

December 7, 2013

David Abir: So I will tell you about this side of the family. Sarah Krensky, okay. Actually, her maiden name was Sarah Lipschutz. Now, they lived in a small townlet, a Jewish family, called Astryń, or Astryńa, various versions of this name, which is 50 kilometers east of Hrodna. Now I'm pointing out these things because it has some bearing. Now, this Hrodna was an important city, about half of it Jews and the rest Lithuanians and a little Poles. And that belonged under the tsar, I'm talking about 19th century, under the Russian tsar. It belonged to the government of Vilnius, which was the capital of Lithuania. So this entire section was part of the small Baltic state of Lithuania. There were three Baltic states: Lithuania, above that Latvia, and above that Estonia, on the eastern side of the Baltic Sea. And farther to the west was Germany. Now, the Jews in tsarist Russia were not permitted to live everywhere. They could live only in places where they were permitted to carry on their lives and live and act etc. A Jew couldn't live in St. Petersburg and couldn't live in Moscow, except with very special permission. And very few Jews did live in those cities in those days.

Now, Astryń was a small town, as I said, and built like many of these little townlets. It had a marketplace, which was the center. Around it was, in the case of a Christian townlet, was a church. In the Jewish places there were no churches of course, so there was a small marketplace and the Lifshitz family lived, you see it's like let's say a horseshoe. In the center of this horseshoe they had a small house. And they were more or less among the more respected families in the townlet. So in that house of theirs there was a small store, which was a store that contained everything, a bit of everything. And in the backyard they had a cow, sheep, chickens, like the custom in those days. Now this house of theirs faced the entire marketplace. When World War I broke out, for instance, and the Germans invaded into Russia and captured the place. So immediately the house of the Lifshitz family became their headquarters. They pushed out the family into the cowshed or whatever it is and they made it their headquarters. When the Cossacks, the Russians, recaptured, they made it their headquarters, and again. So since this area was between the Russians and the Germans, they were all the time, the border moved, and they suffered terribly. Now, at the end of the 19th century, there started a strong movement to get out of those countries which are under the Russian rule and which contain many Jews, like Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, etc. A movement to get out and go elsewhere. So many of them went to the United States. Some of them went to South Africa. Actually, most of the Jewish population in South Africa originated from Lithuanian Jews. Now, Lithuania itself was among the Jewish people, was considered the utmost place of learning. You know Jewish tradition was that the child has to go to hillel, to school, from the age of four. Hillel, then yeshiva, etc. And the best yeshivas and the best hillels were in Lithuania, the very very best. And people like Bialik the famous poet and many others, they were from the Ukraine, and if they wanted to learn something they went to a Lithuanian yeshiva.

Now, the topmost Jewish learned person in those days was the, he was called Havagon Vilna, the genius of Vilna. And when the Hassidic movement started the Lithuanian Jews didn't accept it. I'll tell you why. You see, the Jews suffered terribly, there were pogroms and killings and raping and whatnot. And the slogan in tsarist Russia was "beat the Jews, and by that save Russia." That was the saying, or motto. All these little towns and townlets etc. they lived under miracles. And when the Baal Shem Tov, the one that started the Jewish Hassidic movement, came up with his ideology, that Jews have to look at

everything with a smile, to accept everything with a song, etc. etc. Many people became Hassidic, but the Lithuanian Jews did not accept it because they were afraid that these Rabbis would become like semi-gods. And therefore it's against the Jewish tradition. Jewish tradition was rational thinking, learned thinking, etc.

I see that both of you are getting tired.

Peter Krensky: No, keep going.

DA: Yeah, okay. So, they objected to it. In that movement out of the country, as I said many went, quite a number went to the USA. And among them also the Lifshitz family, mother and father, and four children. The oldest was Shachne (sp?), the second was my mother, Yona. Then there was a son, David. I am named after him. And then was Sarah, the youngest. So Sarah joined, she was very young, I'm not sure about her age but she was about fifteen or something like that. She joined that movement and went to the United States, in 1914 just before the war broke out, World War I broke out. And she kept in writing with her family. The writing continued through all the entire years that followed.

Now, about what happened to Sarah in the United States you probably know better than I do. Back in Russia, World War I started. As I told you, Astryn was a few weeks under German rule, a few weeks under Russian rule. Now, the Jews sympathized with the German invaders because they were more civilized, they behaved more humanely, not like the Cossacks, who were brutal and terrible. The Russians therefore mistrusted the Jews. In Astryn there were a few weeks and months under one rule, a few weeks and months under the other rule. And the starvation was terrible, hunger was terrible, everything was terrible. At one time, their son David, got appendicitis, there was no cure to it and he passed away. And I am named after him. Eventually they survived.

Now, Sarah, after the war when they established themselves a little, she used to send in her letters to Astryn to her parents, she used to enclose a bill of one dollar. Now one dollar was money at that time. Particularly in a townlet like Astryn. So this dollar helped them to build themselves up again. They renewed their store and started living more comfortably. Now, Shachne he was a dealer with wood. In those days, wood was needed for constructing, for the needs of war, etc. So Shachne was during the war out of the house. He was working far away. So most of the burden fell on my mother, she was the second in the hierarchy. I'll not go through all the stories.

Another thing, World War I ended and Lithuania became independent after a few hundred years of Russian yoke. Poland became independent. And the entire Russian empire disintegrated. So Poland and Lithuania were Christian countries of course, but with one distinction. Russia had their church, while Poland and Lithuania were under the Roman Catholic Church, which was different. That was another cause of hatred between these countries and Russia, mother Russia. When Poland became free and Lithuania became free, Poland decided to conquer part of Lithuania. The war ended in 1917-1918. So in 1919 Poland conquered a large area, containing Vilnius, which was the capital of Lithuania, and Hrodna, which was again part of Lithuania. And all of a sudden it became Poland. Against that, the Lithuanian government cut their ties with Poland, there were no ties, no political relations. All of a sudden, one from Astryn to go to Vilnius or Kaunas, that was the second largest city in Lithuania. So, Kaunas became

the capital and to go from Kaunas to Astryn by bus in those days was a trip of half a day. All of a sudden they were cut off, they couldn't go.

So eventually, 1932, Shachne, who lived in Kaunas, and my mother came to them lived in Kaunas. And my mother got married in 1921 with my father. My mother and Shachne decided to visit the parents in Astryn. And the sister remained there, Hashelin. So, how could they go? They went to Germany and from Germany moved into Poland and then could go and visit them.

Roz Krensky: How long did it take to do something like that?

DA: Oh, in the 1920s, two days. So that's the way they reached in 1932 Astryn. And on the way, Shachne built himself up again a nice store. A merchandise store in Kaunas. And my father too in a different field. They made themselves up and lived fairly comfortably, Shachne in particular. So they bought you gifts and present, took you to Astryn, and they spent two weeks there in Astryn and everybody was happy, etc. Now they came back and later on when we had decided to leave, Hitler came to power in Germany. 1933, he came to power. So my parents decided to move out and go to Palestine. But it was very difficult to go. I'll not tell you the whole story of how it happened, but they wanted to visit Astryn on the way. From Lithuania to go to Palestine the best way would have been to go from Kaunas through Germany to Italy, and in Italy from Trieste or any other port to go Palestine. But they wanted to visit Astryn. So what did they do? We went, my parents, myself (I was 11 years old) and my brother (who was 8 years old) we went up to the capital of Latvia, Riga, moved into Poland, moved all the way down to Astryn and could see the people in Astryn. There I met Hashelin and her husband, excellent people. And their mother was still alive. Hashelin had a young little girl called Miriam. So I was fortunate to see them, all of them, and see Astryn. I never saw a Jewish townlet the way it was in those days.

RK: So what happened to the sister?

DA: Now, when World War II broke out and Germany invaded immediately to cause the war. So the Germans moved in, exterminated all the Jews of Lithuania. They were the first to be exterminated, the Jews of Lithuania and that part of Poland. So they were all killed, some of in Auschwitz, some of them before that. The husband of Hashelin was taken to do some hard work in a nearby forest and he was killed there by the Germans. Their end was bitter, very bitter.

RK: So the whole family?

DA: Yeah. So now if you want to enlarge on any item that I mentioned I will do it gladly.

PK: Okay. You said that you met Sarah's mother in Astryn. What was her name? I don't know anything about her.

Ora Abir: (To David) Sarah's mother is your grandmother.

DA: Yeah.

OA: We have the photographs. I'll send you Rozzie.

DA: By the way, a year after they, Shachne and my mother, visited them in Astryn in 1932, a year after that the grandfather, their father, died. So he died before, he died in 1933.

RK: Wait a minute, I missed the beginning. Who's father died?

OA: Sarah's father died, a year after they visited in '34.

DA: In '32.

OA: '32?

DA: They visited them in '32.

OA: Ah, you mean Shachne and your mother.

DA: A year after that he passed away. He suffered, he had heart problems and he passed away.

OA: So he missed the Holocaust, thank God.

DA: The mother, his wife, was alive when we came. I met her.

RK: Peter was saying.

DA: Yeah. And I cannot remember her name now. His name was Abram Hirsch.

OA: Yes when we talked to the Yad Vashem you couldn't remember her name. Because he called her Grammy, you see, they didn't call her by her name.

DA: Yeah, his name: Abram Hirsch, Abram Hirsch. Her name was, I cannot remember right now.

RK: I don't think Joel would know it either.

OA: No, I'm sure he wouldn't. Look, David saw them. Joel even didn't see them.

DA: I was 11 years old when I saw them.

PK: So, what year did you arrive in Palestine?

DA: In 1934, February 1934. And so because of that we had to go to Israel. Up to Latvia, enter Poland, go down to Astryn, then back to Warsaw, from Warsaw all the way to Romania to the Black Sea.

RK: How long did that take you to do all that?

DA: Including our stay in Astryn etc., two weeks. And then we reached the port of Constanta in Romania and there we went on a ship to Palestine, to Jaffa. And when we arrived in Jaffa, in those days the port was a primitive port.

OA: (Laughing) They took the mothers...

DA: Yeah, wait, wait, wait. I have to tell you how they worked. Haifa started being built up and Haifa was meant to be a port because the entire nature of Haifa, today, etc., was ideal for that. And they started developing the oil digging in Iraq. So the Iraqi petroleum company, IPC, which was a British company. And all of Israel was under British rule after the war. So they put oil pipes from Iraq through the desert, through Trans Jordan, through Palestine, to the port of Haifa. And there the oil refineries, you will see them when you go there tomorrow, huge oil refineries started being built up. So, we came to the port of Jaffa. And how did they unload the people on boats? Jaffa was an ancient port dating back to several thousand years — 3,000 years or something like that. Ah, you can see it from your hotel.

OA: Caesarea too. They will see Caesarea. Caesarea too was a port for Herod and the Romans.

DA: So, the port of Haifa worked in a primitive way, there were the Arab boats.

OA: Small boats.

DA: And large boats to load large boxes and other goods. And the ships waited outside of the port. So these boats use to carry the loads to the ships and from there load them on the ships and vice versa. Goods that were brought from Europe or other places were unloaded that way. Now, how did they handle the persons that arrived? All of a sudden we arrived and we're on the boat from Constanta to Jaffa and we're waiting. And all of a sudden those strong Arabs, sailors walked upstairs and they had peculiar trousers.

OA: I'm sure they didn't see it.

DA: And their hats. They came up, took me, took my mother or father like a bundle. One Arab stood on the ship, took this bundle, threw!

OA: Threw the bundle to the other!

DA: Threw the bundle, which was a person, to another Arab that was on that boat and he caught us. That's the way we entered Palestine.

RK: And they did that to more people than one?

DA: Yeah. And they were excellent workers. Nobody was injured, nothing. But it was so strange, so terrifying.

OA: So his mother was shocked. An Arab took her and threw her to another one from the boat (laughing). Can you imagine?

RK: How old was your mother about then?

DA: How old?

RK: How old was she?

DA: She was born in 1895. This was in 1934. So she was 39, 38. A year later, Shachne and his family arrived. Shachne did a wise thing. He, all his life it was a dream to go to Palestine. A Zionist. So in 1933 when his oldest son, Israel, graduated from high school in Lithuania, in Hrodna, he took the son and they came to Israel, Jaffa, and he bought a small orange grove not far from Petah Tikva. And he left his son to take care of it, his son was only 18 years old, no experience at all, but a very gifted child, and he took care of this orange grove until in 1934-1935 Shachne and the rest of the family arrived and we accepted them in the airport in Jaffa. They underwent the same bundling, the same treatment by the Arabs. Now any other questions?

PK: I don't know. It's an amazing story. Where did you first settle?

DA: Me? In Israel? Oh yeah, I'll tell you the entire story. You see, my mother, my father and mother, they had a small store. Okay, I'll tell you about what happened to them during World War II, or World War I. When the war broke out and tsarist Russia didn't trust the Jews because they understood that the Jews would prefer the Germans of those days, which were more civilized, not the Nazi Germans. So they expelled some of the Jews from Lithuania and other parts to go much deeper into Russia. So my grandfather lived in a very small town, Vidishock, not far from Vilkomya. And he was the rabbi of that little townlet. Now, they were compelled to move into Russia, to move all the way to the Caspian Sea. Not the Black Sea, the Caspian Sea. So, all of a sudden, and there were no trains in those days, I mean there were trains but not everywhere. They and many other families were compelled to move with horses and carts during the rainy season, the fall. Autumn is very unpleasant. They moved all the way by horses through the mud and everything all the way to the Caspian Sea. Astraham, and they spent the war there. When the war ended there was the communist revolution, etc. They started moving back. And again a long trip. On the way they passed through Moscow. And in Moscow, they stopped for a few months to recuperate. My father, who was a young man at that time, got a job in a Jewish store selling clothes. So he worked in that store and became let's call it an expert in this particular trade. The owners of that store, very warm Jews, they became very close friends with my father. They were much older. And later on when my father came back to Lithuania and Shachne was already in Hrodna. So my father and my mother they got married and opened a store in Hrodna and that was in the clothing business. At that time, there was a terrible hunger in Russia because the forced collectivization that Stalin imposed on the country when established all the houses and all the rest. And the peasants started killing their horses and cows, etc. because they didn't want to give up their property, meager property. There spread a terrible hunger in Russia, so what did my father do? He started sending bundles to that family in Moscow. And these bundles helped them a lot. He used to put in some goods which the people in Moscow sold for good money and it helped them to save their souls so to speak. So it's a small world.

OA: (Speaks in Hebrew)

OA: (Replies in Hebrew) So, when we arrived in Jaffa, in Tel Aviv, my father's younger brother, he had a younger brother, he became a dentist. A dental technician, not a dentist, dental technician. And he was the first dental technician in Tel Aviv. He came here in 1923. He was quite well up and my father came to Tel Aviv and it was very difficult... oh yeah, I forget another important thing. My father had his store and he used to get the clothes from Germany or England. So he paid whatever the cost was for the

merchandise and so everyday a little profit in Lithuania. Now, in 1929 broke out the terrible economic crisis in the United States, which spread quickly into Europe. And all of a sudden goods, merchandise that my father paid let's say 100 dollars all of a sudden became worth 50 dollars. So he paid good money and had to sell it, not only he, but the entire community, and had to sell it at half price. So by the end of 1933 my father was out of money, no money no nothing. So when he arrived in Israel, no money, they had a very hard time. We had a very hard time, even days of hunger, simple hunger. Until they found a place to live, a small, lousy apartment and he got a job in a store, underpaid, but still. And so we had a very difficult time.

OA: (Speaks in Hebrew)

DA: (Replies in Hebrew) When I became, at the age of 13, I was a good student in school. Some of my class members needed some help, so I started giving private lessons at the age of 13 or 14. And this helped me pay my studies in high school.

OA: In those days, you have to pay for. Now we have sort of unpaid schooling. But the parents had to pay a lot.

RK: David, can I ask you a very personal question?

DA: Yeah.

RK: What do you think about things today in Israel?

DA: About?

RK: Politics, today in Israel.

DA: I will tell you. We have to be realists. In Israel, there are also Arabs. I mean, in the Western part of Palestine. There are also Arabs. You cannot kick them out, they live here. Their fathers lived here. Some migrated from the neighboring countries, but still, they're here. You cannot expel them, you cannot decay them, they're human beings. So, we cannot rule the entire country. And the best solution would be two states, separate states. We are independently now a country, they have their independence in their part of the country. But here the problem starts, I mean other problems start. In our part of the country, we have developed it. We have made it a flourishing country, high rate of income. We did it in a short time. The Arabs did not do it. They are lagging behind, have been lagging behind. So they are in a poorer situation, but they are very chauvinistic. They want to send us out of the country. When the first Jews started moving into the country in the 19th century, the entire country was unpopulated. Very few nomadic Bedouins lived here, some fanatics lived here. The population was very, very small.

Now, they have to have a viable state to make a living. But they are very naturalistic. They are agitated by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, agitated terribly. They are the right wing of the Muslims.

RK: And they have control now.

DA: Over there and many other places they mismanage, and okay that's their problem. But in the meantime, our Arab population is agitated by that. So they want to kick us out and we of course won't give up. Now we've reached a situation where those that have to think what will happen, okay suppose we come to terms with the Arabs, they establish their state and we establish our state. We want to be sure that they will not attack us. So we have to make arrangements for self-defense. Even if they agree they don't want to agree, that means, those that fled the country during the war of independence, the Arabs that fled, want to come back. They cannot come in because their rate of birth is among the highest in the world while we have two children, three children, four children in a family. So within a short time they will overrun us. So we cannot permit these refugees to come back to our area. They have to settle down, if they want to, wherever they are, or within this western part of Palestine, the Arab part. So here, it's a conflict that both sides are too stubborn, can't think of the day after. An agreement would be impossible. I'm telling you I see no real solution within the foreseeable future.

OA: David, you forget to tell that we have now very very extreme government, extreme for the right side, very extreme. And they think that we have to live in the country that Abraham, our father Abraham, gave to us. And that's ridiculous. They say that every piece of land belongs to all of us, only to the Jews. And you can't do it; you can't send entire populations from the country. And that's the problem.

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