rich people had big farms that they took in a Gentile name. They couldn't own a farm by themselves in Jewish. They had to have a Gentile name.

LB: It was in a Gentile name but they kept the money?

DS: They kept the money of course. The Gentile didn't know anything about it.

LB: Did they make up a name? Or did they buy a name?

DS: They'll make up a name. If there was a Gentile, they put the name on the Gentile's farm. And if the Gentile was a poor person they pay him something. They make him for a - I don't know what you call it - a obsehr.

LB: An overseer, a foreman.

DS: He's overseer and they worked, the Gentiles. Jewish doesn't work on farms.

LB: So the Jewish person who actually owned the land, owned it in a Gentile...

DS: They don't own the land. They rent the land, they don't own it. They couldn't own it. They rent it from rich people who lived somewhere else. They got a farm near our town, so they rent it out. And if they rent it out, they rent it in the Gentile's name and they got it over.

LB: Then the Jew would use the Gentile's name and he would work the farm.

DS: The Gentile worked the farm with some other Gentile.

LB: But the Jew put up the money?

DS: But the Jew would sell it and get the money.

LB: What kind of farms did they have?

DS: There was beans and corn and beets. We had lots of [beets](#) for the sugar.

LB: So it was mostly produce. It wasn't like a chicken or beef farm?

DS: No, no, no, no. It was only grain; mostly grain. And some of them got woods; lumber wood. Some Jews got that too.

LB: You mean they would get the rights to a certain plot of trees and then they would cut the trees?

DS: In some acres of land the trees grew and they grew so big they have to make lumber out of it. So the Jews didn't have it but they rented it and they work it. That's how they sell off the lumber and they have different materials and they sell them.

LB: You're saying they used Gentiles to do the work.

DS: Gentiles to do the work. Jews don't do that kind of work.

LB: Even the luftmenschen wouldn't do that kind of work?

DS: No, no.

LB: They'd rather not work, they'd rather be poor and respectable?

DS: They couldn't work. I couldn't imagine a Jew should make that because they couldn't work that kind of work.

LB: They would never do that kind of work?

DS: No.

LB: Why not?

DS: I don't know why not. I couldn't explain you that. Because they never do it and maybe the government didn't let them do it. Maybe the government didn't want them to do it because there were plenty of Gentiles there with that work. I don't know why.

LB: But I mean, if a Jew is starving...

DS: They don't starve.

LB: They don't starve?

DS: No.

LB: Not even the luftmenschen starve? Why don't they starve?

DS: Why don't they starve? They do something that they didn't starve. They buy something and sell something and that's all.

LB: So they make a living from day to day.

DS: From day to day - that's all. Some Jew is going to the forest to buy loads of wood, some people got to burn the wood to make it warm in the house. So the Gentile bring the wood to town, they hire a wagon or something, they bring the wood to town and he sells it and makes a few cents of a dollar on the pile of wood.

BA: My grandfather and father worked for forest dealers.

LB: And they cut lumber?

BA: They didn't cut lumber; they estimated and they collected the payment. They made the transactions.

LB: Ah so how much would be needed to produce so much lumber. So they were the middle men and your father was a bookkeeper. That means he had to know how to read and write; how to figure...

DS: Yes, how to figure, of course. He's a bookkeeper.

LB: And he had to know something about business. Did he have to know some languages? He probably had to know more than one language.

DS: Well, the languages there was just poor peasant talk and Russian talk.

LB: So he knew Russian?

DS: Yes. He knew Yiddish.

LB: Did you speak Yiddish in your home?

DS: Yiddish, Yiddish. Yes. And he knew Hebrew.

LB: He knew three languages. And what did you speak in your home?

DS: I knew Yiddish. That's all.

LB: Did you go to school?

DS: There wasn't school in our town.

LB: There was not even a cheder?

DS: A *cheder*, yes. So, I went to *cheder*.

LB: When did you start cheder?

DS: When did I start cheder? I don't know, about ten years, twelve years, something like that.

LB: Oh, you didn't start at three like the boys?

DS: No, the girls don't have to know even daven (pray). (Laughs) If they knew the little bit, is all right and if they don't know, is all right too. Some of them didn't know anything.

LB: What did you learn in the cheder?

DS: I learned Hebrew.

LB: Did you learn to read it?

DS: I learned to read it, I learned to write it.

LB: Did you write Yiddish?

DS: I wrote Yiddish, not Hebrew. I wrote Yiddish. I learned Yiddish and say the Bible in Hebrew.

LB: As far as I understood it, most Jewish women of your time did not know Hebrew. If they knew prayers, it was in Yiddish.

DS: They knew the prayers and didn't know what they were saying.

LB: Did you know what you were saying?

DS: Yes.

LB: In Hebrew?

DS: In Hebrew.

LB: How did you learn that?

DS: In cheder. I went to cheder.

LB: Therefore you could read and write in these two languages.

DS: I read and write in one language; just in Jewish.

LB: But you could read in Hebrew?

DS: I could read in Hebrew, but I wrote in Yiddish.

LB: Did you know Russian?

DS: Very little, very little, because it wasn't school, just to learn it from the street. When you go to buy a chicken, let's say, you have to know how to buy the chicken. So that's all.

LB: What did you learn at home? Did you learn to do anything at home?

DS: I do everything. Cook and bake bread and wash floors and paint the house; everything.

LB: Did you sew?

DS: I learn how to sew but I didn't learn how to sew dresses or something like that. I could make underwear or something like that.

LB: Your dresses were made by the tailor?

DS: By somebody else; by dressmaker.

LB: Did the dressmaker come to your house or did you go to the dressmaker?

DS: She came to my house or otherwise I come to her. Either way. Come to my house and I go to her.

LB: Was she from your town?

DS: Yes. Now, 1884, I'm trying to remember. 1884, was that [Nicholas](#)?

BA: Mama remembers Nicholas' [coronation](#). I looked it up yesterday.

LB: Nicholas the second?

BA: Nicholas the second, yes. She said she was about ten years old and she watched the coronation parade in her town.

LB: Is that right? Did you ever see Nicholas?

DS: He wasn't in our town. I saw the parade with the soldiers marching but he wasn't in our town. They made decorations for him and different things and the soldiers marching and playing and so on. He wasn't in our town.

BA: In 1894. (1896)

LB: Would you say your house was pretty compared to other people's houses?

DS: My house was prettier than other people's houses. Some of them was prettier than others and some not.

LB We talked about the rich people and what they did and then there was a middle class; they were mostly tradespeople.

DS: The middle class were not the *schneiders* and the *scheisters*.

LB: What were they?

DS: They were the buyers and sellers.

LB: And the tailors and the shoemakers were the what?

DS: The lower class.

LB: Because they worked with their hands?

DS: Because they didn't go in *cheder*. They didn't go to school and they worked with their hands ever since they were little. They have to make a living.



LB: What about your brothers? Did they get schooling?

DS: My brothers were very intelligent and very learned, but they learned in Hebrew - the cheder.

LB: They started at what age?

DS: They started, I suppose, with everybody else - four years old.

LB: And how far in school were they allowed to go?

DS: Well, they go, let's say, thirteen years. I didn't know exactly because I wasn't there. And after that, they go to learn in shul.

LB: They had a tutor?

DS: Not in school, a shul.

LB: But who taught them?

DS: The older one taught the younger one. They have to learn it and they don't know anything they ask somebody. The elder one. And they learn. No organized class.

LB: What was the nearest big city to you?

DS: The nearest big city was [Uman](#).

BA: Between Kiev and Odessa - nearer to Odessa.

LB: So it's in the south central portion, right?

BA: Ma, what was the name of the river? Was that the Dniester?

DS: No, in our town was no Dniester. Was a plain *taych*, you know, a river.

LB: Tell me about the Gentiles that lived around.

DS: Well, the Gentiles usually they had little ground, but they worked it up. They had vegetables and things like that what they lived off. And otherwise what they haven't got they go

and buy from the Jews. They had stores (with) sugar and herring and fish and things like that and meats and all kinds of...

LB: Where did they get those things from?

DS: From other towns - have factories or something.

LB: So some Jews would go there and buy and bring them back and sell?

DS: Sell it, like stores. What do they do at the stores? They buy it from wholesale and there was the same way. And if they have to have dry goods or something like that, they go to the big city, go to Warsaw and places where they make the clothes and they buy.

LB: What did the Gentiles do for a living?

DS: They farm and they sell it. Peasants.

LB: So it was mostly agricultural.

DS: Sure, it was big agriculture town. And around there they catch fish and I don't know what.

LB: What was the relationship between the Jews and the Gentiles that lived around them?

DS: There was no relationship. The only thing that was a relationship was that they changed goods. They go and buy flour or dresses and suits and things like that and that's the relationship.

LB: There were never any friendships?

DS: They had no friendships, Jews with Gentiles. No friendships.

LB: Were they feared? Were you afraid of them?

DS: Sometimes.

LB: When?

DS: When they made pogroms.

LB: Did they make pogroms in your town?

DS: Not in our town but around the towns. In the big cities.

LB: Which pogroms do you remember hearing about?

DS: [Kishinev](#), a big pogrom I hear. They killed the Jews and other things like that.

LB: Did you ever experience a pogrom in your area?

DS: No, but if it was a day when the Gentile got to come to town. They used to come every other week, so when we hear there was a pogrom somewhere else so we paid the ... I don't know.

BA: The priest?

DS: No, it would be like a ...

LB: Would it be like a gendarme? A policeman?

DS: Yes, a policeman. We paid him - all the stores taking together and paid him they shouldn't let in the peasants in towns.

LB: What kind of a policeman? Would he be a Russian policeman?

DS: Russians, everything was Russians. Jews can't keep a job like that, no, so they pay him they shouldn't let in the peasants in town.

LB: And he would honor that? He would keep them out on that day?

DS: Yes, he would kick them out.

LB: So if you heard of a pogrom elsewhere, you would be afraid to let them in?

DS: Afraid they would make it here, so we keep them out.

LB: What about on certain holidays like Christmas or Easter or Passover? Did you ever have any difficulties because you were Jews?

DS: No, no, no. We didn't have any difficulties there. The Christian Easter we didn't bother with.

LB: Did they bother you?

DS: They don't bother us either because it was a small town and they used to make their worship on the river because the river was frozen stiff. You know, it was frozen ice.

LB: At Easter time?

DS: At Easter time it was frozen, the river. They used to ride on the river with horses and wagons and sleds and they make the *goyishe* cross. They used to make it on the river from ice and painted it up and they came to worship on that cross.

LB: And this was the [Russian Orthodox Church](#)?

DS: Yes.

LB: Was there any other kind of church around?

DS: It was a Catholic.

LB: There was a Catholic?

DS: But they don't bother very much.

LB: Were there many people who were Roman Catholics?

DS: Yes, there were Catholics. The Catholics were the rich people, so they come to worship in their church. But the peasants make all that on the ice.

LB: How many churches were there?

DS: Two - was one Catholic church and one peasant.

LB: How many synagogues did you have?

DS: We had three.

LB: What was the difference between the synagogues?

DS: Well, it was one synagogue where the *scheisters* and the *schneiders* go there. One synagogue, the higher class.

LB: So you had synagogues divided by class? Right?

DS: Right, by class.

LB: So the poor people went to one, the middle class went to...

DS: They weren't poor. It didn't make any difference whether they were poor or not. It was ignorance.

LB: Are you saying that the people who were cobblers, shoemakers and tailors were ignorant?

DS: Was in one place and the middle class, the idle another and the higher class was another.

LB: Are you saying that the people who were richer were better educated?

DS: Yes, they were. For one thing, they could go out in the gymnasiums in the other cities. And the other thing is that they got better teachers and higher paid and so...

LB: So, in addition to being a poor class job, you also suffered because you couldn't afford to have a teacher?

DS: No, it wasn't the teachers. It was just the *melamud* was... Everybody teaches Hebrew so you couldn't go very far. And the other one, her father-in-law, her husband's...

BA: My grandfather.

DS: My father-in-law.

LB: And he was a teacher for the rich boys? What did he teach them?

DS: Teach them, I don't know, the high class Hebrew.

LB: Did he teach Russian?

DS: No.

LB: Was there anything at all about secular learning? In other words, non-Hebraic, non-religious, like Russian literature, Russian poetry...

DS: I understand you. They didn't teach me Russian literature. They didn't know it themselves.

LB: So what was an average day like for you? By the way, how long did you live in this town? Until when?

DS: Until I got married.

LB: At what age?

DS: Eighteen.

LB: You were married at eighteen. So you lived in that town for eighteen years, right?

BA: Longer.

DS: More than eighteen years.

LB: And then, what would an average day be like for you?

DS: The average day is you got to cook.

LB: You get up in the morning, right?

DS: You get up in the morning.

LB: What time do you get up?

DS: Don't make any difference. You get up eight o'clock, half past seven, whenever you get up. So you got to make breakfast and then you make dinner and sometimes... Monday you have to cook, you have to make bread; Friday you have to make cholent. You don't cook on Saturday, so you have to make cholent.

LB: What would you say *cholent* is in English?

DS: In English, I don't know. But we cook for night- you make a dinner Friday night, make a dinner and then for Saturday, you put it in the stove. You make the stove hot and put it in the stove and let it stay till tomorrow it gets done. And tomorrow, twelve o'clock, when they come from shul, you make the meal.

LB: Did you have clocks?

DS: Sure.

LB: You didn't get up the same time every morning? Your father had to go to work.

DS: My father used to go on Monday. He was working in another - in a peasant town. He was in a peasant town so he goes away Sunday morning and comes Friday afternoon.

LB: He was gone all week.

DS: All week.

LB: So what did your mother do during the week? Did she work too?

DS: No. What do you do? That's what I say. You got to make dinner, you got to cook and you got to clean up the house and all the rest of it. Sometimes you read, if you could read.

LB: Could your mother read?

DS: Yes.

LB: Did she read Yiddish?

DS: Yiddish, either a book, either you do sewing, underclothes or something like that. You work, you had to work stockings. You make stockings yourself; you can't buy it.

LB: How did you make stockings? You knit them or crochet them?

DS: Knit them, sure.

LB: Gail (interviewer's daughter) Did you want to ask a question?

Gail Brown: How old were you when your mother died?

DS: How old? I was seven years old, so I played outside with the other children. I don't know anything else. I had an older sister, took care of me.

LB: Your older sister took care of you - so did your older sister run the house?

DS: Run the house and take care of me until she got married. And when she got married my father married again.

LB: How old were you when your father married again?

DS: I was nine years old.

LB: So then you had a stepmother.

DS: Yes, the stepmother took care of me.

LB: So she did what your mother would have done had she lived.

DS: Yes.

LB: Could your stepmother read?

DS: Oh, yes. She was a very good reader. She could read Russian and she could write Russian and she do other things. She was a very nice person.

LB: You liked her?

DS: Oh, yes, sure.

LB: Did she teach you Russian?

DS: No, she didn't teach me Russian but she saw I should be able to *daven*, you know to say the Hebrew and to write.

LB: Were you interested in learning anything but Yiddish and Hebrew?

DS: Oh, I was interested to learn but I didn't have the chance. I was very interested to learn.

BA: Tell how you listened at the door when your brother studied. You remember, you told me how when the tutor came to teach...

DS: Yes, my brother had some children to teach, and he didn't want to teach me, so (words missing) if you make some mistake, I'll correct you later.

LB: I have heard this from other women who were born in the Ukraine - that in order to learn, if their brothers were learning from a [\*melamed\*](#) or were teaching other children, they would have to listen, but their brothers would never teach them.



DS: No, I told him, "Let me be in your class." He said, "No, write yourself. If you make a mistake, I'll correct it."

LB: Did you ever get angry or did you think that was the way it was supposed to be?

DS: No, I did the best I could. (Laughs) I do the best I could.

LB: Did he correct what you did?

DS: Sure.

LB: He did look it over, but he wouldn't let you in the class.

DS: But if he dictated, so I said, "Let me do it too." He said no. And I was very interested to learn, I was very anxious to learn. And I learned. You know, it was a little teacher come in. Sometimes we rent out a room - because nobody was in the house - and we rent out a room for a couple and she had a little boy my age. So got a little, some kind of teacher, he should teach him how to write. So he told him dictation and I was in the other room and listened and I make it. I wrote it. So the mother used to say I do better than her boy, "Why don't you do it like Dora does?" So he got mad. He got to close the door.

LB: You had to do it behind the door again.

DS: I was very angry for that, but I couldn't help it.

LB: Did it ever occur to you to ask to have a teacher or was it just out of the question?

DS: That time, when I was growing up, the people were very afraid to teach the girls what the boys learn because it was revolutionary, a little revolution at that time. For they run away to America - they run away to somewhere else - so my father didn't want it. He said a girl, if she could write a little, you know, to give away the clothes and write down, is enough. So he didn't want.

LB: No wonder you're a [women's libber](#). (Laughter) You really suffered from the other part.

DS: So I did the best I could.

LB: The way you were talking at dinner time, you apparently have done some reading in the meantime during those years. When did you start reading? Did you start reading on your own?

DS: Well, I'll tell you, you couldn't read any books - didn't want you to read books. You could read the Bible. My father used to say... Saturday he wanted me to *daven* - to pray - so he showed me how to do it and how you pray. But I could not read a novel, so I used to read at night when I was in bed. I used to sleep in another room, make the light, and I got the novels from somebody else and I read.

LB: What language?

DS: In Jewish.

LB: Do you remember the authors?

DS: Yes, [Mendele Sforim](#) and the different, you know... It was novels. So, all right, I read.

LB: That's already the beginning of the [haskalah](#), right?

DS: Sure. I used to read a novel and put it under my pillow, nobody should see it.

LB: So this was amongst the girls in the village?

DS: Well, I don't know what the other girls do, but I knew what I did.

LB: Where did you get your novels from?

DS: It was man, was a little liberal, so he used to get these novels and I used to get it and pay him for it; three cents or four or five cents for a novel for a week, and I got the novel.

LB: Was this someone who lived in your town?

DS: Yes. I couldn't go in another town. So I used to get a novel. I used to take the newspaper, "*Der Tag*"...

LB: That's a [Yiddish paper](#).

DS: A Yiddish paper - so my brother used to have at that time. They used to have a paper, it used to go all over town, one paper. So my brother took the paper and he brought it to me and I read it.

LB: Your brother did let you read the paper?

DS: Oh, he let me read the paper.

LB: Where was the paper published?

DS: I couldn't say exactly but I think it was in Warsaw.

LB: It was a Polish newspaper?

DS: And it was a Jewish newspaper; used to be, used to say, "*Der Tag*".

LB: So that's how you kept up with current events.

GB: What would have happened if you were caught by your father reading a novel?

DS: Oh, well, they would holler, sure. You shouldn't do it.

LB: Were your brothers allowed to read whatever they wanted?

DS: They read behind too. Nobody knew it. If they want to read a novel, you know, the father wouldn't let them, so he wouldn't do it. He wouldn't read it when the father would know it.

LB: So even the boys were not allowed to read novels. Was your father a [Hasid](#)?

DS: Sure. *Er iz a Chusid und hat gehat a rebbe.* ( He was a Hasid and had a [rebbe](#).)

LB: He had a *rebbe*. Did he go to the rebbe's court?

DS: Well, the rebbe came to us. He came to our town and he used to come to our house. My father paid him to come to our house.

LB: Did the other Hasidim come to your house then?

DS: Yes, yes.

LB: How often did the rebbe come?

DS: Sometimes once a year or once in two years.

LB: And what would happen then? Explain what would happen.

DS: What would happen. He come to the rebbe and give him a couple (*ah pur*) of dollars and ask him what your trouble is and he said, "It'll be all right." That's all I could say. (Laughs)

LB: But when the rebbe came to your house what happened?

DS: The same thing. There's other people came in and give him a *kvittel*...

LB: What's a *kvittel* in English?

DS: Write him a note and tell him the trouble what you got in the note. He'd read the note and say, "*Gut vet ir helfen*." (God will help you). That's all.

LB: So if a Jew came to the Hasidic *rebbe* with his troubles, he would write it on a note and the *rebbe* would say, "God will help you."

DS: God will help you, don't worry.

LB: Don't worry, God will help you. Are you saying these were totally uneducated men?

DS: He told it even to an educated man. He told it and he believed so in the *rebbe*, "*Az der rebbe zugt, mestome vet zahn azoi*." (If the rebbe says so, it will probably be so.)

LB: Even the educated men would believe whatever the *rebbe* told them.

DS: That's right.

LB: Was the *rebbe* an educated man?

DS: Oh, yes! The *rebbe* was a very educated man.

LB: Did he ever explain Torah to this group of men?

DS: I suppose so. When we make the dinner all the *Hasidim shtehen arim*...

LB: When all the Hasidim are seated around the table at the dinner...

DS: And so he talks Torah, tells them something from the Torah.

LB: But the women were not allowed there.

DS: No.

LB: So you didn't know what actually happened there?

DS: No, I didn't know. I understand. They told what was happening, but I didn't see it.

LB: It sounds to me, tell me if I hear you wrong, as if you didn't have too much respect. You say, "*Er gibt im ah kvittel und er zugt az Gut vill dir hilfin.*" (He gives him a note paper and he says that God will help you.

DS: So they got so interested in it and they believed so in his word, so God helped them.

LB: What you're saying is that you don't believe that. Is that right?

DS: I don't believe now, but maybe they didn't believe then either. I laughed.

LB: You laughed then?

DS: To myself.

LB: How old were you then?

DS: I was, let's say, I don't know, about fifteen, sixteen or eighteen.

LB: Why did you laugh?

DS: Because I didn't believe it.

(End of Tape Side 1)

LB: Your family was Orthodox, right? Were they very religious?

DS: Yes.

LB: Did your father wear *payes*?

DS: Yes, sure, with a *burd* (beard).

LB: Did your brothers wear *payes*?

DS: No, not much.

LB: Did your father object when they didn't wear payes?

DS: Well, he did. He didn't object very much because he wasn't that fanatic.

LB: But if he was a Hasid, he would have objected.

DS: But he didn't. He traveled a lot and saw how it was in the world.

LB: So it was fairly liberal.

DS: Yes.

LB: Is that where you picked up some of your ideas?

DS: Maybe, maybe.

LB: Think back. I know it's a long time, but after all, most Jewish women at that time lived in a very small world.

DS: A very small world. When I got married they wanted me to [cut off my big hair](#) and I didn't want to cut off my hair, so I didn't. I didn't go like this (bare headed). I had to go with something on, with a *perrick*.

LB: What's a *perrick*? You had to wear a wig over your own hair?

DS: Over my own hair. Otherwise I wear - what you call it?

LB: A kerchief.

DS: A kerchief.

LB: A *perrick* is from the French *perruque* (wig).

DS: Yes.

LB: It's not a [sheitel](#)?

DS: It's a *sheitel*, yes, but...

LB: But you didn't shave your head?

DS: (Laughs) Oh, no. I was an independent young lady.

LB: What about your husband?

DS: My husband, don't matter, but my mother-in-law didn't let me in her house. She didn't want to see me like that.

LB: She thought you were not a good Jewish girl. What did she want you to do?

DS: She want me to cut off and to shave off my head.

LB: And then you would have been a good Jew?

DS: That's right.

LB: And was that all she expected of you?

DS: That's right.

LB: Was that the only way you failed her?

DS: That's the only way.

LB: And for that reason she wouldn't let you into her house? That's very interesting! That I never heard before.

DS: (Laughs) And all my sisters were shaving off their heads. All my sisters when they got married.

LB: Did you go to [mikveh](#)?

DS: I did.

LB: Could you tell me what sort of person your husband was? After all, he married you.

DS: He was a religious person. What means religious? He was learned, you know like in the shul he was sitting and learning the [Gemara](#) there, but at the same time he didn't tell me anything that I want to do.

LB: If you wanted to do something, you did it? He didn't order you about.

DS: No, no, no.

LB: So you were free to do as you wished. Even at eighteen?

DS: To do what I want. Even at eighteen.

LB: Well, eighteen then, you were already a full adult, right?

DS: No. I was young because I didn't have a mother. My step-mother died and my father got married.

LB: He got married a third time?

DS: A third time because he was still a young man, he was still working and he wanted to get married.

LB: Was your marriage arranged? Was there a *shadchan*? Was it a *shidduch*?

DS: I understand. No *shidduch*, but my husband didn't see me very much before we were married. He saw me one time and I...

LB: And you saw him one time. Did you agree to it or did you have no choice?

DS: (Laughs) I hadn't got the choice. My father say, "That's it."

LB: How did you feel about it? Do you mind telling me? If there's any question you don't want to answer, then don't answer me. Did you have any feelings about this?

DS: Well, I suppose so. I didn't want to get married that young. So my father say, "You have to do it because I didn't want you..." One thing, my father was that time - I say he was young - he was over seventy. And he was good enough to work. He was a very strong man. He was keeping himself young. So he say, "The Jewish thought is when you have to live till seventy, that's what God said. And after seventy, God give you a present; every day is another present." So he said if he dies, who will take care of me? Of me. So he say if he'll die, who will take care of me? Nobody. "So I want you to get married while I live."

LB: So he was taking care of you, the way he saw it.

DS: That's right.



LB: But you didn't want necessarily to be taken care of?

DS: I wanted to go to America but I didn't have any money.

LB: So you married your husband. And he was from your town. What did he do for a living?

DS: What he do? He do whatever the other men do. He have to have some kind of meal. We got meal where we make some kind of grain. So we had that and we had another thing. We had wood where we make lumber boards; where we make lumber there. And then we came to America.

LB: You came to America what year?

DS: We came to America, I think it was 1911. And he came about three years before, 1908.

LB: During that time there was a revolution in Russia.

DS: No, the revolution was 1914.

LB: There was [one in 1905](#).

DS: 1905 was no revolution. It was started, but it was not in our town. It wasn't very much.

LB: It didn't succeed, but there was a revolution. In other words, you didn't feel it at all in your town.

DS: No, no, no. It was in the big cities, in Odessa, in Kiev and so on. But not in our town.

LB: There was no trouble in your town.

DS: No trouble.

LB: From what age did you want to go to America?

DS: From about fifteen, sixteen.

LB: How did you hear about America?

DS: Oh, people going to America and they write letters and I knew it. And I read in the paper.

LB: Most of the people we've talked to, if we've asked, "If the war hadn't come, or if pogroms hadn't come, would you have expected to spend the rest of your life in this town?" They said yes.

DS: I didn't.

LB: What did you expect to find in America?

DS: To work and to make a living. To be free.

LB: In what way did you feel you were not free there that you would be free here?

DS: I learn. I read in the paper what they say. And I knew enough - imagined it was better.

LB: How would you be freer?

DS: That's what it is. Because in our town you was afraid to go out at night, maybe a peasant will pass and throw a stone at you.

LB: So you were afraid. Before you said you weren't.

DS: I wasn't afraid to stay in the house because it was no pogroms yet. But I was afraid at night to go out in the dark. It was no lights in the streets and it was dark so I wouldn't go out. Maybe a peasant will pass by and throw a stone. And it's a fact, they do do, they do it. So I wouldn't go.

LB: You felt you would be free from being afraid.

DS: That's right.

LB: Did you think maybe about being free to go to school?

DS: Well, I thought I'd go to school. I'm young enough and I'd work in the day time and go to school at night.

LB: You did think of those things?

DS: That's right. And in our town was no schools.

LB: Did you ever think of going to one of the big cities in Russia like Kiev or Odessa?

DS: Well, no I didn't, I never did. Because there is no better.

LB: No better how?

DS: No better than a small town. A Jew is a Jew everywhere they go.

LB: You felt the pressure of being a Jew even though you never experienced anything bad?

DS: No, no, no. I was afraid. I was afraid, as I say, to go...

LB: To go out at night.

DS: Sure. One thing, was very dark, you know, and I was afraid.

LB: Would you say that you were happy when you were little?

DS: When I was seven years old, I was happy. I didn't know any better.

LB: That's a lot of the reason why people are happy.

DS: (Laughs) *Lach nisht*. (Don't laugh) A kid knows how to play outside with other kids and that's all.

LB: Right. Would you say it was your mother's dying that stopped this feeling?

DS: No. My sister was taking care of me. My mother died, of course I felt I lost her because I was her baby and you know the baby's always... So I missed her, of course, but I got used to it. You get used to lots of things.

LB: Did you get along well with your father or was it difficult for girls and fathers?

DS: No, it was not difficult at all. My father came, he wanted me to sit by him. When we go to the table to eat, he wanted to see I shall eat. He's afraid maybe the stepmother didn't feed me enough. I suppose so, because I wanted to sit by him and eat like everybody.

LB: Were you the last child home?

DS: The last child in my home. My brother was young. He was about eighteen years old. He married. He left town. He went to Odessa.

LB: He did go to Odessa? So some of your family went to Odessa. Did any of them become [Zionists](#)?

DS: He was a Zionist.

LB: He was? And what did he do?

DS: He was teaching there, to Odessa, and he went in a country town and teaches Jewish.

LB: Did he ever think of going to [Palestine](#)?

DS: Well, that time was no way to go to Palestine, but he was a Zionist.

LB: Was your father a Zionist?

DS: I couldn't tell that because I don't know. You know, that time was difficult and besides that I didn't have the chance to talk to him very much because on Saturday he looked in a book and *shul* and then I didn't have any chance to know what he thought about. So. He had a horse and buggy.

LB: So most of your life was spent with women until you got married.

DS: That's right.

LB: Except for your brothers. Did you see much of your brothers?

DS: My brothers... one is married and one is gone away. And then he came back and he married her.

LB: Did he stay in your town or did he go back to Odessa?

DS: No, when he's married he stayed in the town there.

LB: And where was she from?

DS: She's from (place missing)

LB: Was that near your town?

DS: No, I don't know the mileage. It was different from the mileage here.

LB: Like a day's trip or two days?

DS: No, it was half a day.

LB: Was that an arranged marriage too?

DS: This was, he picked out himself.

LB: He picked her himself. Do you think that the arranged marriages were any better or worse than the other kind?

DS: Well that time it was different, entirely different. All my sisters were arranged marriages. They didn't see the boy they were going to marry and the boy didn't see her who he's going to marry. The fathers got together and they say so much and so much they giving and so much and that's all, so they were satisfied. And the daughters take the fathers' word and then they were satisfied.

LB: Was there ever any fight in the family - I don't want to marry that man or I don't want to get married?

DS: No, not in our family.

LB: How about in your town? Did you ever hear about anything like that?

DS: Yes, there was some divorce. Some people divorced; got married and divorced.

LB: Did any young girls ever object to this system?

DS: Well, some of them object and some of them don't. I don't know. Different opinions. I remember one girl of my age; the father insisted on her to get married and she married and then she locked up herself. She wouldn't let in her husband. And they divorced and another got married and went away with her husband. She had a nice husband and he divorced her and she came to her father back. And her father, he didn't want her, but he couldn't help it.

LB: So he took her back?

DS: Right.

LB: There's no way of knowing whether one system is going to work better than another.

DS: That's right. In some families (it) does and some don't.

LB: Do you have any preference yourself? Do you feel one way is better than another?

DS: No. Is all ways the same, and if you pick out a boy and you fall in love with him and after then you divorce. So what is it? It's all ways the same. You couldn't guess. Sometimes the father picks out a nice boy and the girl is satisfied. All ways the same.

LB: It's interesting because nobody else has talked about this in our interviews. You're the first one that has talked about marriage and having the father set it up.

DS: No, no. It was all right.

BA: Mama was lucky.

LB: I don't know how come it's never come up before because not all of the women that we've spoken to had love matches. There must have been some that had arranged marriages. Tell me something about your brother who went to Odessa. Was he a revolutionary at all? Was he Russian thinking at all?

DS: He was Russian thinking and he feels with the Russian peasant because he could live here and he couldn't live there. So of course, but he couldn't help it.

LB: Well, so he wasn't a revolutionary because what I'm talking about...

DS: He wasn't a revolutionary to go... But he came to America too.

LB: He did? What year?

DS: About two years after.

LB: So you all came before the First World War? So you didn't suffer through the war and the [Civil War](#) and the [Revolution](#)?

DS: No.

LB: Did your whole family come over here?

DS: No. The family was there and they suffer a lot.

LB: Who stayed?

DS: I got a brother and I got sisters and I got whole family. One family is in Israel now. They were rich before the Revolution; they were very rich people and they took away everything and

then they come over after the border. We have to send them some money otherwise they haven't got a penny to live on.

LB: What border?

DS: You know, the Russian border.

LB: With Romania?

DS: It was coming over to Kishinev.

LB: It was Romania (now Moldova). Where were they trying to go?

DS: One came. One wants to come to America but he couldn't; America didn't let in that time.

LB: What year was this?

DS: It was about the same time... about 1916, 1917. I remember that.

LB: That was already the war years. You mean they weren't letting them in then?

DS: No, America didn't let in. They got a percentage.

LB: That wasn't till after the war.

DS: After the war, yes. That's what I say. After the Revolution.

LB: That's already 1921. That's [when the quota set in](#).

DS: No, it was before.

LB: It was?

DS: Sure. It was before the Russian Revolution.

BA: When did (missing) go to Israel?

DS: The same year. It was 1917, 1918. Something like that.

LB: But the Revolution didn't start until 1917.

DS: The Revolution started in 1916.

LB: On which calendar?

DS: And the Revolution started in 1916 and in 1917 they already got [pogroms](#), so then they started to come over to America. They took away everything. My sisters were rich but they didn't let them in because of the percentage. They didn't let them in here.

LB: You're saying that by [1917 there was already a quota](#), right? I'm going to check that because I didn't think there was a quota until about 1921 or 1922.

DS: No, it was a quota then because we wanted to take over the family. They went to Canada. We couldn't do it.

BA: One sister went to Canada.

LB: There was no quota from Canada?

DS: In Canada was no quota. They couldn't get into America, they had to go to Canada. The sister with six children went to Israel.

LB: In what year was that?

DS: That was about 1918.

LB: That was early. How did she get there?

DS: My brother-in-law had a brother here that done something. You know, he raised him and everything but the brother here was well to do, so he went to Kishinev and took them over there.

LB: And from Kishinev how did they get over to Israel?

DS: How did they get over? I don't know. By boat or who knows how they got out, but they got over. And we had a family in Atlanta. So all together we got them to Canada.

LB: How did you wind up in Atlanta?

DS: On account of this family that we had here - relatives. But they were in [Atlanta](#). They come in 1903, 1908, or 1905 - something like that. And they come here and they established and my husband come three years before me.



LB: And they were all in Atlanta? How come? Because most Jews came to New York.

DS: They come because somebody was in Atlanta. I couldn't tell you exactly the details. One had a girlfriend here so they come over to Atlanta. There were eight children, no parents - they haven't got any parents. And eight children come to Atlanta.

LB: So your husband went to Atlanta, made enough money...

DS: Those boys were our relatives and they come to Atlanta. Were six boys and two girls. One was married, so she got the husband here. So they come to Atlanta and they start working; they peddle and this and that and then they establish a grocery store and they making good and then they started to build buildings and that's all.

LB: And your husband was in on all this?

DS: My husband was peddling till he got the language and then he got the grocery store.

LB: And he saved up money to send for you?

DS: He didn't save up money, but I got money and I come back. I sold my household things.

LB: Did you have any children then?

DS: Sure, two children.

LB: You had two children. (Looking at a photo) Now this picture is taken...

BA: That's before she came to America.

LB: But it says, "Rita's Photo Studio, Miami Beach."

BA: Well, she had it reproduced.

LB: Are you one of these children?

BA: No, my oldest sister and my brother.

LB: So, are you the baby?

BA: Yes.

LB: You weren't born yet.

BA: No, no.

LB: This is right after you came to the United States?

BA: Before.

DS: This is before. They were born in Russia. I came with those two children.

BA: She took that picture to send to my father in America.

DS: You can't recognize me.

LB: I want to know if that's your hair.

DS: That's my real hair. I took off the...

LB: Where was this picture taken? In your hometown? And you took off your wig?

DS: Yes.

LB: Wasn't that a shame for the neighbors?

DS: The neighbors did not know it. It was in another street.

LB: But you wouldn't dare walk down the street like that?

DS: Oh no, no.

LB: What would have happened if you had walked down the street without a wig on?

DS: Everybody would talk about it, my goodness, "*Tochter geht uhn ah perrik.*"

LB: "So and so's daughter is going without a wig," right? And that was cause for gossip.

DS: Oh my, for shame, sure.

BA: While my father was in America, Mama earned money by learning to make wigs.

LB: If that isn't poetic justice or something! Honest to God! For other women to wear what you didn't want to, right? It must have been a really rough life, especially since there was so much that you didn't like.

DS: Well, you know, you get used to everything. You get used to everything. You don't know what a person can get used to.

LB: Yes. There was more about this freedom thing than just being afraid of being a Jew. You didn't like wearing a wig. If I understand you, you're telling me there were a lot of things you didn't like. You couldn't wear your own hair when you walked down the street.

DS: Of course not.

LB: You couldn't read a novel without hiding it from people. You couldn't get educated because you were a girl.

DS: Because I was a girl and there were no teachers.

LB: Was there enough money?

DS: Money didn't mean anything because, if I got a teacher you could pay him two dollars for six months.

LB: So money was not a question. The town was too small for teachers.

DS: Nobody wants to come to teach for two dollars for six months.

LB: But some girls went away from home.

DS: No. Some girls weren't away from home because very poor, very poor, where they got to go and work in somebody's house.

LB: But I'm saying middle class girls would leave home and go. My mother went to Vinnitsa. She went to a gymnasium there, I think.

DS: But in our town it was a shame when a girl goes away.

LB: It was a shame? So, what you're telling me is girls' lives were in a real tight fence.

DS: That's right, that's right.

LB: Is that what you're talking about when you say you wanted to be free? It wasn't just being a Jew?

DS: It was both things. It was because I was a Jew and I couldn't go anywhere and I couldn't do what I want to, and the other thing is the education. I wanted to be educated and I couldn't and there were lots of things why I want to go away. And when we're going to America later, when I have children, I say we have to go away on account of the children. We have to educate them. And so here, my son was a big lawyer and all the children make college and it was different.

LB: Did you go to school when you came here?

DS: I couldn't, because I want to go to night school so my husband says you couldn't go by yourself. I couldn't leave the children. If you go by yourself, people will talk, you know, not nice. So I didn't go. I learned with the children's books.

LB: Did you read [The Rise of David Levinsky](#); how the mother learned from her children's books?

DS: That's right, that's right.

LB: But she was angry all the time because she couldn't go herself. Were you angry too?

DS: Yes, sure. (pause)

LB: That's very frustrating.

DS: You see, it was a night school. We had a night school in our town, in Atlanta. So I wanted to go to night school. We were living outside of the city. We had to go with... So it was a boy from that neighborhood who was going to school a night - a European boy. So I was going with him. Alone, I couldn't go. My husband say it would be a shame, people will talk about it. And I always keep away so people shouldn't talk about me any bad things. I always tried to do that, so I didn't go.

LB: It was all right to go with this boy?

DS: It was all right to go with the boy, but he says people will talk about you if you go with the boy. I couldn't go alone because I was afraid to go alone.

LB: You couldn't go either way. You couldn't go with the boy and you couldn't go alone.

DS: Either way. Because I was afraid to go by myself.

LB: And with the boy people would talk.

DS: That's right.

LB: So you didn't go. Were other women going?

DS: I suppose so. I wasn't there. People were going that lived close to the school. Was an Educational Alliance and they made so the people that lived in town - we were living outside of town, a little outside in the Gentile neighborhood, so I have to go town by bus. So it was far away and I didn't go.

LB: You say you lived in a Gentile neighborhood in Atlanta. Were your friends any Gentiles?

DS: No.

LB: Only Jews?

DS: I wasn't afraid of anybody. I didn't have any Gentile friends. When they came in the store, "How are you and...".

LB: But that's the way it was in Russia.

DS: It don't make any difference. But I wasn't afraid of them.

LB: But you never had a Gentile in your home.

DS: I got the maid.

LB: I mean as a friend.

DS: As a friend. Yes, they could come in. I could give them a drink or something, whatever it is. They didn't come to visit me. We lived by the store and if they want something in the house they could come in.

BA: She's asking, did you have friends among the Gentiles?

DS: All the Gentiles were friendly with me because I talked to them in the store and they come to buy.

LB: They were friendly but were they your friends?

DS: Well, no, I hadn't got any friends, Gentiles. I didn't have any time to have friends. I didn't have any time to go visit neighbors. Never was in a neighbor's house.

LB: Not even a Jewish neighbor?

DS: We didn't have any Jewish neighbors, but if I had, I wouldn't go because I didn't have time.

LB: What were you doing?

DS: The store.

LB: You worked in the store with your husband?

DS: Sure, that's right. I hadn't got time for friends. The only friends we had - the family. I'll tell you, we had a big family here with the children. So either we go there or they come to me. The same is the holidays.

LB: Was there a big Jewish community in Atlanta?

DS: Well, at that time wasn't a very big Jewish community in Atlanta but it was people and we're going to shul together, you know. It was very little. It was, I don't know, about 8,000, something like that. And it was scattered all over town.

LB: How many synagogues were there? Do you remember?

DS: It was three, with our synagogue.

LB: What kind? Did they follow the same line?

DS: It was four, really. One was Reform, and one was Orthodox and one was between it.

LB: That's three, what was the fourth?

DS: The fourth was - we made it, our crowd. We had a crowd from Russia, so we made our own synagogue.

LB: What were the other three? Were they Germans?

DS: No, it was not Germans. It wasn't Russian but it was a different kind of a crowd. I couldn't explain you why, but it was a different crowd.

BA: Your synagogue was people from our own town.

LB: It was a [landsleit](#) synagogue? Right? All your *landsmen* belonged to your synagogue. And the others, were they also for *landsmen*?

DS: No, it was all kinds...

BA: [Litvaks](#).

LB: Where did the Litvaks go to shul?

DS: Orthodox. The [Reform shul](#) was the Germans.

LB: Who went to the in-between shul?

DS: The between shul was the same old thing - they didn't like this shul, they made themselves a shul.

BA: The large shul was Litvaks. Mama's was a small shul and there were maybe two other small shuls from different communities; one a temple of people of German extraction who had been several generations in Atlanta.

LB: That was the Reform?

BA: Yes. In addition, there was the Spanish (Sephardi) [synagogue](#). There was a large Spanish community that might have been a little later. Mama is describing the situation in the very early years when she was there. The community grew a great deal. I'm not sure, but I think that the Spanish community came around the time of the First World War. They came via Turkey and the Island of Rhodes, but these were [Sephardim](#).

LB: And they set up their own shul? So that's at least five.

DS: Now is seven shuls, then was three shuls.

LB: So your shul was just strictly for your people.

DS: Yes, Russian people

LB: Bebe, if you would describe what happened to your father when he came over here. From being a religious man in Russia, what happened to him? From what year would you date it?

BA: Well, I think as soon as he came he abandoned the ritual ways and, because he was working as a peddler and went into the country and so on, and he evidently didn't have a strong feeling about it being important. He had done it more or less routinely and questioned it. And my father was a very introspective person who philosophized a lot. And he was very socialistic in his feelings and he became quite a skeptic about the value of religious ritual so that he abandoned all interest in living religiously.

LB But he still considered himself a Jew?

BA: Very strongly. Always.

LB: How did he manifest his being Jewish?

BA: He kept a strong association with the Jewish community. He belonged to the synagogue. He belongs to the [Workmen's Circle](#), the Yiddish branch of the Workmen's Circle. They always had a strong orientation toward Yiddish culture.

LB: How did he feel about the Russian Revolution in 1917?

BA: He was hopeful about it, very hopeful about it. He later became very disillusioned about it.

LB: When was that?

BA: When did he become disillusioned? Well, in the first place, I can remember at the time when I was born, in 1920, during the twenties, when the Revolution was just in its infancy, the Jews suffered a great deal as middle men who had no place in the revolution. And our family would get letters from their relatives in Russia about famine in the Ukraine. They evidently had a poor crop and there wasn't enough to go around and the Jews didn't get their share of grain and our relatives were actually starving at that time. And they wrote stories about the things that were happening and this was a bitter thing to hear, that this Revolution that they had hoped was going to bring justice to the poor man was again leaving the Jews out.

LB: He felt that it was just the Jews that were starving?

BA: Well, I'm not sure at that point. Maybe it was later that he realized that the whole thing was not working out as he had thought it would. He was never a Communist and he was a Socialist.



LB: [Lenin](#) died in 1924. Up until 1924 Lenin was still in power. In 1920 the Civil War was still on. Everybody was starving in 1920 and the Civil War was raging in the Ukraine.

BA: My grandfather, my mother's father, whom she has been telling about, lived to be in his nineties and he was killed in a pogrom. He was run down by a Cossack.

DS: And my sister's boy was killed too, during this same period.

BA: In 1920; I was named for him. It was just before my birth.

LB: That's when a great many pogroms took place, during this time of the Civil War. You feel that this was the time when your father turned against the revolution? During the twenties?

BA: I really can't say an exact date. He never turned against it. He never identified with it that strongly.

LB: But you said he was hopeful. When did he lose hope, or lose this feeling of hopefulness?

BA: I'm not sure because I was very young at the time. And the conversations with him that I can remember best would be during the thirties. I think he felt that the czars had been replaced by another regime equally oppressive and that the people had been betrayed.

LB: Was this before the [purges](#) or after? Because the purges were in 1939 (sic).

BA: Before the purges.

LB: Before the purges he felt this. Do you remember the Jewish community in Atlanta?

BA: Oh yes.

LB: Is there anything that you could add to what your mother had to say in respect to the Jewish community in Atlanta? For example, Bebe was first generation born in the United States, right? Your mother and your father were Russian born. They came over here, they started a business. Where did you live in Atlanta? In an apartment or in a house?

DS: We always got a house with the store - connected to the store.

LB: And you grew up in this house and you went to a public school and you had friends. Did you have Gentile friends?

BA: Yes.

LB: Did you go to their homes?

BA: Sometimes.

LB: As a rule?

BA: Well, I did visit Gentile friends.

LB: Did they come to your house?

BA: Occasionally. I don't know that we were typical because there was a community in Atlanta which was heavily Jewish and we did not live in that community because we lived near the store which was not in the Jewish neighborhood. So I was at a disadvantage, I felt at that time, because I was separated from the Jewish community and...

DS: They only went from the school to the Jewish Center.

LB: So that was her main contact with Jewish children you mean?

DS: But the other children used to go to Arbeiter Ring Cheder, Arbeiter Ring School. We had a Jewish school, an Arbeiter Ring. So the older children went and she didn't go there.

BA: I went one year.

DS: So the only thing where she was going with Jewish children was in the Sunday school.

BA: And through the Zionist organization. We were members of [Young Judea](#) and we had clubs and those were my chief social outlets. I went to a public school where there were very few Jews.

DS: I don't think there were any Jews. It was a Gentile neighborhood and I don't think there were any Jewish...

BA: A few.

LB: You left Russia to get away from the restrictions of a small town Jewish community.

DS: Yes, and I could not raise the children the way I want.

LB: You wound up in Atlanta, Georgia in exactly the same kind of a community. You couldn't do what you wanted.

DS: Well, yes, I could. I could send my children to school.

LB: So this was the main difference.

DS: The main thing was I could educate my children. In Russia I wouldn't be able to do it, see. So I thought in Russia they'll be just as poor as anybody else and wouldn't be any sense to it.

LB: How did you get this feeling about education?

DS: I was looking for education ever since I was a little bitty thing. How? You just feel for education. I just feel as if the world needs educated people. You don't need the, you know... I looked at the poor people there, the *sheister*, the *schneider* (shoemaker, tailor) and I was very (upset). I didn't like it. I didn't like it.

LB: Was it in the air? Did the other girls talk about it?

DS: No, not the other girls talked about it. Nobody talked about it. Nobody cared. But I do. I do. I feel like I have to go away. I talk to my husband. We have to do something. The children are going to grow up in the wilderness.

LB: Did your husband agree with you?

DS: Sure. Otherwise he wouldn't go.

LB: I was going to ask you if he made the money and saved and sent for you.

DS: No, he didn't send me no money to come here. I worked a little and I made some money and got household goods, I sold it.

LB: How come he didn't send you the money to come over? He didn't have it either?

DS: Well, he didn't make enough that time.

LB: So you decided you were going to get on your horse and make it yourself.

DS: That's right. I decided I'll do what I can and when I came I would help him and we'll do what we can.

LB: If you look at the picture of yourself and your two children here, you look very well dressed.

DS: Yes, I was well dressed because when I got married my father made me lots of dresses; made me all kinds of dresses. Good dresses too. Made a big wedding; made lots of dresses.

LB: Was your father still living then? Oh, yes. He was killed in the revolution.

DS: He was well off and he gave “*noden*”.

LB: A dowry? *Noden*? Oh.

DS: And he made me a very nice wedding and good dresses; not just dresses like I wear now. Good silk.

LB: That’s a beautiful dress you’re wearing and your two children are beautifully dressed. That’s not the picture of a poor woman.

DS: No. As I say, I got good dresses.

LB: Did you ever read the story of [I.B.Singer](#) about the [girl who wanted to be a student](#)?

DS: I suppose so. I learned a long time ago. I did want to learn by myself but I couldn’t. I haven’t got the chance. Whatever I knew, I knew myself.

LB: Did you do a lot of reading? Were you able to do any reading once you came here?

DS: Oh yes. Not in English, you know, in Jewish. I couldn’t talk a word of English when I came here. When I was here I tried to read English. I tried to learn English but of course I couldn’t learn as much as if I went to school. But I read English. I read papers. I read books.

LB: You read books in English?

DS: In English, sure.

LB: What kind of books?

DS: I got now books, you know, Jewish life in ... *Ich hab shoin fargessen vie zoi es hest*. (I have forgotten the name.) I don’t remember the name but I did read it. I read the paper. When I first came I didn’t know a word of English.

LB: You didn’t have time for anything.

DS: In fact, after we came from New York in the train, so it was funny - every time the conductor passed by I gave him the ticket to show. He said, “Oh, too much.” So what happened? I have to stop in Washington to change the train so he forgot all about it and it was in the middle of the night and he took us. So in the middle of the night he looked at the ticket. You see, he

came over. So he stopped the train what's going to Washington. In the middle of the night he put me in the other train it should take me to Washington. I have to stay all night there. Without, I couldn't have a train. I couldn't say anything. And then I had to send a telegram. My husband was expecting me before because I have to change trains in Washington so he expected me before. He couldn't understand why I didn't come. So I have to give a telegram and I couldn't say. So there was a girl there by the telephones, she was a German so she could understand me, what I say, and she sent the telegram. I told her in Jewish and she...

LB: To your husband. Did you know any of the German Jews that lived in Atlanta?

DS: Well, no. German Jews that lived in Atlanta, they were very bigoted. They don't care for small Russian Jews. They don't bother. Like here. When I came here the whole Atlanta didn't bother with Russian Jews, the rabbi of the Reform Temple.

LB: He didn't care for Russian Jews?

DS: No!

LB: He didn't want them in their synagogue?

DS: Not in the synagogue, but he wouldn't talk to them even. He wouldn't. Now there's a rabbi, he mixes, he comes to meetings sometimes, we have discussions or something, but before you couldn't do it.

LB: What about the Litvaks?

DS: The Litvaks were all right with the Russian Jews.

LB: They mixed.

DS: Yes, they mixed. But otherwise.

LB: What about the Sephardic Jews?

DS: The Sephardic Jews is the same thing. All the Jews were mixing but the Germans. German Jews didn't want to mix.

LB: How did the German Jews make a living here? They started as peddlers too.

DS: What did they do? They were in business. I don't know what they do. Some of them had big stores.

LB: Did they have their own clubs?

DS: Sure, everything was their own. Now is different, now is different. In Atlanta is different; a little bit more liberal, but otherwise it was...

LB: Did they consider themselves Jews?

DS: Yes, they consider themselves Jews but they think they're better than the other Jews. That's all.

LB: Were there any organizations to help the poor in Atlanta, amongst the Jews?

DS: Well, sure, there were organizations among the Jews. This Jew is different and (words missing). Maybe they give some donations too, but not in this crowd.

BA: The Jewish Educational Alliance was established by the German Jews, originally to help the Russian Jewish immigrants.

DS: Let me tell you something - when the Russian Jews have to go through, when they used to go to America they used to go through Germany. So they didn't want to let them in the house. They kept them separate. They help him with money or something but they wouldn't let them go to the house.

LB: So here they established the Educational Alliance and did you learn English in any classes or did you just learn it from the store?

DS: I learned it from the street, that's the reason I couldn't talk so good.

LB: How did your husband learn English? Just from peddling?

DS: Yes.

LB: If he was a socialist he must have done a lot of reading - your father - right? What kind of books did he read?

BA: I really don't know in the early days. Later he read the same books that we did. Regular books, journalistic books, novels.

LB: Do you remember any of the authors that he read?

BA: I really don't remember.

LB: Was he versed in Torah?

BA: Yes. He didn't continue his Hebrew studies in America. But he had - you remember his father was ...

LB: A teacher of the rich.

BA: Right, and he studied with him. And he studied Talmud and I think he even read a little secular philosophy in Russia because he was familiar with [Spinoza](#). And he used to read Spinoza and similar books here. He was interested in philosophy and he read Kant and Hegel and...

LB: Rabbi Zimmelman (Congregation Agudat Achim in Schenectady) said it was unthinkable for a Jew to read philosophy. As soon as he read philosophy he would start asking questions. And that would be undermining.

BA: His father didn't approve of his reading those books.

LB: Was his father a Hasid also?

BA: Yes.

LB: Were there many Hasidim in the Ukraine?

DS: Oh, yes.

BA: No freethinkers. Were there [Mitnagdim](#)?

DS: Mitnagdim - my father-in-law was a Mitnagid.

BA: Oh, my grandfather was a Mitnagid. I wasn't sure.

DS: He didn't believe in the *rebbe*.

LB: But your father was a Hasid.

DS: Yes, my father was.

LB: I was going to ask you about your mother-in-law; did she stay in Russia or did she come over with you?

DS: Oh, no. She stayed in Russia.

BA: They didn't approve. They were heartbroken when Mama and Papa left because they felt they were losing them. And also because they felt that they would leave the Jewish life. And they would not have gone themselves. They felt that no religious, pious person could live in America as a Jew.

LB: Was your husband's family more religious than yours?

DS: No, it wasn't more religious. Everyone was going to shul. Everyone was looking in the (missing words) and reading...

LB: Were they more strict than your family?

DS: No. Same thing.

LB: Did your father feel that if you went to America you would be lost as a Jew?

DS: He didn't feel I would be lost but I would be lost for him because he wouldn't see me any more.

LB: I understand, but that's a different feeling of personal loss as a daughter. Did he feel he was losing you as a Jew?

DS: No, he didn't say that. He never did express himself so I don't know.

LB: Those are two different feelings and one very different from the other.

DS: I understand - I know that, but he never expressed himself on that. When I went away I could do what I want. As a matter of fact, when I didn't want to cut my hair, he said, "Now she's grown and she could do what she wants."

LB: Did you love your father?

DS: I sure loved him, sure, and he loved me too. He was very heartbroken when I went away.

BA: I hate to interrupt, but I don't think she has made clear the feeling that I have about her relationship with her father. There was a tremendous respect, a tremendous awe that she had for her father. He represented almost everything that she admired in spite of her free thoughts and her worldly ambitions; really greatly admired and revered her father who was a much older man.



And I think she had an image in her mind, the status that he held with his family - his whole family. He was the center of the family and they all shared the feeling. And she felt that this was something that came with age and that she perhaps could look forward to this kind of status. And I always felt that this was the tragic irony that she grew up in a period in which age was revered and grew old in a period when youth is revered.

LB: That's true. There was also a love between a father and a daughter.

BA: Even though there was a certain distance.

LB: Of course. It sounds as if between her husband's family and her husband there was a different feeling. There wasn't love so much.

BA: You're hearing it from Mama's side.

LB: I know it.

BA: I can recall my father's feeling about his father. He respected him and admired him very much. He admired his character and he admired his father's intellect. And he shared the intellectual interchange with his father that meant a lot to him. It was a different kind of feeling than Mama had for her father. He was a boy and they studied together and they talked together.

LB: Your mother-in-law, what kind of a woman was she?

DS: She's just a woman. She didn't know a word of Hebrew, not in writing, not anything. But she was *frum* (pious). What her mother taught her, she kept. She kept what her mother told her.

BA: What her mother taught her, she adhered to.

DS: And she was very strict about that. She didn't want her children to do different. She want her children to do what she does. She didn't know why.

BA: There was not a warm feeling between Mama and her mother-in-law. (General laughter). Mama never felt that her mother-in-law was a warm person. And she was a sickly person, so that she was very limited in what she could do. Mama felt sorry for her but she did not love her.

DS: It's a fact my father-in-law was a nice man, you know, a learned man but he never did object to me and my hair. He never did object. He didn't say anything. He didn't say yes or no. And the mother-in-law didn't want to look at me.

LB: Was he her only son?

DS: She got another son; an older son.

LB: But he was her baby.

DS: He was the baby. And the older son was a *shochet* (ritual slaughterer) and a *ruv*. A *rebbe* and a *shochet*, so he's *frum*. She wanted me to be the same.

LB: Did your husband maintain connections with his family once he came here?

DS: Sure, he writes letters, sure. He liked to do what his mother says. He likes to please her. He liked to do what his mother says. He didn't want to be, you know, fresh or something. But otherwise he knew exactly what it is.

LB: It must have made life hard.

DS: Sure it was hard but when he came to America he do what he want and that's all.

LB: When he came here, did he still want to do what his mother said?

DS: No, no. When he came here he do what he wants. He do what he think he wanted to do.

BA: But he was never fanatical either in his observance or in his lack of observance. And my mother remained religious all the time.

DS: I would make it the children should know they're Jews, they're not Gentiles. I made Saturday, [bentsch licht](#). I make a Friday night dinner. Don't make any difference. What I'm doing in the store - I work Shabbos and everything, but I want in the house - I didn't let them make the lessons Saturday.

BA: My father was no longer bound to synagogue or holiday observance but he never minded if Mama did. Attendance in synagogue didn't mean anything to him and if he had been left to his own devices he would just as soon not have gone to synagogue. But he went to please Mama. That's why he was not fanatical. He was willing to do what she felt.

DS: He was never cross about it. And I wanted to make them know they're Jews. [Pesach](#) I made a seder and invite the married children and make a seder.

LB: Did you ever let Bebe date a non-Jewish boy?

DS: No. If she wanted to I would run her out from the house.

BA: That's not quite true.

DS: Listen, I want to tell you something - we had a friend, very free. You know, he didn't believe in anything. So when the daughter brought a Gentile boy in the house, she should not do such a thing. He threw her out.

LB: He threw her out? Permanently?

DS: He would, he would if she bring another. And she married a Jewish man.

LB: Your husband became a kind of a free thinker here, he was not really religious anymore once he came here, right?

DS: When he came here he was religious, but he threw away everything.

LB: Did he become a [Zionist](#) at any time?

DS: He was a Zionist of course.

LB: What do you mean, "Of course"? Not everybody was a Zionist.

DS: I understand, but he was in a crowd that they were all Zionists.

LB: Did any of them go to Israel to live?

DS: Yes, one boy went to Israel.

LB: From America?

DS: No, from Russia. He went to Israel.

LB: Did your husband read Zionist literature here?

DS: Here, I suppose so.

LB: You don't really know?

BA: Yes, we know. We had the books in the house. We read [Weizmann](#) and we read [Pinsker](#) and [Moses Hess](#) and [Herzl](#) and my father belonged to the Zionist organization. I was going to say that we must have been the only Jews in Atlanta in the early years who were members of the

Arbeiter Ring which was a non-Zionist Socialist group, who were also members of a synagogue. We went to Sunday School at the synagogue. We used to have to hide the fact from our Arbeiter Ring friends because they disapproved.

LB: This was a Socialist group? It was a Yiddishist, Socialist group.

BA: Right, non-Zionist and non-religious.

LB: Was it a [Bundist](#) group?

BA: Well, Bundist means the Yiddish; there were two organizations. There was an Arbeiter Ring and an [Arbeiter Farband](#). And the Arbeiter Farband was the Bundist group. So we were both associated with the Socialist movement, the religious movement and the Zionist movement. And my father never felt that there was any conflict, adhering to all three.

LB: Okay. I'm going to say thank you very, very much.

Dora (Dvora) Freeman Shamos  
Atlanta, Georgia  
Born 15 Dec 1884  
Died Jan. 11, 1985