



# Shtetl to Sharon

**How the Brustmans  
came from Russia to  
New York City and  
Sharon Springs**

**by**  
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**March 2001**

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The principal people in the three generations  
covered by this history:

**Abraham Brustman**  
**Rivka Bodenstein**  
(Leib s parents)

**Froy m Krakauer**  
**Tovah Ginsberg**  
(Perl D vorah s parents)

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**Leib Brustman**  
(Takes the name Louis)

**Perl D vorah Krakauer**  
(Takes the name Dora)

**Moishe Mechel Krakauer**  
(Dora s brother,  
takes the name Morris)

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**Max Isadore Fanny Elsie Ida Abraham**  
(Dora and Louis s six children, who use the names  
Mark Irving Frances Elsie Ida Al )

**Hinda Krakauer**  
(Dora s niece)  
**Rueben Katz**  
(Dora s nephew)

## Prolog

Most Americans of Jewish descent trace their lineage through a shtetl, a poor Eastern European village. These people include Dora and Louis Brustman's descendants. Ironically, the place this couple's grand- and great-grandchildren most associate with them is Sharon Springs, New York, a poor American village. Sharon is the extended Brustman family's gathering place, and the Brustman House there is a family shrine.

Dora and Louis hadn't contemplated a shrine and, indeed, never heard of Sharon until relatively late in life. The trek from Shtetl to Sharon is the story of their lives. Like all lives, the journey was the accumulated flow of events, choices and actions, but not always as anticipated.

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### 1 The Russian Pale

Froy'm Krakauer, a tall gruff man with a long graying beard, is over sixty years old in 1910, and will live into his eighties. He is a religious man, earns his living as a storekeeper a few blocks from home, and is known throughout town as "Froy'm one-and-a-half" because of his great height. His business is grinding and selling grain. A few miscellaneous items such as soap and herring add to his income.

His son, Moishe Mechel Krakauer, 31, away in Warsaw on a buying trip for the family store is taken with the sophistication of that city's secular Jews. He wants to be up-to-date too. In emulation he shaves his beard and buys modern clothes. When Moishe returns home Froy'm is horrified, curses and cuffs his son. It is a defining moment in their lives. Moments like this are repeated in countless families throughout the entire Imperial Russian Pale of Settlement.

The Pale of Settlement is a region in the western-most portion of the Russian Empire. It includes traditional Polish lands annexed by the

Russians in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and is home to millions of Jews. Russia has official policies limiting the rights of its Jews and the types of jobs they may hold. One policy confines nearly all Jews to the region; Jews may not live in Russia beyond the Pale.

The people in this area, Jew and gentile, are impoverished. But Jews are also subject to unofficial and official persecution. Many East Europeans harbor anti-Semitic views, and Russian Government policy is openly discriminatory, intended to discourage the practice of Judaism. Further, Jews are subject to terror in the form of pogroms, frequent raids by Cossacks on Jewish communities. The government turns a blind eye at these sprees of looting, raping and killing. Jewish life in the Pale is difficult and often nasty. The Pale and its discriminatory policies will exist until the Russian Revolution deposes the Tsar in 1917.

Eastern Europe is in a period of political and social ferment. The ferment is especially difficult for Jews because of the Pale's oppression and wretched poverty, particularly for young Jewish adults who want change. Some are attracted to political movements such as Socialism and Zi-



**Froy'm One and a Half**

onism. Many just want to be less religious so they can participate in a modernizing world. Still others want to emigrate to escape. This ferment contributes to family and generational conflict, resulting in confrontations like that between Froy'm with Moishe.

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## 2 Hrubiechev

Hrubiechev is a typical large village within the Pale. The village (pronounced Ruh-beh-shev), lies on the west bank of the muddy Bug River (pronounced Boo'g). Only one or two streets have cobblestones and the rest become wagon-miring mud whenever it rains. A large town square serves as a meeting place, market and civic center.

About half Hrubiechev's 10,000 inhabitants are Jewish. Jews have lived in the village since 1400. Yiddish, Polish, Ukrainian and Russian are the principal village languages. Hassidism, founded during the 1700's, influences Jewish religious life in the Pale, and many of Hrubiechev's Jews belong to its various sects. The others are orthodox. Froy'm Krakauer is one of Hrubiechev's Orthodox Jews.

In 1910 Froy'm (Ephraim in English) lives with his family in a three-room apartment, one of thirty or forty apartments in a sprawling three-story brick building. It has many wings arranged about a central courtyard and is one of the tallest buildings in Hrubiechev. In the Krakauer apartment the floors are dirt and there is only a fireplace, no water or toilet facilities. They live better than most people in the village, even enjoying the luxury of chicken once a week.

Froy'm married Tovah Ginsberg in 1878, probably a match arranged by their parents. Like nearly everyone in Hrubiechev, he and Tovah must toil constantly to eke out their living. They have six children, not a particularly large family for this time and place.

Like most of the people in the village, Froy'm is coarse and peasant-like. He is also intelli-

gent and controlling. Froy'm wears a full beard, as do all devout Jews of the Pale. Though he and Tovah are deeply religious, Froy'm reads and cherishes secular books and so regards himself a bit more worldly than his coreligionists. This little streak of independence manifests itself in his children, most of who are strong-minded. Managing six children is difficult enough, but strong-minded ones make the task particularly exasperating. He is sharp with his children.

The first child, Moishe Mechel (Moses Michael in English), is a tough and likable schemer. He works for Froy'm in the family store and has two daughters from a prior marriage, Helen and Lena. Helen's nickname is Hinda. Moishe brought scandal to the family with an extramarital affair that left a young villager pregnant. The rabbis advised him to divorce his wife to marry the pregnant teenager "So the baby would have a name." Lena now lives with Moishe's first wife, and Hinda lives with Froy'm and Tovah, in effect the couple's seventh child.

The second son also brought scandal. He abandoned Orthodox ways, adopted modern dress and, according to his father "Acted like the *goyim*." He went to work for a lawyer, maybe in Warsaw, and severed all family connections.

The third child, Perl D'vorah (Pearl Deborah), is tall, heavyset, strong willed, short-tempered but dutiful. Born in 1884, she married a tall, fair-haired boy named Y'shayeh (Joshua) in 1898. Several years into this marriage she became increasingly bored and unhappy. Eventually they divorced. Now in her twenties, Perl D'vorah regards herself too worldly and modern for Hrubiechev and its religious ways.

The other three children are Chaiya, Ella and Solomon. Solly, the youngest is called "the baby" and everyone adores him. Ella is suspected to be retarded, possibly because Froy'm and Tovah are first cousins. Marriage between cousins is quite common in the Pale and for that matter for both Jews and Gentiles throughout Europe.



**Tovah**

### 3 Tomashev

Thirty miles southwest of Hrubiehev is the smaller village of Tomashev. Tomashev has a few thousand inhabitants and sits at the edge of the Russian Empire, about ten miles from the Austrian frontier. The Austrian-Hungarian Empire is at its peak and extends well into this region of Eastern Europe.

The region's ethnic makeup is Polish, Jewish, Russian and Ukrainian, and the traditional regional center is Lemberg, a city of seven hundred thousand people on the Austrian side of the border. Like other large cities, Lemberg is industrializing and attracting people from the countryside. The city was once Polish and named Lvov. But over a hundred years earlier Austria annexed Poland's Province of Galicia, including Lvov, its capital city. The Austrians renamed the city Lemberg.

Two or three related Brustman families live in Tomashev. The one we are interested in is headed by Abraham Brustman, born in 1849 and married to Rivka Bodenstein in 1876. They have about ten children, including Ariyah Leib, probably the fourth, born in 1883. He calls himself Leib, but his friends use the affectionate Leibish. He is self-consciously tall, having to stoop when passing through some of the village's smaller doorways. Around 1900 Leib is married to a cousin whose maiden name is also Brustman. They have two daughters, Ethel and Frieda.

About 1904 Leib is a man on the run. He fears the Tsar's police will eventually catch him for his recent crime, desertion from the army. He pleads with his wife that they and their small daughters must flee to America, leaving Russia forever. She, however, will not consider leaving because Tomashev is everything to her. The village and her relatives comprise a world she will not and cannot leave. There is arguing to no avail and soon divorce remains the only option. So Leib and his wife seek a rabbi to dissolve their marriage.

Unmarried again, Leib Brustman is free to escape Russia, but because of the divorce settlement he cannot afford the fare to America. Instead, he goes to Lemberg, which is fairly close but, importantly, not in Russia. Lemberg has a large Jewish population where Leib can be anonymous, retain a Jewish way

of life, and be relatively safe while he seeks the means to reach America.

Life in Lemberg will be much different from the previous two years. Those years were spent in the Russian army as a draftee in a compulsory five-year term. They were miserable years; Jewish conscripts suffered the notoriously cruel and sadistic abuse of their anti-Semitic officers. Leib barely managed to endure this hateful life but one day, after a particularly vicious beating, this good-natured and mild, maybe even meek, man decided he could take no more. The beating itself provided the opportunity — it was so severe he was left in the snow for dead. A Polish peasant found Leib barely alive and saved him in hope of being paid a reward by his family. Being left for dead created an opportunity to desert the army and he took it.

Leib's travel from Tomashev to Lemberg is dangerous. He cannot take roads since they enter Austria at points where his papers would be checked. Leib has to pay one of the local farmers who smuggle people out of Russia as a sideline. The farmer will guide him for miles through the woods and fields that straddle the border. There are rumors that deep in the woods guides often kill their customers for the money that must be in their satchels; no one would know there was a murder. This risk adds to the journey's danger.

During the next five years or so Leib works as a waiter at the "Joint Jewish Worker's Committee Cooperative" restaurant. This very large kosher establishment is a mainstay of Lemberg's Jewish workers. It is probably here on Grudeka Street, during a typical crowded and chaotic lunchtime that Leib first speaks to a young woman. This modestly handsome, clean-shaven waiter takes the order of the seamstress who works nearby in a tailor shop. Her name is Perl D'vorah Krakauer.

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### 4 Lemberg

What is our heroine doing in Lemberg? It is 1908 or 1909; she is divorced from Y'shayeh and has come here to escape Hrubiehev.

Perl D'vorah and Leib soon are seeing each other regularly. He is 25 years old, she 24. Both hope to go to America one day. By 1910 they have heard each other's stories many times over. Leib tells of

his life in Tomashev, his marriage, the army, his desertion and his perilous escape across the Austrian frontier. Perl D'vorah, in turn, tells of Hrubiechev, her family, and her unhappy marriage to Y'shayeh.

Perl D'vorah and Y'shayeh were both fourteen when they married. At the wedding Perl D'vorah, in the orthodox manner, had her hair cut off and replaced by a wig, called a *sheitel*, which she will wear ever after. The young newlyweds expected a union typical for an arranged marriage. Perl D'vorah would try to be a good wife and learn to love Y'shayeh. Y'shayeh, a timid, quiet, slightly effeminate boy would try to be a good husband and provider. His meager income is supplemented by occasionally smuggling tobacco. Smuggling, practiced by nearly everyone, is profitable by avoiding the Tsar's heavy taxes.

Years passed without children. Perl D'vorah was frequently ill and upset. Her increasing unhappiness becomes apparent to her family. Compounding the situation, disappointed relatives suspected she was barren and Tovah tried to discuss it with her. Perl D'vorah, however, refused to talk about the problem with her mother.

At eighteen, Y'shayeh was conscripted into the Russian army. Stationed near Hrubiechev, he regularly saw his wife. Still, there were no children. After five years Y'shayeh completed his army service and returns home. In time Perl D'vorah found herself more desperate than ever. At last she relented and sought her mother's help. No, Tovah was told, Perl D'vorah is not barren; rather Y'shayeh is *tim-tum*, a fairy. Despite Y'shayeh's sincere devotion, Perl D'vorah finds life with him unbearable: ten years of marriage and still a virgin!

Tovah helped her daughter obtain a rabbi's bill of divorcement, a *get*, based on Y'shayeh's failure to consummate the marriage. The rabbi, satisfied as to the facts, granted the *get* and Perl D'vorah chose to leave Hrubiechev, an unhappy place for her. She went to Lemberg.

One day in 1910 Perl D'vorah has something new to tell Leib. Her brother Moishe Mechel will be going to America. It seems their father cursed and hit him for adopting modern ways while on a buying trip to Warsaw. This was the final straw for Moishe. "Enough! I'm leaving," he said. Perl D'vorah sees this as her chance. She will go to America with Moishe Mechel.



Europe in 1910

Her plan is to travel from Lemberg to Hrubiechev and join her brother and his second family there. She will say goodbye to her parents and then travel to Hamburg where her ship will sail. Somehow, she tells Leib, they will meet and get married in America.

Froy'm and Tovah understand this is the last time will see their two children. They know crossing an ocean is just too far, too arduous, and too expensive to be done more than once in a lifetime. Worse, they are sure America will wrench their children's Jewish souls loose. Indeed, the children aren't nearly observant enough as it is. This somber day, amid all the goodbyes, Tovah implores Perl D'vorah to at least promise to never light a fire on the Sabbath: that is, to always observe the Sabbath and keep it holy. Perl D'vorah makes that promise.

Hamburg teems with emigrants delivered by the trainload from Eastern and Central Europe. Second class passage from East Europe to New York is fifty dollars, equal to months of wages and years of savings. Our intrepid band proudly travels second class, thus avoiding the indignities of steerage. Nevertheless there are difficulties: the intended ship burned in port and the departure is delayed until the shipping company finds a replacement. While waiting in Hamburg, Perl D'vorah's purse is snatched. But at last the ocean crossing begins. The ship will stop in England and Ireland to board more passengers and then take the long journey to New York across the immense Atlantic Ocean.

The first evenings of the two-week voyage are no doubt a curious mix of fear and hope, apprehension and anticipation. Whatever her thoughts, this much is known: Perl D'vorah is on deck, standing by the railing as land recedes from view. As the last sight of Europe, the coast of Ireland, disappears, she reaches up and removes her *sheitle*, a symbol of the life left behind. Then, looking out to sea, she flings it toward the horizon.

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## 5 New York

A letter to Europe and a reply take about a month to close the circuit. Perl D'vorah and Leib correspond the whole year after her arrival in New York. She finds work in a wig shop making *sheitles*, ironically, having vowed never to wear one. She drops her given name in favor of the more fashionable Dora. Leib likewise will become Louis upon reaching America. Anticipation of being together builds. Dora saves and sends fifty dollars for his boat fare. They agree to be married as soon as he comes to the United States. For both it will be a new marriage in a new world, a new...beginning.

Leib is one of a couple of thousand immigrants entering America that particular 1911 summer day. Arriving in New York, the world's fastest growing city, is both exciting and worrisome. He thrills at his first sights of this new land. His ship enters the harbor and passes the Statue of Liberty, the tallest structure he's ever seen; then he spots the immense Brooklyn Bridge, the longest bridge in the world. As the ship docks in Manhattan, he marvels at the city skyline with some buildings nearly twenty stories high and one, the astounding Singer Building, at forty-stories even taller than the statue!

A ferry takes Leib from the dock to the Ellis Island Immigration Station to be processed for admission. Then Leib begins to worry because on Ellis Island, though not likely, he could be summarily rejected and sent back to Europe. There is also a measure of trepidation as he senses the tremendous adjustments that lay ahead.

The immigration inspectors accept Leib, and a year of separation from Dora ends. Leib, now Louis, looks for a job. He finds a job in a garment factory. Sweatshop jobs are common for urban "greenhorns,"

newcomers to America. The daily hours are long in a six-day workweek. Being unskilled, Louis is made a pants' press operator. He pushes a 15-pound iron around all day, hard work that leaves him exhausted when he returns home in the evenings.

Louis and Dora wed shortly after Louis begins work. They live at 237 Stanton Street, within the lower eastside of Manhattan, the principal area for Jewish immigrants. It is the most crowded place on earth, Calcutta included, thanks to tenements, tall buildings specially designed to pack the most people into the least amount of real estate. It is a vibrant place, with shops and small factories abounding. Most signs are in the languages of Central and Eastern Europe, with Yiddish predominating. It's as if a half million people from the Pale were crammed into a few square miles, and in effect it is.

The sidewalks are packed with people and tables of storefront merchandise. The cobblestone streets are crammed with peddlers' pushcarts and the constant



**Louis as a young man, circa 1915**

traffic of horses, wagons, cars and trucks. The neighborhood din is continuous, and soot and manure are everywhere. Overhead there is a jumble of iron fire escapes clinging to the buildings and laundry hanging to dry on lines strung between them. This is a far cry from Hrubiechev and Tomashev.

Numerous societies spring up in immigrant neighborhoods to help in the adjustment to the new world. Typically, people from the same area or village in Europe band together and rent a meeting hall. A society serves its members as a mutual assistance group, a social center, and a cultural refuge. Further, it is a focal point for collective efforts such as organizing cemetery plots and assistance for families still in the old country. The lower eastside has hundreds of these societies.

Louis and Dora join the Hrubiechev Society, then six years old and 300 people strong. Immigrants from that village formed two other societies but those were for more religious people. Louis and Dora see themselves as stylish and up-to-date. They decide not to join a temple though they keep a kosher home and are religious. Older Hrubiechevers, however, regard them as not very observant; they disdainfully view the couple as “young moderns.”

The next year, in July 1912, word goes to parents and family in Europe that Dora is decidedly not barren. It's a boy! Their son is named for an uncle, Mechel. They decide to call him Max; after all, this is the new world and he needs a fashionable name. Max, however, in later years will choose another name for himself, Mark.

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## 6 The Lower East Side

Parents and family in Europe are happy and relieved when Dora ends any lingering doubt she might be barren. Between 1912 and 1923 six children are born: Max, Isadore, Fanny, Elsie, Ida and Abraham, the last named for Louis' father, who died during these years. These names eventually transform into Mark, Irving, Frances, Elsie, Ida and Albert. Louis invents Ferish as a playful name for baby Fanny and it sticks for life.

Max was born in a hospital, because Dora is modern and that's the modern thing to do. But the hospital is expensive and for the remaining children Dora hires

an old lady known as Chaiya the Hrubiechever Midwife. The midwife is busy so she doesn't bother with birth certificates right away. She goes to city hall every few weeks and files them in a batch. Because she can't remember actual birth dates, the midwife just enters the filing date on each. So the Brustman children celebrate their birthdays on days when business was slow for Chaiya the Hrubiechever Midwife.

In Europe this same period is marked by a World War. This is a source of anxiety about the safety of family back in Hrubiechev. Hrubiechev is on the front lines between vast German and Russian armies and the area experiences much fighting. Villagers, including Dora's niece Hinda, climb to the roofs to watch nearby artillery battles. The village endures long periods of hunger and constant fear of destruction. The hunger is such that momentary relief in a piece of bread, given by a kindly German soldier, is an event Hinda will remember for life.

In the end, the war spares Hrubiechev but does bring change to the village: there is no longer a Tsar; postwar treaties rearrange borders and even form new nations. Hrubiechev, Tomashev and Lemberg are in territory transferred into a newly formed independent Poland. Lemberg reverts to its Polish name, Lvov.

With the war in Europe over, Hinda can leave Hrubiechev and wants to come to America. Her father, Morris (Americanized from Moishe Mechel), does not want her here. To him she is a reminder of a prior marriage and will be another mouth to feed. Her Aunt Dora intervenes and promises to look after Hinda, Hinda comes to New York to join her American relatives. Dora, about ten years older than Hinda, becomes her big sister and best friend, a relationship that will endure as long as they live.

The 1920s, a decade known as the Jazz Age, is a prosperous time. The American economy hums and there is money to be made in the stock market. It's fashionable to play the market, and even Louis and Dora eventually find a few dollars to dabble in it because that's what worldly people do. For most immigrants a thriving economy means work is plentiful. Unfortunately the available work is still mainly in sweatshops, which are busier than ever.

For the Brustman family, earning a living these years still means long hard hours of work. Louis now operates a machine that presses clothing. Be-



tween a 12-hour workday and evening toil with piecework brought home in a basket, there is little time, energy, or money for entertainment. Perhaps Dora and Louis play cards with friends or on rare occasion see some Yiddish vaudeville or theater. The Sabbath is especially precious in this life because it provides the only regular relaxation in a seemingly endless treadmill of drudgery and toil.

Louis, Dora and their six children live in a two-bedroom cold water flat. The kids sleep several in a bed and the toilet at the end of the hallway is shared with other families in the tenement. Louis is a good-natured man with a sense of humor and a devoted father, but it is Dora who has the stronger will. She is the family's manager, finances included. This is a common arrangement for Jewish families, which tend to be matriarchal. Louis turns his earnings over to her, keeping only a 25-cent weekly allowance. Half his allowance goes for cigarettes.

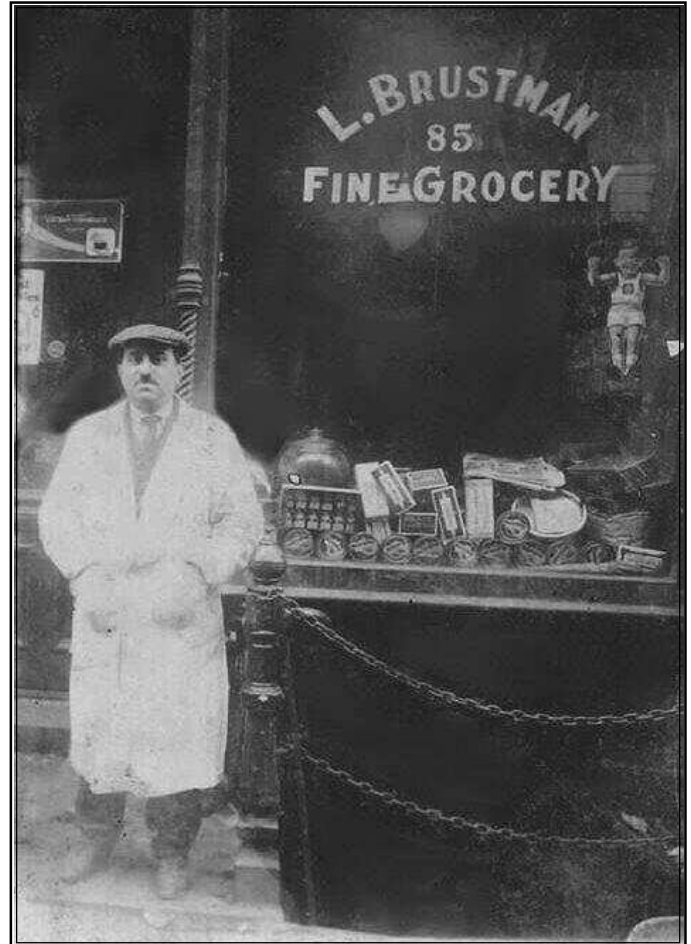
Dora and Louis open a small grocery store at 85 Willett Street on the ground floor of the building in which they now live. The idea is to supplement family income, but they also see the grocery as a chance to eventually break free from the sweatshops. The store only proves to be a different type of struggle. Competition is fierce and margins are razor thin. Dora works in it all day and Louis works there in the evening after returning from the sweatshop. The grocery provides some money but eventually fails. The final blow is a cheating wholesaler who defrauds the store.

Meanwhile the children grow. Their parents are too busy or too exhausted to talk and spend time with them. The kids fight with each other the way brothers and sisters do. They also take care of each other. Frances, age 8, has the job of caring for baby Al each day when she returns from school to make it easier for Dora who is tending both Al and the store. She takes Al for a stroll to the playground except when it rains; then she plays with him in the apartment.

By now Louis and Dora can speak English though it is limited and heavily accented. They prefer to speak Yiddish the tongue they are comfortable with. One can live in the lower east side and never use English. The kids speak to their parents in Yiddish, but to each other in English.

Around this time, Dora's brother Morris rises to the presidency of the New York Hrubiechev Society. In addition to its other functions, the society serves as a

channel for charity. Charity is important not only because these Jews regard it as religious duty, but also because charity sent to the old world is a form of ostentation. It helps validate the decision to emigrate. Each Passover the Society sends used clothing and money for purchasing *matzoh* to Hrubiechev. A Committee is appointed in the village to oversee the distribution of this largesse to the poor of Hrubiechev and vicinity — which is just about everybody.



**The Fine Grocer, circa late 1920's**

As Society president, Morris brings much prestige to his aged father back in Hrubiechev. First, because being a "president" of anything, it didn't matter what, was a big deal in the old country and, second, Morris appointed old Froy's Chairman of the local Matzoh Distribution Committee.

It is about this time Dora's original husband, Y'shayeh, comes to America. He poignantly still loves Dora and wants to be with her again. Of course, this is impossible. In New York he stays with the Brustman family one night. He inadvertently

leaves behind a mustard colored robe that becomes the little kids' plaything — they love to roll in it — for years to come. With Dora's fecundity well proven, the New York community of Hrubiechev landsmen laughs Y'shayeh out-of-town. He goes west somewhere, Chicago perhaps, and is never heard from again. For years after, whenever the subject comes up, Louis will joke: "No, Y'shayeh wasn't *tim-tum*, he just never discovered the place; when I found it, I found he didn't."

Among other events of the 1920's, Dora and Louis become US Citizens. On Louis's application he lists his daughters Ethel and Frieda as living with him in New York. Though they are still in Tomashev, he hopes to bring them to the United States one day. After the World War the US closed its doors to open immigration, so this fib is meant to help secure the girls' entry.

Also towards the end of the decade, Dora receives word that her parents, first Froy'm and then Tovah, have passed away. The news of each parent's death stuns and deeply grieves her.

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## 7 The Great Depression

If the 1920s were tough, the '30s promise to be tougher. Arriving with the new decade, the Great Depression is a national economic catastrophe that lasts through the 1930's to the first days of World War II. In this period factories are shuttered, and unemployment is the worst in history, at 30 percent! Money in the stock market is wiped out. Many people, including those in the lower eastside, become dependent on breadlines, soup kitchens and welfare. Nearly everyone is even poorer than before and money tighter than ever. This is a desperate period when every penny counts and steady work is a precious godsend.

The Depression shapes the outlook of a whole generation of Americans, Louis and Dora's six children included. In 1930 these kids are age seven to eighteen, growing into adulthood during tough times. Scrimping is a necessary habit and education is a luxury. The kids are prodded into leaving school to work as soon as possible. Mark and Izzy (Isadore's nickname) work full time in the Post Office though under aged (they falsified their birth dates) and have to turn their paychecks over to Dora. These jobs are

a real prize, as government won't lay off workers in these hard times. Elsie and Ida spend evenings doing piecework at home. Working with Dora they are up to all hours cutting lace into patterns for use in lingerie. Frances is a secretary for an insurance broker in the Flat Iron Building at \$12 per week.

As tough as life has been in America since their arrival, Louis and Dora never complain. This is not because they are oblivious to hardship or because they are upbeat people (Dora certainly is not), but simply because however bad things are, they know it would be far worse had they stayed in Europe.

Even in tough times life progresses. In New York and in Hrubiechev news is eagerly shared in lively correspondence across the Atlantic. On both sides of the ocean there is gossip of new babies, upcoming bar mitzvahs, marriages, jobs gained and jobs lost, and old people passing. Dora's sister, Chaiya, married to Shmuel (Samuel) Katz, tells the New Yorkers of her son Reuben's prospering antiques shop in Warsaw; Dora tells the Hrubiechevers of her kids' Post Office jobs; and so on. Photographs are regularly exchanged to proudly mark occasions. The links to the Krakauers are strong and it is still a close extended family despite an ocean's distance.

Eventually Louis becomes a cutter in a garment factory, which improves his pay. This allows the family to move into the Lavenberg Homes, a Jewish philanthropic housing project near the East River. They live just off Houston Street at 128 Goerck Street (later to be named Baruch Place.) Here the Brustmans have three bedrooms and a bathroom, which makes the kids feel they are living in the lap of luxury. Louis and Dora use one of the bedrooms, and the others become a girls' and boys' dorm. The three sisters share one bed. Mark and Izzy, because they are grown working men, don't have to share their bed with little Al, who sleeps in the same room but on a cot. Ah, it feels good to have so much space!

Louis is not in touch with family back in Tomashev except for his grown daughters. He has no relatives in America and only one friend from the old country. So the Brustmans socialize mostly with Hinda and her husband Jack, Morris and his family, and with other Hrubiechevers. Though a townsman only by marriage, Louis becomes the consummate Hrubiechever and is elected President of the Hrubiechev Society. He is proud of this.

Their kids start getting married in the 1930s. The first, in 1932, is a terrible calamity in Dora's eyes. At age 18 Izzy suddenly marries a high school classmate, Sophie Rinelli, an Italian Catholic. Izzy compromised Sophie's honor and the Rinellis pressed him to marry her. Over twenty years earlier, Mama warned a scoffing Perl D'vorah America would lead Jewish souls astray. Oh, for shame, this prophecy is being realized! Given Dora's temperament, there is shouting and wailing. What to do? Dora takes legal steps to have the marriage annulled, claiming the couple was below the age of consent. The Rinellis contest the action, and the court rules in favor of the



**Frances and Bill**

marriage. The couple soon separates anyway, and the marriage eventually is dissolved by divorce.

There are two marriages in 1935, first Mark to Martha Fawer (an uptown girl) and later Frances to William Schoenfeld, Martha's uncle. In 1937 the first of Dora's grandchildren is born: a son to Mark, named Frederick, for Froy'm Krakauer. In 1939 Elsie marries Theodore Heinbach.



**The first grandchild with his parents**

street, a young Polish anti-Semite calls out with some Jew-baiting. Dora doesn't accept this, picks up a stick and heads over to him. The surprised man takes off and runs down the street. She gives chase but he is young and she is old. As the gap between them widens she takes aim with the stick and hurls it at the bigot. She misses, but Reuben will never forget this introduction to his Aunt.

When Dora reaches Hrubiechew it is a fond return home. Her stay will be with her sister, Chaiya, for two weeks. Chaiya now has five boys and a girl. Ella has two daughters. Dora is especially happy to see her youngest brother Solly, "the baby," who now has a wife and two children of his own. She spends time with siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles, nieces and nephews, many of whom she sees for the first time. They, in turn are eager to see her and hear about the family's American outpost. The visit is nostalgic, poignant and, considering an apprehensive European political situation, a happy homecoming.

The ambient political situation is a source of family gloom and worry. The Nazis now govern neighboring Germany with militaristic, expansionist, and violently anti-Semitic policies. Increasing signs of war scare everyone. War could bring hardship, maybe even as bad as the previous war. Nevertheless, Dora's visit includes many animated rounds of dinners and re-introductions, toasts of wine, and posing for a stiff family portrait. Conversation is endless. The adventuress has returned and it is cause for excitement. But beneath it all the Krakau-

During 1937, after 27 years in America, Dora sails to Europe. She wants to see Hrubiechew and her family once more. The travel is by way of Warsaw where she is to meet her sister Chaiya's son, Reuben Katz who will accompany her to Hrubiechew. He is twenty-seven, living in Warsaw, and a successful antiques dealer. This is their first meeting, as Reuben was not yet born when Dora left for America.

Reuben doesn't know what to make of this heavyset woman in her mid-fifties, but is favorably impressed by a little incident. As they walk down a Warsaw

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## 8 Poland



**Dora (center) with her family in Poland: sister Chaia, her husband and six children on the left and rear; sister Ella at center right with her two children kneeling in front of her; brother Solly, standing at top right, with wife and two daughters in front of him. The young man standing next to Solly is Chaia's son Reuben Katz. Nearly all will perish at the hands of the Nazis.**

ers have an anxious question: Can the New York part of the family help the rest of the family get out of Poland?

The answer is that the American branch is trying. However, the US's isolationist attitude, its newly restrictive immigration policies, and even some measures of domestic anti-Semitism, create difficult obstacles. The United States won't accept Jewish refugees. In the end the family's efforts prove futile.

Meanwhile, back in New York Louis is taking care of the kids. The older ones, in their twenties, already have initiated themselves into the joys of Chinese food to their mother's consternation. (It's got pork, you know.) They see Dora's absence as the chance to have Louis, long curious about this forbidden fruit, finally sample it. Louis isn't as rigid as Dora about keeping kosher, and he make plans to go with them to "The Pageant," the local Chinese eatery. Ida, age 15, overhears this and threatens "to tell momma when she gets back." Such a brat! This stops Louis in his tracks.

Or so Ida thought. The older kids eventually take Louis for his illicit meal, but they have to conceal the transgression from Ida. So Louis has this one taste of Chinese food in his life. Does Louis like the food? Yes, he enjoys it greatly. But, of course, how could it be otherwise: *Trayf* or not, Jewish genes are predisposed to the stuff.

The Krakauers aren't the only ones wanting to leave Poland. The desire to leave is widespread among Jews fearing a Nazi invasion. Very few are successful. One of Louis's younger brothers does manage to leave Poland. Louis doesn't know it because he hasn't seen nor spoken to his brothers for almost thirty years; they have long lost track of each other. In 1938, Israel Joseph Brustman, living in Warsaw, acts on his concerns of impending war. Israel and his oldest son go to Australia, one of the few places in the world accepting European Jewish emigrants. He finds refuge in Melbourne and, in mid-1939, sends for his wife and family. In hindsight, Israel's timing proves providential.

At decade's end, on September 1, 1939, the hellish nightmare that becomes World War II breaks loose. Germany invades Poland in a furious blitzkrieg from the west. Within days, Soviet Russia attacks Poland from the east. Hitler and Stalin have a secret pact to seize and divide Poland among themselves. A weak Poland soon collapses under the Nazi and Soviet onslaught. The pact specifies the Bug River as the line between German and Soviet territories, so the new boundary touches one side of Hrubiechew, the wrong side. The Red Army stops at the edge of the village, permitting the German army to enter. By the end of September, Nazis are the overlords of Hrubiechew.

## 9 Holocaust

The Nazis are cruel to all East Europeans and especially to Poles. But they are most brutal to Jews, a people the "Master Race" detest more than any other. In Hrubiechew the family's situation becomes grimmer each month as the Germans consolidate control over the populace. Initial deprivations and humiliations soon became property confiscations and physical abuse. German beatings, taunts, and cruelties are relentless, life an ordeal of constant despair and fear.

Dora's nephew, Reuben Katz, is still living and working in Warsaw when the Germans occupy it. Soon the Germans are rounding up the city's Jews and he feels it will be safer to be in Hrubiechew. To get there he must escape Warsaw and walk 160 miles through fields and woods, avoiding roads where German occupiers could spot him. When he arrives the family advises him to flee into the Russian occupied areas east of the Village, which he does. Immediately the Soviets press him into the Red Army.

With direct contact to relatives in Europe closed off, the family's American branch becomes increasingly concerned over the fate of brothers, sisters, and Louis's children. They only hear unsettling rumors. Early hopes that the Allies will stop Germany are dashed. Helplessness and attendant frustrations grow with German military successes. Soon the United States is at war too, bringing a whole new set of worries for the American Brustmans: Irving, Al, and Frances' husband Bill become soldiers. The whole world is caught in the war and family in America and Europe are no exception. In the midst of this, four new grandchildren are born: Henry to Frances, another Henry to Elsie, Richie to Mark, and Alice to Frances.

The rumors from Europe become more alarming. They say Jews are suffering even more than before. They are rounded up, turned into slave laborers, or simply slaughtered. German atrocities are being described as systematic and on a frightening scale.

The American Hrubiechew community hopes such tales of incredible inhumanity are exaggerations, just wartime propaganda. But unable to be sure, fearing the worst, anxieties continue to grow. If there were only some news...

Every few weeks the Nazis have Hrubiechew's Jews report to the Village Square. In the beginning, 1939, these assemblages amass thousands; at the end in 1942 it is just two hundred. The purpose is to make selections for deportation. Some of the young and fit are sent to concentration camps, mainly Sobibor, as slave labor. Some elderly and unfit are taken outside of town for execution. The remaining Jews are sent home until the next time.

In the afternoon of October 20<sup>th</sup>, 1942, the Gestapo orders all Hrubiechew's remaining Jews to the Square. There they are jammed into army trucks



**Wartime snapshots of soldiers on leave, 1943: Dora, Al and Henry Heinbach; Irv with sister Ida.**

and taken to execution pits just beyond the village. They are made to undress (the Germans see no point in wasting clothing) and lie face down in a row by the edge of the pit. Then a short, red-faced Gestapo member named Demant, walks from one end of the line to the other, putting a pistol shot in each person's head. He relishes his job.

Afterwards, the Nazis declare Hrubiehev "Judenrein" (free of Jews.) Thus ends 500 years of Jewish life in Hrubiehev, the Krakauer family included. To the Germans this is just another small action, repeated in hundreds of villages, in a vast effort to cleanse Europe of Jews.

In Tomashev, there is a similar destruction of the Jews. Louis's daughters, Frieda and Ethel, are sent to concentration camps where Frieda is killed.

At war's end nearly all the Brustmans and Krakauers in Europe are slaughtered. Dora and Louis's brothers and sisters, including, Solomon, the adored baby brother, and their families are murdered. The survivors are Reuben Katz in the Red Army, Louis's daughter Ethel liberated from a concentration camp, and two others. The survivors make their way to what will become Israel, except for Reuben, who eventually comes to the US. There is no longer family or other ties to Europe; Hrubiehev and Tomashev become just another pair of distant, foreign places.

In one of the war's tragic ironies, the family's small American branch is now essentially the entire family. Originally a tentative offshoot of a sturdy European tree, this branch is now the main stem. Who could have foreseen this outcome that poignant day in 1910 when Tovah and Froy's Krakauer sadly watched their troublesome son and impetuous daughter set out for another world?

## 10 Sharon Springs

Sharon Springs is a leafy summer resort nestled in hills overlooking upstate New York's Mohawk Valley. The Village features mineral springs and hot sulfur water baths. The resort was quite the high society place in the 1800's, but is no longer that fashionable. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century a foreign-born Jewish clientele increasingly favors it. By the 1920's there are a dozen large kosher hotels, numerous smaller kosher establishments, and a small synagogue, most in aged buildings dating to the village's nineteenth century heyday. By 1940 the clientele is exclusively Jewish.

In the 1920's, during Prohibition, it was a stopover for Jewish rumrunners. Typically, they smuggled liquor in from Toronto or Montreal, passed through Sharon Springs on the way to New York City, and sold some of the hooch to hotel owners. Morris, who always liked a fast buck, was involved in this at times and so discovered the Village.

On Morris's recommendation, Hinda and her husband Jack vis-



**177 Union Street, Sharon Springs  
The Brustman House as it looks in 2000, essentially the same as in 1944.**

ited Sharon Springs in the 1930's. They found a bustling village brimming with guests, thousands of Yiddish speaking immigrants whose modest prosperity allowed them to come for the baths, a health cure European-born believe in. The atmosphere was outgoing and the hotels offered regular entertainment; it was a place a religious Jew with special dietary needs could be comfortable. The couple liked what they saw and become regular guests.

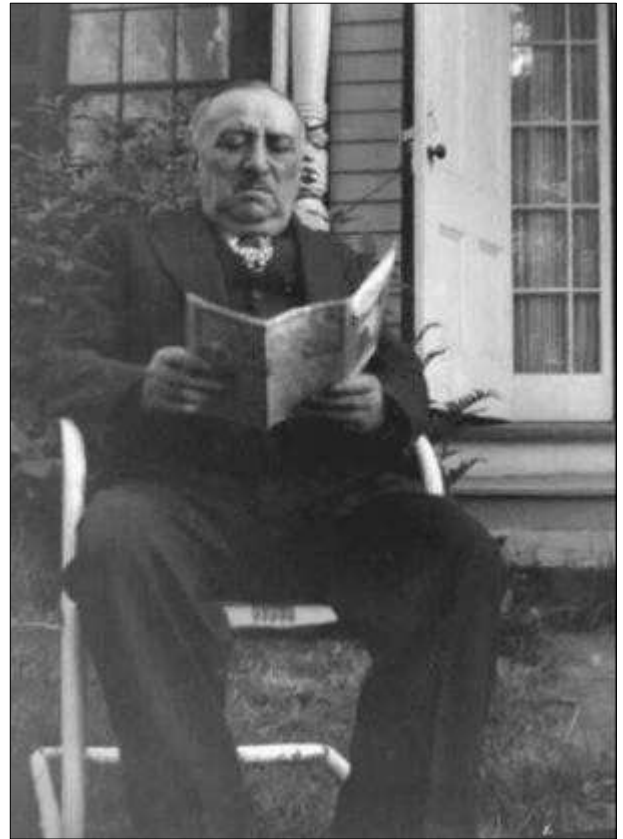
Hinda and Jack stay each summer at the Wellington Hotel on Washington Street and become friendly with the proprietors, Mae and Norbert Wachman. The season runs from May to October and Hinda decides a living could be made here. Hinda suggests Dora might want to buy a rooming house in Sharon Springs.

In October 1944 Dora comes for the first time to see the village and its possibilities. On this visit she spots a private home for sale at the foot of Union Street, feels she can turn it into a modest rooming house, and buys it. She names it "The Brustman House."

The following spring Dora hires local workmen to prepare the house for its first season. They are working the day President Roosevelt dies. It is drizzling, and a genuinely sad Dora notes to one, a roofer, "See, even the skies are crying!" The unexpected, sharp reply is: "He should have died sooner!" This illustrates in a small way the sharp contrast in outlooks of the two cultures sharing the village. One is Christian, rural and Republican, the other is Jewish, urban and Democrat. The year-round people and the Jewish hotel owners economically depend on each other, yet are suspicious of each other. They do not mingle except to do business.

Within a couple of years Dora is doing quite well with the rooming house and Hinda decides to get into this business too. With a partner, Hinda purchases the New Brighton Hotel on Union Street. Later she breaks up the partnership and buys a place on Division Street that she names Helen's Cozy Cottages.

As in New York, when in Sharon Springs Hinda and Dora spend evenings together, talking and playing cards. The evenings are pleasantly cool compared to the often stultifying summer heat of New York City. When Morris, Hinda's father, is in town, he drops by to see his sister Dora and everyone likes to greet him. Everyone means Louis, three daughters, and a



**The original Brustman relaxing in front of the Brustman House, 1947**

growing number of grandchildren who spend summers at the Brustman House.

Following the 1945 season, some months after the war's end, Dora and Louis throw a big party to celebrate the safe return of their soldier sons. The party is in the lobby of their apartment house in Brooklyn, where the couple moved the previous year. They invite the extended family, all the boys' friends, and the entire apartment building.

When the time for remarks comes, Dora gets the attention of the festive crowd, hushes it, and then gives a speech in Yiddish. She tells the assembly how she was constantly worried for her boys. Then she turns to Al and says, emotionally, how he was always in her thoughts as he slogged across Europe fighting the Germans. "Abbie, I was with you in every foxhole. Wherever you were, I was with you." Al responds, "Yeah, ma? How'd you like the little French babe in that Paris hotel?"

With the boys home there are more marriages: Ida to Max Haber, Al to Edith Wachman (the daughter of the Wellington Hotel owners), and Irving to Blos-

som Waxman. And more grandchildren: Billy and Larry to Elsie, and Rita to Ida.

Summers are spent in Sharon Springs and winters in New York City. In these first years a huge black cast-iron stove with a broad cooking surface is the focus of the Brustman House kitchen. In the chill of early morning the family warms by its radiant heat, consuming steaming coffee and hot cereal before beginning the day's work. Wood for the stove is stored in a much-weathered carriage shed out by the brook behind the house, and coal for it is stored in the basement. The grandchildren, particularly Henry S, have the task of fetching wood and coal to feed the stove's glowing embers.

Besides wood, ice is consumed in goodly quantities. It is delivered in 50 pounds blocks, carried to the ice box by the truck driver, slung over his shoulder in the grip of huge tongs. Produce is sold off the back of a farmer's pick-up, the house being a stop on his rounds through the village. Soda is delivered too. Dora keeps several cases of Fitzgerald Brothers lemon soda in the storeroom. It is for sale to the guests, but every so often a cool bottle is directed to a thirsty grandchild.

Though originally purchased strictly as a business by a businesswoman, the house begins to transform into something else. It becomes a part of family folklore and legend, the summer refuge from city heat, and a gathering spot for relatives. Even if this old Jewish resort town is a peculiar mix of Marc Chagall and Currier and Ives, it just suits the family fine.

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## 11 Brooklyn

The 1950s opens with Dora and Louis living in Brooklyn where they moved in the '40s. A lifetime of hard work accentuates their age; they look old. Dora is still sturdy, but Louis is frail. Their Avenue P apartment is comfortable compared to earlier places. In the living room there is a TV / radio / phonograph console proudly boasting a 10 inch screen. In the kitchen, along with the inevitable jelly glasses, is plenty of seltzer in thick glass siphons. Visiting grandchildren can get it mixed with cherry syrup. Life finally allows for small luxuries.

Then Louis develops Parkinson's disease. His doctors speculate it's related to the beating he received

in the Russian army. As the disease worsens he becomes bedridden and in 1952, after a long hospitalization, he dies. This soft spoken, gentle and kindly man is gone. His portrait is hung in the house that bears his name and the next grandchild, Al's daughter, is named to honor his memory: Lois. Other grandchildren, Susan to Irving, Andy to Frances, Toby to Ida, Diane to Irv and, lastly, Jason to Al also come into the family during the 50's.

"The Season" in Sharon Springs, May through October, keeps Dora busy. It means cleaning rooms, doing laundry, cadging customers, and innumerable other chores. The daughters, assorted grandchildren and others are on hand to help during July and August. This aging but vital woman works hard. A rooming house, the Brustman House, is her livelihood. It ensures her independence.



**Dora with Blossom and Elsie and a gaggle of grandchildren, Sharon Springs, 1954**

As the resort's clientele age and die, new patrons replace them: refugee Hassidic Jews. They are of the Satmar Sect and most are concentration camp survivors. They come for sulfur baths, hoping to repair ruined health. The Satmar are very different in many apparent ways from the previous Jewish clientele: they are disdainful of other Jews, keep to themselves, and dress unusually. They wear black caftans, white stockings, fringed shawls and wide fur hats. In addition, they are fairly poor and do not spend money in the village.



The resort's character changes with this new, smaller, and insular customer base. The season becomes shorter and far less prosperous. The music concerts stop, the movie house is shut, and most shops close for good. The resort's long slow decline accelerates and properties are sold off cheaply to the Satmar, including the Central Hotel next door to the Brustman House. Other hotels are just left to rot.

Several Greyhound buses shuttle each day between Sharon Springs and New York City during the season. Few guests or visitors have cars. But when Max or Al is in town, the family has access to private transportation. Ah, Max Haber's tan DeSoto and Al's Chevy Bel Aire — the stuff of legend!

At the Brustman House, a refrigerator and gas range have replaced the icebox and cast-iron stove. Ever more layers of bargain wallpaper and linoleum thicken the walls and floors. Steve, the tipsy town handyman whose main qualification is being cheap and available, every so often jacks up a tilting porch or replaces a rotted floorboard, usually in a manner that defies convention and/or logic. All the while uncles Bill, Max and Teddy are busy repairing,

mending and fixing everything else that needs it; just about the entire house and its contents. One way or another the place is miraculously kept a step ahead of disaster. The cumulative legacy of this frugality still stands, a shrine to relentless thrift.

There are dark moments too. One is when Dora is rushed to a Cooperstown hospital with a stroke. Another is more private and recurring; the nightmare of the Holocaust is never far from Dora's mind. Somehow the Nazis' murder of her family creates a survivor's guilt that produces frequent remorse. "We could have saved them," she constantly tells Hinda, "We could have saved them."

Now that all her children have children of their own, everyone is busy with the business of family. Dora watches her fourteen grandchildren grow. There are bar mitzvahs and high school graduations. Ida and Max move to Florida and, as the '50s became the '60s, Mark and Frances each celebrate 25<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversaries. "Where does the time go?" Dora would always ask.

Then in 1961, suddenly, Dora dies.

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## Epilog

Dora is buried alongside Louis in Mount Hebron Cemetery, within a section purchased by and reserved for the Hrubiechev Society. They lie among the family and friends who also took the journey that led from a poor Russian village to this immense, peaceful cemetery in New York's Borough of Queens.

When you face their graves you can see the distant New York skyline beyond. You cannot, however, see any of events that filled their two lifetimes — service in the Tsar's army, courtships and marriages, border crossings and sea voyages, poker games, the Great Depression, Sabbath ritual, or countless other events important and not. To the beholder the shared granite headstone simply informs they were beloved family.

Their saga spanned nearly eighty years and two World Wars. It covered two continents and several cultures. It started in Hrubiechev and Tomashev, and ended in New York City and Sharon Springs. It was an adventure.





**The author with his subjects during  
an early research session, 1944.**