

An Old Man Bruce Drake

I remember sitting in the living room of my grandfather Samuel Drach in the late 1970s when he told me the only thing he was ever to tell me about his past – which was about the Emperor Franz-Josef. I believe what he told me is that he had once seen the Emperor, but I am not certain. I was 30.

By this time, he was in his 90s and my parents had moved him from the house in the deteriorating and increasingly dangerous section of East New York where he had raised his family, to a nondescript apartment in Rego Park, Queens. My grandmother had died seven years earlier.

There was always a hint of an emotion somewhere between anger and bitterness about my grandfather. Fairly or not, part of it was a feeling of neglect, of the family not coming to see him enough. But I always sensed there was something more. I kept trying to explain it to myself and also to understand why he said almost nothing at all about his history, even what to me seemed a brave story of a 20 year old making the journey to America in the *Zwischendeck* of a ship from Hamburg and arriving at Ellis Island on a frigid day in 1904 with less than \$20 in his pocket. But that is something I would later find out on my own.

My first try at explaining this was in a work of fiction – a short story – that I wrote during the 80s called “An Old Man,” in which the central character found himself in circumstances like my grandfather’s, and trying to compete for the attention of a young grandson, a child glued to the television, by telling him about his journey on foot to see the Emperor. It was his effort, the only means left to him, to tell his grandson that there had been great moments in his life, even if they happened no more.

A quarter century later, I began to trace his story in a different way, as many of you have done with your ancestors, with the help of *JewishGen*. I now know he was born in Wojnilow in Galicia’s Stanislawow province in 1884 and I know, thanks to historian Susan Wynne’s fine histories, the affection with which Jews of the region held Franz Josef, and how they romanticized stories about his visits to their communities.

I’ve learned much about Samuel Drach’s history, and that of other branches of my family. I will never learn the answer to the question that started me to think so much about him – what he thought, what made him seem feel the way he did, what kind of personality he was as a young man, what his family was like in the *shtetl* where he was born. But I have made some surprise discoveries and while there is virtually no chance I will learn more about him as a human being, I have learned in this research that every time you believe you have hit a dead end, there is the possibility of another breakthrough.

I learned also of the overwhelming sadness that this journey can bring, as you discover people whom you never knew existed, and what befell them.

When I started my research, I was astounded by how little my father – who is the last of his children – knew about my grandfather’s history. My grandfather rarely if ever spoke of it, and the same was true of my mother’s mother. He knew the family had a *Galitzianer* heritage, but knew nothing of where.

I put the first pieces together in the usual way – U.S. immigration records, Hamburg lists, information my grandfather provided on Social Security forms and Selective Service records. From these I learned he was born in Wojnilow (now Voynilov, in the Ukraine) and that his parents were Jacob Drach and Helen Shippar. His wife Anna Ebert was born in

1888 to innkeepers in Wygoda, Mordechai Ebert and Neche Kleinfeld (Marcus and Norma, she wrote). The records on *JewishGen* indicated they moved to Marty’nuv Stary. Anna had brothers who lived in Bukaczowce before coming to America. Unfortunately, while her parents and their other offspring show up in the census records of the region available on *JewishGen*, those records make no mention of Anna, or of Samuel, or of his parents.

While I never became a successful fiction writer, I did have a chance to write like a historian as I set down my family’s story. It was a fascinating exercise to give context to the facts I found, by drawing on histories, books, newspapers of the time and the reminiscences of others. In a book called “A Radical Life” by Thai Jones, I found a description of his great-grandfather’s trip from Hamburg to America on the *Patricia*, one he took three months before my own grandfather made the voyage on the same ship. It described the abnormally stormy and cold weather that prevailed in the winter of 1903-1904, an account corroborated by stories in the *New York Times* of the same period. So, I knew that my grandfather had arrived after a rough trip and in bitter cold.

One of the first surprise connections I made in this research was through *JewishGen*, and member Linda Cantor. Our families had a connection through a family named Ebert (the maiden name of my grandmother) and in particular a Friede Ebert from Bukaczowce who married into the Mandel family, one of Linda’s own ancestral lines. I was never able to make the connection between Friede Ebert, and the family of my grandmother Anna Ebert, but I did know that Anna had returned home in 1911 to show her family her firstborn. Linda told me that on the return trip, my grandmother chaper-

oned to America her grandmother and her grandmother's sister.

"Also, did Anna and Sam have a restaurant on the Lower East Side?" Linda asked. "If so, then my grandparents met each other there."

I know that Samuel Drach did have a restaurant, listed in the New York City Directory of 1915 and again in 1917 when it was described as a "subway lunch room" at 10 Delancey St. But the restaurant's days were numbered after the Brooklyn Rapid Transit Company extended the line past the terminus at Delancey and Essex Streets, uptown to Chambers Street in 1913, a fact vaguely remembered by my father which I was able to confirm through histories of the subway.

I continued to mine facts about my grandfather and grandmother, some of which began to jog my father's memory, and he added more. He did remember that my grandfather came from a large family, and one of his reasons for leaving for the U.S., is that the family had difficulty supporting itself. So, my grandfather had siblings.

My father recalled that when he was in the military during World War 2, and knew he would be making a trip to Tel Aviv, my grandfather told him to look up a nephew in Benai Berak, an orthodox community outside Tel Aviv. My father remembered visiting a man with two children, who were very poor, and lived in a one-room hut. He couldn't remember the name of the family, which led me to guess that the nephew was the son of a sister of my grandfather and thus had a different last name. It seemed unlikely to me that my father would not remember a surname that was his own.

For a time, I put the research to rest. I was running out of leads to follow and the tragedy of what happened in Galicia and Europe during the Holocaust places its own dead ends on what we can find.



Young Sam and Anna (before 1920)

But something this summer prompted me to search the online database at *Yad Vashem*. Its search engine provided the chance to do a search on "Drach" and "Wojnilow." The first screen showed three names, including a "Leib Drakh" and listed his town as Gelsenkirchen. But I followed the link that led to a page describing him more fully as Yehuda Moshe (for which I later learned "Leib" was a frequent variant). The Page of Testimony for him listed his parents as Yaakov and Khana – the Yiddish/Hebrew variants of Jacob and Helen, the parents of my grandfather. Yehuda Moshe was 11 years older than my grandfather, was a merchant and, unlike his brother who chose America, went to live in Gelsenkirchen in the Ruhr region of northwest Germany, which became a center of wartime industry for the Nazis. His last known location was in the Polish border town of Zbonzyn, which was also a place where Polish Jews had been rounded up in an "Aktion" on October 28, 1938 before being expelled.

The Page of Testimony had been filed by a Meir Drach in 1951, who certainly would no longer be alive. I searched the burial records on *JewishGen* where I saw a Meir Derech who had died in 1983. I was about to move on until I saw the Hebrew characters of his name, which I recognized as the same characters used for "Drach." Fortunately, there

was a full burial record and that showed his father to be Yehuda Moshe. The *Yad Vashem* site pointed to a service of the Israel Genealogical Society to help users of the database find, if possible, descendants of those who submitted Pages. A volunteer named Rose Feldman found me some possibilities, and through her, I telephoned the home of Yuval Derech and, fortunately, got his wife Yedida since her husband does not speak English.

I told my story to Yedida and she said that Yehuda Moshe was indeed her husband's great-grandfather, and that his grandfather had been Meir. Meir's son Yehezkel had changed the family name from "Drach" to "Derech," which in Hebrew means "way." Yedida promised to try and find out more, and weeks later, when I was starting to give up hope, she wrote to me that Meir's daughter Rivka remembered the visit of an American relative during World War 2, and also that Yehuda Moshe's brother – my grandfather – cared for a wife that had gone blind later in life. That was confirmation beyond doubt; and it certainly meant that my grandfather had corresponded with Meir, but of this he never said anything.

Yedida told me more. Meir had arrived in Israel in 1933, but the other descendants of Yehuda Moshe had remained in Europe and all died in the Holocaust. It is always said that if you are a Jew, someone connected to you died in the Holocaust, but the certainty of knowing this weighed on me, particularly with the approach of Yom Kippur. And it was something of which my grandfather never spoke.

Yedida wrote of Meir: "The story how he came is sad. His older brother David was in charge of the list of giving the certificates — the papers which were the permission to enter Israel. So David gave his papers to his young brother-Meir because he claimed that Meir is young and unmarried. For the rest of his life



Sam and Anna in 1961

Meir felt very bad that he survived and his brother hadn't."

My father had said that Samuel Drach had come from a large family, and if any of them remained near Wojnilow, they no doubt perished too. Through histories at Yad Vashem, and books about the mass deportations and exterminations in the region, we know that between 1941 and 1943, an SS Captain named Hans Krueger, supplementing a small number of men under his direct command with Rumanians and Hungarian ethnic Germans, organized and implemented the shooting of some 70,000 Jews and the deportation of another 12,000 to death camps in this part of Galicia. After a *Judenaktion* in Stanislawow, where his men fired into thousands of victims who had been rounded up in a

cemetery, the authorities began to concentrate on the smaller towns like Wojnilow, taking their prisoners to the ghetto in Stanislawow.

A rural bureaucrat in Nadworna wrote to an official in Germany: "Currently I'm involved in resettling my 7,000 Jews. How, is something I'll have to tell you in person. It can't be explained in writing." I have seen another translation of

this last line that reads: "In writing, it would not seem possible (like reality)."

Samuel Drach had left Wojnilow nearly 40 years before these horrors. My guess is the reason was economic, although the so-called "Golden Age" provided the Galician Jews by Franz Josef was fraying and anti-Semitism was on the rise. But having learned what happened to his brother, to his brother's children and to their children, and what happened in Wojnilow and throughout the region, I found myself thinking each day about this sadness – and, by coincidence, came across a the website of Roman Zakharii, an academic born in nearby Ternopil.

Zakharii visited the area in 2004 and sought out the Jewish cemetery

in Wojnilow. He found it by following a cattle road through a pasture, and found a small pile of grave-stones. He noted with a sad irony that around the remaining stones grew the poisonous plant called *kropywa* in Ukrainian, or *kropiwa* in Polish. "For me, it was not a coincidence," he wrote.

He took photos of what he had found. One of the stones was dated August 11, 1892, possibly marking the grave of a little girl. A fragment of an inscription on another read, "a modest woman, Sarah the daughter of Yisrael... May her soul be bound up in the bond of everlasting life."

Of the people I discovered in my own search: may all their souls be bound up in that bond.

Bruce Drake, whose original family name was Drach, is a career-long journalist who has covered the White House and national politics for the New York Daily News, served as Vice President for News at National Public Radio, and now is General Manager of CQPolitics.com, a website on politics and government owned by Congressional Quarterly. He was born in New York City and now lives in Silver Spring, Md., outside Washington, D.C.