

THE LIFE
AND TIMES
OF...

Mrs. Dora Gross-
Feb 14, 1911 - _____
from Russia to Baltimore.

Rikki S. Berlin
April 2, 1979.

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The small town of Virbovitz was located in the Pidoyla - Geverna area of Russia. Virbovitz is no longer in existence, and Pidoyla - Geverna is now the Ukraine, but seventy-five years ago it was a thriving Jewish community. In that small town there lived several religious families, one by the name of Brotman. Yitzchack Brotman, his wife Leah, and their five children were members of that community. Recently I spoke with Mrs. Dora Gross - formerly Miss Dobrich Brotman from that small Russian town. "Virbovitz was located in a valley - a lowlying area between two hills. On one hill was fighting the enemy, and on the other hill was fighting the good people."

In the community, mostly all the people were from Jews. "Next door to us - we had a goy - a Christian - he put up during the war - a big cross - to show the soldiers that he was a goy and not to come into his house when they were robbing."

As a little girl, Dobrich only remembers living in a time of war. During World War I, Jews in Russia were living in fear. Not only were

there robberies, there were fires." I remember distinctly once there was a fire. We all went to watch and my father didn't like it so we had to come back to the house."

I asked Tanta Dora where her house was located - what kind of neighborhood ^{with} what kind of people. "Everybody was from or Goyish - nothing in-between. We were all called by our Jewish names. I was Dobriech - they didn't call me Dora since I came to America." Dobriech had one older sister, one younger sister, and one younger brother. Her oldest brother, my grandfather, was Nifter in January of 1974. Their family was a close one. Her father had a large butcher store in which both of her parents worked all day. All the children attended religious school - the girls until around ten or twelve, and the boys until they were ready to go to work or Yeshiva. "Nobody had to go to school like today - but we all wanted to be educated. Just when we were ~~got~~ getting ready to go with the Melamed - the programs started and we were a brad so Pa wouldn't let us go."

"Everybody came home and we had to work everyday - to help Pa in the store. Meilech (the eldest of the children - my grandfather) ~~but~~ would help schlep the meat around, and cut it, and the rest

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of us would sweep or deliver things. We always worked. I was lucky. When I was younger I'd help watch Shikie & Gittle (the youngest children) while Ma was in the store. When we got older we spent more time in the store. We didn't play and things like that, we came home and we worked. Only the little ones played.

The Brotmans had to work hard, others even had it harder - just to get food. The Brotmans were lucky - others had less - but because they owned a butcher store they could occasionally eat meat. But the other people couldn't afford to buy - and since there was no money - if they ate what was in the store - that wasn't free either. They didn't have much at all. Dobrick remembers one time when they hadn't eaten real food for a while. "... no bread at all. My father went to look for Meiteh & Brucha who had been gone for several days searching for food." My father was very friendly with the goyim from the business. Goyim could help the Jews - but they could get arrested if they weren't careful. For a week we didn't know where they (Meiteh & Brucha) were - so Pa went to look for them. He found Brucha sitting on a lawn eating a piece of bread. He took it away from her because she had bread from wherever she was,

and we three children at home didn't practically know what bread was - he brought it home like a piece of cake - he cut it in squares and gave us each a piece - this was just during the war. Otherwise things were so bad.

Besides the war time when they couldn't get anything - it wasn't so bad. "Pa had the store in the house. They went out of town to kill animals and they brought it back to sell it in Visbovitz. Sometimes Pa would have them shecht it in the backyard. There were two shoetern in the city - one died so we had just one - nobody replaced him. When we got the meat my father would take everything apart and sell the non-kosher stuff to the goyim in the neighborhood and sell the rest in the store."

I asked Tante Dora about the shules in the city. She told me that there were two of them. The only reason that there was two shules was because each was in a different section of the city. There was no such thing as a separation of levels of frumkeit among the families - it just had to do with the neighborhood. "There was the big shule and the little shule. We went to the small shule - they baked matzos there. It was scary then - I was just a little girl and things

that was going on was scary."

But the house itself, in which the Brotman and similarly other families in ~~the~~ Virbovitz was pretty big. You entered into a vestibule first. On Succos Pa would open up the roof and it was a succah. There ~~was~~ was a big square room with a big table. There was a big ~~and~~ real nice tapestry on the wall. We used a coal stove and oven to cook and bake everything. We had a big barrel and a man brought buckets-full of water to the house a couple of times a week and filled the barrel. On Friday he'd bring a really big lot of water and we'd be real careful how much we used. Ma used to bake all the bread and challah herself - cookies - everything was homemade. We had a wash-woman - she used to come and take care of all the laundry things while Ma was working in the store. Everybody was real close - the community was like one big family. Every Monday Melech and his father traveled to the market. "I don't remember what the place was called where the market was - but they went far - it took a whole day. They bought eggs and fruit. Sometimes Pa let us all go - sometimes not so somebody would stay at home in the store with Ma." Unlike today there was no such thing as yash-

groups in Russia. "Nobody even imagined things like
MCCY or Bros - or any kind of organization for kids.
We didn't need them because nobody really had
free time to spend together. On shabbos we stayed
home - Pa didn't like us to go around too much
because of the war."

But the most outstanding part of Tante
Dora's life in Virbovitz is how she and her family left.
"The oldest brother - Meiteck - left in 1920 first. After him
Brucha left and it was just us three kids and
my parents left in the house. I'll never forget what happened.
On Friday night Pa went to shule - he took with
him Shika (Yehoshua - the youngest son), Gittel (the youngest
child), me, and Ma went to the neighbor's house
during that time - because Pa didn't want us to
stay alone. He said it's not safe - so we three left.
When Pa came home from shule we went home.
We came to the house - the windows were broken -
they'd try to rob us. A neighbor came by and
he was talking to my father. Then - in the night after
shabbos - Pa decided to leave. We got ready. Then
we left during the week one day. We ~~left~~ left every-
thing behind - didn't take nothing but money. We
had ~~a~~ real hard time getting to the border - it was
winter. But we did get ~~across~~ across. The Romanians
didn't want us to come across - if they caught us

they'd shoot. There was a man who hid us during the day and at night we finally went across. It was a couple of families all together. We walked across the border Ma carried Gittle - she was only 2 years old. We all got in a wagon - & were hiding in the hay. We were lucky; we didn't get arrested - a lot of people did. That's when the soldier was beating on Ma*. I don't want to talk about it. So then we was on the other side - we were in Romania. We went to Bucharest and was staying there two years. We went from city to city till we got to Bucharest. There we got a passport and we was waiting a real long time. See, everybody got a number on their passport. The Hias building in Bucharest hung up the list of numbers who could go on the boat to America. Everyday Pa would go - he was looky and looking - but the number didn't come. Meanwhile, Melech who was living in Washington D.C. then got what for us - so now we could come. Pa was waiting for the number. Everyday it wasn't coming up - so Pa would go and buy food for the next days until he could get back to the Hias building and look for the number. One day it came up, Pa was real excited - he came home and told us we were leaving. See - in Bucharest we was living with Ma's aunt and her family. Then we rushed to the boats

with nothing - just money. Then Pa's cousin met us in New York when we came; it was on May 20, 1922. We traveled to Washington D.C. to be with Meitech since he was the legal sponsor of the trip. We stopped in Baltimore for a few hours, then we went to Washington to be with Meitech - we hadn't seen him for such a long time. Everyone was real happy then - we couldn't believe it."

"We didn't stay in Washington because Pa didn't like it there. Then we moved to Baltimore. We came to Lombard Street, we had a shule. We went to school #93 - when it just opened up on Lexington and Central Avenues - a new school. Shula went to Parochial School (now called T.A.). Pa worked for Uncle ~~Chayim~~ Chayim in his store, and we children went to school."

I asked Tanta Dora about adjusting to American life. "It was definately not easy. When we first came my father didn't make a living - we couldn't hardly talk - but we managed - we were happy to be here. My brother was here and we hadn't seen Meitech for a long time."

"Did you ever want to go back to Russia?"

"Oh NO! No indeed! In fact Pa's father's brother - Uncle Berel - went back to Virbaitz and was killed by soldiers on the way - he missed the rest of

his family. But none of us ever wanted to come back -
oh no - not on!

Since my grandfather ('Melech') came over secretly -
I asked her if there were any significant and/or inter-
esting stories that happened to him. "Melech of traveling
together with Brucha for a while. Once they were
hiding by a hay stack. Brucha hid by some rocks -
Melech got under the hay. Then some Bolshevik soldiers
came over to the hay stack and said real loud, 'Well
there is probably some dirty Jews hiding in here - we'll
take care of them.' ~~The~~ ^{one of them} ~~they~~ ^{he} lifted ~~their~~ ^{his} pitchfork
and dug ~~it~~ ^{it} into the ~~rock~~ hay and switched it
around. As Melech lay in there he was watching
the pitchfork moving in front of his face and suddenly
the soldier said - 'Oh - there's no Jews in here let go.'
It was a close call for Melech. Later he and
Brucha separated. Brucha went with her friends
who were arrested. Because they were young some stranger -
a guy they didn't even know got them off. Mean-
while Melech got together with his friends - there were
three boys and three girls - all in their twenties together.
The girls decided that boys are too suspicious looking and
they'd probably get arrested - so the six of them
split up. The three boys got out of Russia and
the girls were arrested and sent back. Then

Melech went with a family he met who had a son his age who already was in America. Using his passport Melech went with his family to America. Then in 1921, he came and settled in Washington D.C. I don't like to talk about it - let's go back to America."

Then, taking a deep breath, Tanta Dora continued. "When I graduated I was by Melech who had his own butcher store before he was married. I did have my own store until Sol and I was married (Her husband, Sol Gross is now deceased)."

To end off this interview, Tanta Dora had one thing to say about all these questions. "We went thru so much - it's really hard to say it - don't even want to think about it. Coming here and everything - we went thru too much. You're all lucky to be born and raised safe and free all the time. You can't imagine what it's like living in a place and then having to run to a whole new country where you don't know the language. You dress different - everything is so different. It's not easy - you're so lucky - U children - I hope you know it and appreciate it."

It's hard to believe that history can be made by someone in my own family. Usually you read about

