

HISTORY OF STAVISHT

By Lisa Brahin Weinblatt © 2012

As a child, I was drawn to an old sepia-toned photograph taken in Stavishche, Russia that stood proudly on my great-grandmother's shelf. The stunning image of my great-grandmother and my infant grandmother living a different reality ignited within me a lifetime desire to learn every detail of their past. Even back then I wondered: Where was this mysterious town of Stavishche on the other side of the earth, where my grandmother's world began and then so abruptly fell apart?

I soon discovered that Stavishche (Stavisht/Stavishcha/Stawiszczce) was and still is located 29 miles south of the larger Belaya Tserkov (White Church) in what is now Ukraine. Nestled in a green valley on the road to Kiev, located 74 miles north, Stavishche was uninhabited until 1622 when Stanislaw Lubomirski, the chief of the Polish Bialacerkiew district, established a new settlement there.¹ He called the then Polish village Lubomirz, but it was soon destroyed by Tartars. The name Stavishche was later adopted because of the great abundance of water surrounding the village, including both banks of the Gniloi Tikich River. It was from this river that villagers enjoyed the delicious carp and other tasty fish, such as my great-grandfather Isaac's favorite, kapchonka.

In the 1600s and 1700s, Stavishche was rebuilt and later visited by at least three Polish kings, and was bestowed by the last monarch as a gift to Count Franciszek Ksawery Branicki and his descendants in 1774. The family retained ownership of the land despite Russia's annexation of Ukraine in 1793. By the time my grandmother Anne "Channa" Caprove was born in 1912, Count Wladyslaw Branicki owned the estate that stood in the shape of a horseshoe and was surrounded by the most beautiful botanical gardens. Wladyslaw, and later his daughter, Countess Julia Potocka, granted all residents free access to enjoy the perfumed aroma of the palatial gardens.

My grandmother's happiest childhood memories, in the years just preceding the Revolution, were playing and picking flowers from the Branicki estate. As a young child, I watched Grandma plant lilac bushes on the property line of my mother's home in New Jersey. She said this reminded her of the purple lilacs in bloom that formed a hedge in the Count's botanical gardens, a constant attribute to springtime in Stavishche. The estate and its exquisite gardens, which also included exotic plants and gorgeous rose bushes, was ransacked and torched by peasants during the Russian Revolution of 1917.

Stavishche's bustling open marketplace played an important social and economic role to all of the residents of the town. While everything points to Sholem Aleichem² basing his imaginary shtetl on the nearby village of Boyarka, one can say for certain that the esteemed writer was no stranger to Stavishche. In 1883, just a decade before publishing his masterpiece, he might have (or at least visited on occasion) his soon-to-be father-in-law at the marketplace in Stavishche. It is the same market fair where my grandmother's grandparents, Fay and Carl Cutler, began their love affair and where her parents, Rebecca Cutler and Isaac Caprove, were reunited in 1911 after a two-year lovers' quarrel.

Troubled times soon blindsided the town's Jewish population which had an established presence in the town since the mid-1700s. During 1917-1920 at least ten anti-Jewish pogroms swept through Stavishche. Most of Stavishche's 4,500 Jews were saved by the town's heroic rabbi, Pitsie Avraham Gaisinsky³, who brilliantly negotiated with the murderous hetmans of Grigoriev, Zeleny and Denikin's bands. One hundred sixty Jews lost their lives, but approximately four-thousand others fled to safety in other lands during a mass evacuation. In the early 1930's collectivization under Stalin triggered a Soviet man-made famine victimizing most of the remaining residents of Stavishche. In 1941, about 150 Jews who remained in the town were murdered during the Holocaust.⁴

The families of Jews who once fled Stavishche now live throughout the world. In addition to the majority who immigrated to the United States, many from Stavishche resettled in Israel, Canada, Great Britain, France, Bessarabia, Romania, Argentina and other countries. One prominent Stavishcher who immigrated to Israel was Avraham "Postrel" Harzfeld who became a member of the first Knesset. Others never left Russia; they remained in Stavishche or in nearby cities such as Belaya Tserkov and Kiev.

Many years ago, I found it odd to hear a writer refer to Jews as a 'rootless' people. While the mass Jewish exodus of my grandmother's native town brought many of its families to different lands, it is Stavishche that is truly our roots.

Notes:

¹ Some sources suggest a possible ownership and settlement of the land prior to 1622, but many sources, including *Slownik Geograficzny*(1890), recognize the census of that year to be the first written confirmation.

² Aleichem was the author of *Tevye the Milman*, on which the play *Fiddler on the Roof* is based.

³ Rabbi Yitshak Avraham Gaisinsky was affectionately called "Pitsie Avraham." You will see his name spelled a variety of ways within the *Stavisht Yizkor Book* including Gaysinski, Haysinki, and Gasinki. The author discovered that many of the rabbi's descendants, including his grandson, referred to him as Pitsie Avram.

⁴The number of victims might have been as high as 150-200.