

Yetta Cohen, my great-great aunt, was born in about 1890 in Kalufka, which was a town in Europe in an area that changed hands between different countries three times in the 1900's. She lived there with her father, her mother, who was her father's second wife, her twin brother, Pincus, and her sister, Golda. In addition, there was an older half-sister, my great-grandmother, Gittel Devorah, and another brother. Gitty was much older than Yetta, and her son, my grandfather, was only a few years older than Yetta. The family was close, however, and Gitty and her family would come to visit for Yom Tov. As a second marriage, Yetta's parents married in a religious ceremony but not a civil ceremony, so her mother and the children kept her mother's last name, Ehrenberg, while the older children took the last name of their father, Reibel.

Kalufka, where Yetta was born, was a small town, with not a lot of shops. Yetta's father had a business there until a pogrom came through their town, and his business was destroyed. They then moved to Czernowitz when Yetta was 6 years old, which was a large city in the province of Bukovina, then in Austria-Hungary, although in 1918 it became part of Romania, and now is in the Ukraine. Czernowitz is near the Carpathian Mountains. The river Prut runs through the city, and it is surrounded by forests and fields. On average, it is warmer in the winter, and cooler and rainier in the summer than Baltimore. Czernowitz was a large and vibrant city, and was known as "Little Vienna", since it was an important cultural center, and also as "Jerusalem upon the Prut", by its Jewish community. In fact, Jews made up more than 30% of the population in the early 1900's.

Since the law in Czernowitz was that children had to attend school, Yetta went to 'folk school' for four years. She once earned 25 kronnen as a prize for being the best student. Her family used it to buy a coat for her. Yetta's first memory was when she got a new, rose-colored dress, and all of her friends came over to see it. She felt very fancy and special then. Yetta's family lived as frum Jews. Her favorite holiday was Pesach because her father ran such a nice Seder, singing all of the parts of the Hagaddah. On Purim, her mother would bake a lot. Pincus would dress up and sing special songs, and people would throw money at him.

When the family moved to Czernowitz, Yetta's father tried to find a position as a Hebrew teacher, but he couldn't find enough students, so they struggled financially. Luckily, Gitty had already gone to America with her family, and she sent back \$15 a month to help support them. Then Yetta's father caught pneumonia and died, so Yetta left school, even though she would have wanted to continue, and went to a neighbor to learn dressmaking. When she knew how to make dresses, she got a job as a finisher, and earned \$5 a month. Her mother sold eggs to restaurants. Between the two of them, and the money from Gitty, they managed.

By about 1910, when she was 18, Yetta had saved enough money from what she earned, and from what Gitty sent, to go to America. She took a droshky, which was a horse-drawn cart, to a small town, where she met a friend. The two then went to the port in Bremen, where they stayed for three days. Then they took a steamboat across the ocean. They took their own kosher food with them, since there would be none on the boat. The trip was supposed to last five days, but took seven because of rough weather. Many people were seasick, but Yetta was not. When they got to America, she and her friend did not have to go through Ellis Island because they travelled 2nd class, not 3rd class. They were met by Gitty in New York. When Yetta came, there were still horse-drawn streetcars in New York City. Yetta lived with her sister's family, and took classes in English – first during the day, and then in night school, as she started to work as a dressmaker. She earned enough money to send tickets for her mother and Golda to come to America. Her brother, Pincus, ended up in Buenos Aires because he liked to travel. At one point she went back to Austria to visit her family, but she got caught there because of World War I.

In America, Yetta worked hard as a dressmaker until she owned her own shop, with four girls under her. She would go to look at dresses in fancy department stores on 57th Street, remember what they looked like, and go back to her shop and copy them. She worked five days a week, taking off on Friday to clean and cook, and on Shabbos. Her mother would go to shul on Shabbos, but she would rest then, and only go on holidays. A friend introduced her to her husband, because she was working so hard that she never went out. She married in her late 20's.

All in all, Yetta's life was much easier in America than in Europe. Even though she worked hard, her standard of living was higher, and it was safer, too. In World War II, the military dictator of Romania had a ghetto created in Czernowitz, and sent many of the city's Jews to Germany. At first he allowed 190 Jews to remain, but the mayor of Czernowitz was able to convince him to raise the number, in the end exempting 20,000 Jews from deportation. Overall, two thirds of the Jews in Czernowitz perished. Clearly, Yetta was very lucky that she and her entire family were able to leave Europe when it was still easy to do so.



Central Square

The Czernowitz Shul

