

The Tenacious Traveling Torah from Slonim



1930s to 2006, Poland to New York to Maryland to Shorewood, Wisconsin

By Leah Dobkin and her daughter Hannah Bobrow

I've heard the expression what goes around comes around, but I did not completely understand the meaning until my Zaide (Yiddish for grandfather) told me this story about our family in Europe during the Holocaust.

There were seven brothers who lived in the village Slonim in what was then Poland but is now Belarus. These seven brothers - Schlayme, Muttie, Jacob, Moysha, Paul, Hershel and my great-grandfather Abram - lived with their mother Heiche. Since there were terrible economic conditions after World War I, the six brothers wanted to immigrate to the United States with their mother, who was a widow.

Schlayme, the youngest, wanted to stay in Slonim. The brothers immigrated to America in a process very familiar to other immigrant families. One brother at a time would journey across the perilous Atlantic ocean to America, make some money, and then send for the next relative to join him in the land of "Milk and Honey."

First Moysha moved over, and changed his name to Morris. Then he sent Paul. Paul sent Muttie over, who became a garment worker and changed his name to Max. Max then sent my great-grandfather Abram over, who changed his name to Abraham, or Abe for short, and became a house painter. Abe sent over Hershel, who changed his name to Harry and became a baker. Harry then sent over their mother Heiche.

The six brothers lived in Brooklyn and the Bronx, and most of them got married. Everything seemed good except for one problem: Heiche wasn't happy because her sons were not religiously inclined, so in 1934 she moved back to Slonim and lived with Schlayme, her only remaining son.

As the story goes, when Schlayme got word that the Russian Communists were invading their beloved town, he and the other men of Slonim quickly buried the only Torah in their town. The

Russians did not believe in freedom of religion, nor were they particularly fond of the Jews. If the Torah was not hidden, it would most definitely be destroyed.

The next assault, more deadly than the first, was the German invasion after Poland was divided by Russia and Germany. This time the men of Slonim knew if they didn't fight they would be rounded up and killed, and their sisters, mothers and children would be sent to concentration camps to experience horrors that could not even be conjured from the worst nightmare.

So they dug up their beloved Torah and hid in the forest to fight the Nazis in guerilla-style combat. This small, but brave Jewish army was part of the Partisans that fought the Nazis behind enemy lines all over Eastern Europe. The Germans, with their large numbers of fighters and overpowering weapons, conquered the Partisans. However, before the men of Slonim were slaughtered, somehow they passed the Torah on to a sympathetic soul who took the Slonim's Torah to safety.

Like a precious child, that Torah was rescued in the bloody forest surrounding Slonim. The women and children of Slonim were not so lucky. They were rounded up like cattle and carted away to their deaths, never to see their husbands, brothers, and sons again.

Heiche and Schlayme sent letters from Slonim to the six brothers in America until September 1939. They never heard from Schlyame and Heiche again. The six brothers were so sad, depressed, and full of guilt, that some of them never ever talked to one another. My cousins (the grandchildren of those six brothers) are scattered everywhere. Each one is living life as fully as possible, and trying to make important contributions to our cherished country.

One cousin was my Zaide, Bill Dobkin, a dedicated social studies teacher and assistant principal in the New York City public school system. He also recareered as a newspaper reporter, editor, political cartoonist, artist, park commissioner, and tennis and golf aficionado. When my Zaide was 13, he wanted to be Bar Mitzvahed, but his parents were non-practicing Jews. His father was against the idea, and his mother provided lukewarm support. In typical Jewish family fashion, women rule, and my Zaide was Bar Mitzvahed in 1944 at Prospect Jewish Community Center in Brooklyn.

To my Zaide's surprise, his father Abe Dobkin not only attended the Bar mitzvah, but participated in the service. He confidently walked up to the Bema and read from the Torah like a pro. What Zaide realized that day is that his father probably learned Hebrew from the Torah that had been dug up and saved. Like that Torah, Abe Dobkin's religious upbringing was no longer buried.

My Zaide is a practicing reform Jew and so are most of his children and grandchildren. In the Autumn of 2002, his granddaughter Alexandra was Bat Mitzvahed at a temple in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. Before she began to read from the Torah, the Rabbi stepped forward and announced to the congregation that Alexandra was going to read from a very special Torah that had been saved from a village called Slonim in Poland.

We would like to believe that the Torah was the same Torah that great grandfather Abraham Dobkin read from, and that his brother was among the Partisans; while we will never know for sure, my Zaide and his son Josh turned to one another in tears, shock, and delight. They seemed to have serendipitously found the Torah buried and saved by the brave men of Slonim. What an amazing trip that must have been for that Torah.

Leah Dobkin is a freelance writer from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She lives with her husband Tim and three children, Hannah, Seth and Ken and their cat Koo. Co-writer Hannah Bobrow is a freshman at Shorewood High School in Wisconsin and the granddaughter of Bill Dobkin (Zaide); great, great granddaughter of Heiche; and great, great niece of Schlamye Dobkin.

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