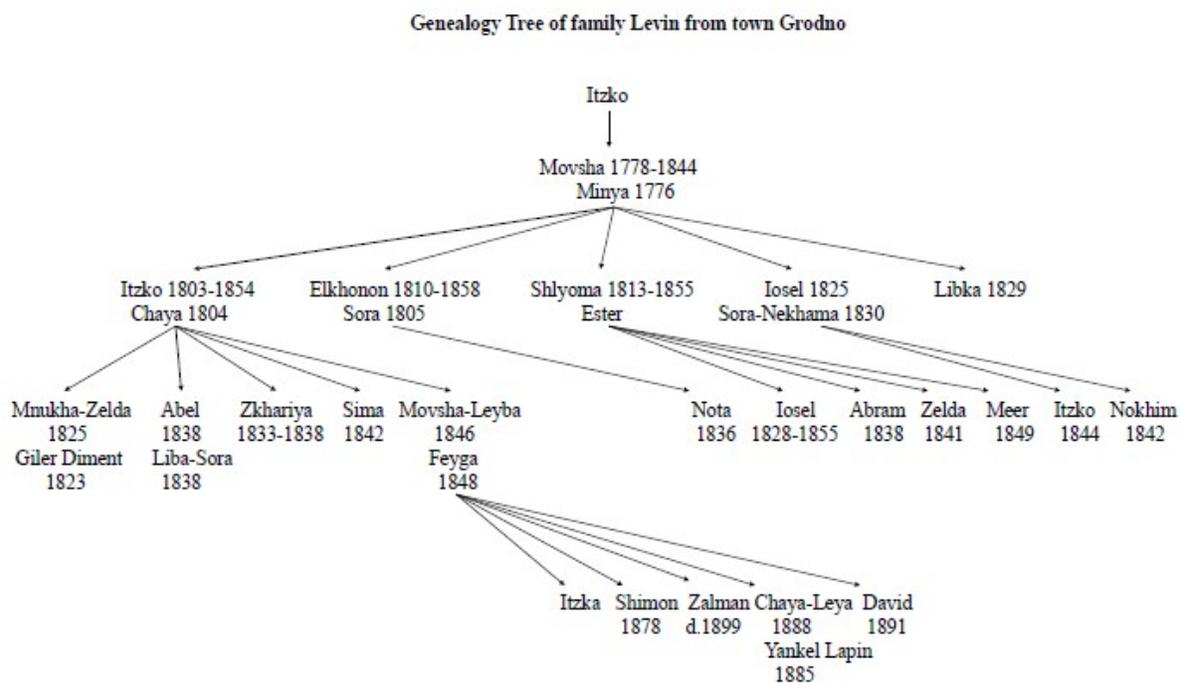


The Levin/Levine Family: Life in Grodno and Immigration to America

By Marjorie Geiser

Thanks to Yuri Dorn of Jewish Heritage Research Group Belarus and Anna Przybyszewska Drozd of Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, I've been able to track my ancestors back to my 5th g-grandfather in Grodno, Belarus. Below is a tree, as put together by Yuri.

My g-grandfather was Itzka, my 2nd g-grandfather was Movsha-Leyba, 3rd g-grandfather was Itzko, 4th was Movsha and 5th Itzko.



The stories below on Movsha Leyba have been spliced together from the records Yuri and his team were able to find in Grodno. It's my hope that one day someone also searching my family will see this and contact me. Finding living relatives on the Levine side has been extremely challenging.

Movsha Leyba LEVIN (1846-1911)

Movsha Leyba Levin, my 2nd g-grandfather, was born in Grodno, Belarus, around 1846, which, at that time, was in the Russian Empire. This was during the time of the Pale of Settlement, which was a geographical area where Jews were restricted to live between 1791 and 1917. At its height, the Pale had a Jewish population of over five million, which represented the largest component, at 40%, of the world Jewish population at that time.

It's hard to imagine the life Movsha Leyba Levin lived in 1910. His son, my g-grandfather, Isaac Levine, known as Itzka Levin in Grodno, Belarus, had already been gone for 7 years to the US, but we don't

know if any of Movsha Leyba's other four children, nor any of his five siblings and seven cousins, left Grodno.

In the Grodno archives, Movsha Leyb, son of Itska, lived at 8 Belostokskaya Street in his own house, which had two apartments. He lived and ran his 'pub' in one apartment, and rented out the other apartment. In a 1910 list of tax payers-business owners, he owned a store that sold beer. By 1912, however, his wife, Feyga, daughter of Mikhel, was listed as the store owner, selling small groceries and tobacco, which indicates that Movsha Leyba must have died between 1911 and 1912.

During WWI, Grodno was occupied by Germany, who terrorized the people and destroyed much of the infrastructure of the town. Between the wars, the area was first allocated to Lithuania, then to Poland.

In 1920, during the Polish-Bolshevik War, a pogrom took place in Grodno. Almost the entire suburb inhabited by Jewish craftsmen, workers and poor burnt down, and 250 people were killed.

In WWII, Grodno again fell under German occupation, on June 22, 1941. On Nov 1, 1941, the Germans established a ghetto, where 25,000 Jews were forced into a space designed for around 5,000 people. On Nov 2, 1942, the first mass killings began, which marked the first transport of Grodno's Jewish population to extermination camps. By March 13, 1943, Grodno was declared "Judenrein," which means free of Jews, by posted public announcements. However, Grodno was considered to have one of the largest strongholds of partisan and underground movements, with about 16,000 active partisans.

What we don't know is if any of the Levin family were still in the area during this time, if they survived the war, or if they were victims of the Holocaust.

Isaac LEVINE (1871/1876-1915)

Isaac, my g-grandfather, was born in Grodno between 1871 and 1876. He was the eldest of at least five children. It's hard to say when he left Grodno, but by 1897 he was in Warsaw, Poland, where he married Sarah Silbernagel (Sura Lecia Cypa Zylbernagel), daughter of Josek Zylbernagel and Brana Leia Wilk. Their first three children were born in Warsaw – Betty, Helen and Jacob, my grandfather.

We'll never know why Isaac left Poland for America, but he left his young family and arrived in New York in July 1903, which was quite common in those days for the husband to sail to America ahead of the rest of the family, then buy a ticket for them to come later.

If he was still living in Warsaw at the time of his trip, traveling to Rotterdam, his embarkation point, had to be quite a journey. By today's travel, the 764 miles would take 12 hours. In 1903, travel was either by train, wagon or donkey. But that was just one of the major obstacles. Papers and passports had to be obtained, and Isaac traveled in steerage level.

Sarah's journey, with three young children, had to be beyond challenging. Not only did she have the long land journey, but since the train schedules didn't coordinate with sailing dates, it was quite common to have to wait days, weeks and even months at port. At least steamship companies were required to watch over prospective passengers, and at most ports they were housed in private boardinghouses. But that was just the START of the journey! Imagine having three children ages four, five and six years-old in conditions as described as late as 1911, in a report to President Taft, by the US Immigration Commission this way:

“The open deck space reserved for steerage passengers is usually very limited, and situated in the worst part of the ship, subject to the most violent motion, to the dirt from the stacks and the odors from the hold and galleys... the only provisions for eating are frequently shelves or benches along the sides or in the passages of sleeping compartments. Dining rooms are rare and, if found, are often shared with berths installed along the walls. Toilets and washrooms are completely inadequate; saltwater only is available.

“The ventilation is almost always inadequate, and the air soon becomes foul. The unattended vomit of the seasick, the odors of not too clean bodies, the reek of food and the awful stench of the nearby toilet rooms make the atmosphere of the steerage such that it is a marvel that human flesh can endure it... Most immigrants lie in their berths for most of the voyage, in a stupor caused by the foul air. The food often repels them... It is almost impossible to keep personally clean. All of these conditions are naturally aggravated by the crowding.”

When Isaac arrived in the US, he was going to meet an uncle, Bernhard Lewin in New York, but for some reason not specified, Isaac was held at Ellis Island for 5 days. I have never been able to determine who Bernhard was. Did he go by a different name in Poland? Could this have been Isaac's brother, David? According to my tree, Isaac had one living uncle, Abel. Would he have changed his name to Berhard?? It seems unlikely, but it's hard to really say. Back then, just because it said he was an uncle, doesn't mean he was actually an uncle, though.

Where he lived after he arrived, I have been unable to determine, but his family arrived in March, 1906, bound for Philadelphia.

Isaac was a watchmaker. In 1910, the family was still living in Philadelphia, where Isaac had his own shop and the couple had two more children, Michael and Max. However, by 1915, the family was in New York City, and by then they had six children, the youngest Molly (Mae in later records).

From Isaac's death certificate, he had been sick for 3 years before his death. Could he have moved his family to NYC so his family was with relatives? What is interesting to note is that, back in Grodno, his sister, Chaya Leya, and her husband, Yankel Lapin, applied for a passport in 1912, "...for traveling abroad on family matters." The application was rejected because Yankel's draft certificate wasn't submitted. Were they trying to go to the US to see Isaac because he was sick?

On August 2, 1915, Isaac died. On his death certificate it states his death was due to "... a long-standing endocarditis," which is basically inflammation of the heart.

He was just somewhere between 39 and 44 years old. His eldest child was 17 years old and his youngest was just 5 years old. By 1920 Sarah is still in NYC, but a different location, and has her youngest four children with her. Her youngest would have been 9 by then. Who helped with the family? We don't know.

In 1930, Sarah lives in another apartment, yet, and her two middle sons, Michael and Max, still live with her. However, by the time of her death, in 1952, she is living in Miami, Florida.

Jacob Levine (1902-1977)

Jacob, my grandfather, was three years old when he came to the US, and was just 13 when his father died. According to the 1940 census, he had completed up to the second year of high school, possibly

because he quit to work to help support the family. In 1920 he was still living with his mother and three younger siblings.

He married Flora Epstein in 1923 in Massachusetts, where she and her extensive family lived. By the 1930 census, he was living with her family in Los Angeles, California, and was working as a machinist, fixing washing machines. In 1940, he was a taxi driver, but they were living on their own, in their owned home, with their three daughters, Ruth, Iris and Janet.

Growing up, we heard tales of Jacob's travels. I always thought he traveled for work, but it was much later that I learned that he just... Traveled. And gambled. He was a quiet man, and I could count on one hand how many conversations I ever had with him. At 75 years-old, he died of a sudden heart attack quietly in his chair, waiting for breakfast.

Flora was always a spunky little lady. It was because of her that they always owned their homes in Los Angeles. And in Los Angeles, she was surrounded by several siblings. She stayed active after Jacob's death, but at 82, she also passed.

With the passing of both Jacob and Flora, thus ended the immigrant story of the Levine family.



Jacob Levine and Flora Epstein, 1943



Marjorie Geiser

Margie retired from her business in 2017 and in 2018, to prepare for a month-long trip to Poland, she decided to venture into genealogy. Little did she know it would transform her life AND her days.

Since then, she has been taking, on average, 9-12 educational webinars per month, soaking up all she can learn on ALL aspects of genealogy. Her family story provides a wealth of directions to go, from her maternal side of Jewish immigrants coming to the land of plenty (USA), to her paternal 'farmer' side, which includes warriors in the Revolutionary War, immigrants from locations such as France and Denmark and Ireland, to even ancestors said to be on the Mayflower.

Margie is a JewishGen volunteer in the Educational Department, providing Virtual Conversations, which are 45-minute private zoom sessions that help students learn new strategies, resources and tips in order to empower them to take their personal research journeys to greater successes. To learn more about the JewishGen Virtual Conversations, go to <https://www.jewishgen.org/Education/edu-virtual.html>.

To contact Margie, email margiegeiser@gmail.com.