



Kahn family from Kamenka, Podolia Gubernia (now in Moldova)

Written by Marilyn Feingold

In a note from Arnold Kahn I learned about his father, David, who was born in Kamenka in 1909 and lived there until about 1920. Even though this is about the Kahn family, I hope the context and details of these memories will help to fill in what the fabric of life was like for their own ancestors who may have lived in these communities were like in those times. The quotes below are from the notes I got from Arnold, his father, and his aunts.

"Kamenka" was a small town with a small Jewish community located in an agricultural area. Arnold's grandfather was a tailor who was successful enough to own a building and employ other helpers. From time to time he went to Odessa because he loved cantorial music and had relatives who lived there. Arnold's father traveled with his own father as a child. They would go by train to the big seaport city of Odessa. Kamenka had a train station and the trip to Odessa took less than a day. In the winter, the Dniester River would freeze over and one could cross by walking or skating on the ice. Dave remembers seeing horses and sleds cross the Dniester. Arnold's father remembers there being stands (kiosks) on or near the river that sold hot "tomales" in the winter.

However, the most vivid memories for Dave and his sisters were spending significant periods of time hidden in the basement of their building - hiding from Cossacks and the various armies that fought for control of the of the area during the First World War. When in hiding, the family stayed indoors. They never went out for days at a time. When we didn't hear horses anymore we knew it was safe to go out. If they couldn't find us they'd move on to another house. Sometimes they're force their way into someone's house. This usually happened during the day.

Arnolds' grandmother was from Rashkov, a shtetl very close to Kamenka.

In Kamenka, David's father had a tailor shop downstairs and the family lived upstairs. They were middle class Jews. Their neighbors, the Finkelsteins, moved to Pittsburg, Pa. Dave Kahn attended Kheder (Hebrew school). There was no secular education. This was the time of the Pogroms and every day there was a new disturbance. The government changed often. The Kheder had a building with 2-4 classrooms. He started going there when he was 6 1/2 years old- He walked to school or his father carried him on his back in bad weather. The teacher lived in the school building. The children, boys and girls, were between the ages of 7 and 10. The languages spoken were Yiddish and some Russian. Theirs was not a normal life. They stayed in

basements most of the time looking out of cracks. They were afraid of Cossacks, other armies and governments. There were two doors that opened to the street. Whenever there was a change of government the Jews were attacked. Their silverware, jewelry and money were stolen. Kamenka had under 10,000 people at this time. There was only one synagogue and it was orthodox. There was no library in Kamenka.

The family ate vegetable and bean soup and chicken on Shabbat. Chicken was considered a luxury because the family was poor. They were lucky to have it. Money had no value then because the government charged 50000 rubles to buy matches. They also ate cottage cheese, cornbread, mamaliga. Food was cooked in an iron pot that was half rounded at the bottom. They turned the pot over in the plate. The bread was sliced with no.8 thread. Dave left around 7:00 AM in the morning to go to school. For breakfast he had bread and a glass of milk (no cereals). They got milk from a retail store. For lunch he took along what he would eat. This might include pieces of fruit, sliced white bread, pears, apples or plums. His mother made cookies and Mandelbreit. He also ate red and green grapes. For supper the family might have split pea soup, butter beans, or kasha.

Dave's mother got up very early. She dressed herself and us kids, fed us and sent us off to school. Dave's mother covered her hair. She gave up her shaidel when she came to the United States, but still kept kosher. Dave's father prayed with tallis and Tefillin each day. They had a wall clock in the living room of their home. They had little furniture - a sofa, chairs, kerosene lamps and a chandelier and tables. The rooms were about 8 X10 or 8 X 8. There was one mirror in the bedroom. In the kitchen were a stove, a wooden table and chairs. "You couldn't read with a lantern. There wasn't enough light to read."

Sunday was a workday. Everyone helped Dave's father in the tailor shop. Saturday was a day of relaxation. We made wine from the juicy grapes in Kamenka. We drank on Shabbos and on holidays.. His dad didn't drink Schnapps at home. When the weather was bad - cold, snow, rain - Dave stayed home.

Kamenka was known as a resort for people with Tuberculosis. People would come to Kamenka to get well. They stayed for 2-3 months. Grapes were grown on the outskirts of the city. Since the air was clear people wanted to stay there. They rented rooms in their home to visitors. There was very little privacy in homes. There was a curtain to separate rooms. Kamena had clear air - there was no industry there, no smog. It was surrounded by mountains and the finest fruit anywhere - luscious big, tasty fruit. The town was nice - a fairly quiet, wonderful place with streets made of cobblestone. There was a small Kosher bakery in Kamenka that made only bread. There were no theaters or movies in Kamena. To the left of his house were some homes and a small grocery store. Across the street were lots of small homes.. They had good neighbors and everyone got along well. But there were not good memories. The government consisted of small city officials. David knew of no Jews in the city government. There was a Jewish group that took care of those in need, if someone needed Matzo or anything else. If someone was sick they went to the small hospital in

Kamenka. There were only general practitioners then, no specialists. One went to Odessa for specialists. Before the High Holidays it was customary for all the Jews to go to the cemetery on the outskirts of town to pay respect for dead relatives.

There were no horses, buses or cars in Kamenka so people mainly walked, although some occasionally rode bikes. There were some horse and buggies (carriages). Dave's grandfather on his father's side was a coachman.

On Shabbos, he went to synagogue with his Dad. The shule was a few blocks away from their house. It had a small bimah and no cantor. There were no Hasidim at his synagogue. Mostly men were there and a few little boys, but no little girls. His mother stayed home. There were less than 50 people at synagogue. The building was probably stucco (gray or white). On Shabbos they went to the park in the summer. Dave went with his father because he liked to "swing". The family went to visit neighbors on Shabbos.

The Dniester River was beautiful. It froze from November and you could walk across it. Dave could walk from his house to the Dniester River. During the summer everyone went swimming in the Dniester.

There was a doctor in Kamena but no dentist. There was also a pharmacy in town. The houses were connected with a small backyard and no bathroom other than an outside hole. They used tubs to bathe. Most Jews didn't have pets. You sometimes saw stray dogs. Some Jews had cats.

His house had three rooms. He slept on the top of the stove¹. His mattress was made of straw. The coal stove heated the whole house. The walls were plastered and painted white. There were family pictures on the wall and locks on the inside of doors. There were windows in the house, but, no fireplace. His sisters slept in a small room and his parents had their own room. Everyone bathed in the kitchen. There was a curtain there. Dave's mother warmed the water in the tea kettle and poured it in the tub. "It got cold in the house." On the floor were throw rugs. There was no front or back porch. The doors were made of wood. The "toilet" was outside with sheets around it. One squatted over the hole. We used rags to wipe ourselves and then threw them in the pit. We used lime to keep the odor down. We bathed once a week "if you were lucky", right before Shabbos.

During Sukkot they built a Sukkah attached to the back of the house. Dave's father put it together, with a table and chairs in it for eating, but they didn't sleep there. All their neighbors were Jewish. The children liked to play with a beach ball. David's father was a custom tailor and made all of their clothes. His father had two sewing machines. He had to complete an apprenticeship when he was nine years old to become a tailor. Dave's mother helped in the tailor shop. They employed two or three

¹ House had a built in stove and that area was connected to a boxed enclosed structure that went along the wall of the kitchen area. It was low and rectangular shape and one or more of the children slept on it because it afforded heat.

people. The name of the store was "Nathan Kahn, Tailor." The house and store were heated with coal. They bought the coal from the coal yard and it was delivered to them. It was delivered in September and stored in the coal shed and used throughout the winter. They had water in the house, no well. They had plumbing and a kitchen sink. Wood was also bought and delivered to their home. Dave's mother washed the clothes in a tub with a washboard and hung them on a clothesline. She heated up the iron on the stove and then ironed the clothes.

For clothing, David had shorts and shirts for summer. For winter and summer, he had jackets made by his dad. His mother knitted sweaters. They wore the finest clothes. The boot maker in Kamenka made their shoes. He had two pairs, one for Shabbos and one for the rest of the week. His sisters had little dresses made by his mother.

Dave went to the Turkish bath with his Dad. There were stairs there. The higher up you went the hotter it got. It was "like a steam room". The steam rose to the top. Always on Friday afternoon before Shabbos they went. His Dad would quit working at 12:00 to get ready for Shabbos. They dressed, and he went to shule Friday afternoon and Friday night. They bought candles for Shabbat. Dave went to sleep around 8 or 9 at night shortly after it got dark.

The Christian peasants did farming around the town. They owned the farms and raised wheat and cattle. They were also fruit growers. They were comfortable, but not rich. Dave had friends who were not Jewish that he played with on the street, but the Jews didn't associate much with the "goyem".

The barber cut Dave's hair. His parents were not Hasidim or ultra pious. His father also went to the barber with Dave. His mother cut her own hair.

Dave said he saw beggars occasionally, but doesn't remember any homeless people. His parents read and wrote Yiddish. His father used some Russian. Dave has no memory of Radio or orchestras in Kamenka.

Their main concern in Kamenka was staying alive.

In 1920 David and his family stole away across the Dniester River in small canoes and took a train to Bucharest, the capital of Romania. They established residency there and lived there for two years. Dave left with his father, mother and two sisters. They knew a "bad situation was developing in Kamenka." They took what they could carry—clothes, bedding, flatware and silverware" Dave was afraid. He knew it was a question of life or death. There had been pogroms in Kamenka all the time. The Cossacks and changes of government made the Jews the scapegoats for all their problems.