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# No Longer a Secret: Uncovering My Family's Russian Jewish Heritage

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research article

## No Longer a Secret: Uncovering My Family's Russian Jewish Heritage

—Ella Nilsen (Edited by Katherine Bragg)

The closest I've gotten to a glimpse of my grandmother Betty's life are boxes of old family photos. The pictures are small, sepia-toned prints, crinkled with age. In one, my grandmother looks about five years old. She sits upright in a tiny child's chair, reading a book. Her hair falls to her shoulder and is tied up by a white bow. I can recognize my father in her facial features, and the intense expression with which she stares at the book. At this young age, Betty's mother was dead, and her father had left her and her brother to the care of the New York State foster system. She was separated from family and community. The implications of this abandonment would be far greater than she knew then. Her Jewish past, lost with her parents, would become a burden for Betty and eventually become a secret she would protect fiercely later in life.

I began my 2010 summer Research Experience and Apprenticeship Program (REAP) project with the single intention of discovering the identities of my paternal great-grandparents, Betty's mother and father, Lena and Jacob Coopersmith. My research mainly consisted of searching census lists and databases as well as immigration and genealogical records, looking for family obituaries and census entries. I searched a fair amount of Jewish databases, looking for clues about the Jewish life in America my ancestors may have experienced, and did extensive reading in secondary sources on the history of Jews in the Russian Empire.

I learned Lena and Jacob Coopersmith were Jewish immigrants to the United States, Lena from Russia and Jacob from Austria. My grandmother Betty had kept their identities secret, declining to tell her children and grandchildren anything about their ancestors. Because of this, we knew almost nothing of Lena and Jacob. My grandmother did this to hide the fact that she and her parents were Jewish.

### History of the Jews in Russia

I initially became interested in the experiences of Russian Jews after taking two Russian/Soviet history courses with University of New Hampshire Professor Cathy Frierson. While studying Jewish life under Tsar Nicholas II (1894-1917), I knew that the largest Jewish migrations out of Russia occurred before his reign. The source of Jewish discontent in Russia was far older than Nicholas II; the actions of Russian autocrats nearly one hundred years previously had contributed significantly to this exodus.

Between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, nearly 1.3 million Jews departed Russia for the United States (Slezkine 116). Violent persecution and restrictive laws made this migration one of the largest ever witnessed by the world. Ninety-four percent of the Jewish population had been forced to live in the Pale of Settlement, an area encompassing sections of present day Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Ukraine, and Belorussia. Those in the Pale experienced stark poverty and persecution. Jewish shopkeepers and entrepreneurs were not allowed to run businesses, and it was extremely difficult for Jewish doctors and lawyers to practice. Ethnic Russians were also allowed to live in the Pale as



*Betty Nilsen, the author's grandmother, as a child. Inset, Jacob Coopersmith, the author's great-grandfather.*

they wished, causing significant overcrowding. These problems caused millions of Jewish subjects to leave the Russian Empire, seeking a new life in a different country.

## **Family History**

My great-grandmother, Lena Coopersmith, was a Russian Jewish immigrant born around 1884, when anti-Semitism was still rampant in the Russian Empire. She probably made the journey to the United States as a young child, arriving sometime around 1900. I found no documentation of her parents in America; therefore, I assumed Lena came over with her older siblings, which was not uncommon for immigrating families. I could not find much about her life before her marriage to Jacob Coopersmith, an Austrian Jewish immigrant.

Although the story of Lena Coopersmith's immigration to the United States remained a mystery to me, I assumed that she shared a common immigration experience with many other Russian Jews. Through my reading of histories of Russian Jews and of their experiences upon arrival in the United States, I gained some understanding of the reasons Jews left the Russian Empire as well as what the typical journey to America consisted of. Since I could find no actual documentation of Lena's life in Russia or passage to the United States, I decided to fictionally recreate my grandmother's experience for the purpose of my research project.

I first had the idea to write my great-grandmother's fictional narrative after reading *The Death of Woman Wang* by historian Jonathan Spence. The history monograph's subject was life in seventeenth-century rural China. In one chapter, Spence wrote a narrative dream sequence for a historical person known only as the Woman Wang. Though fictional, his writing added a distinctly personal and hauntingly real aspect to the life of a woman about whom very little is known. Spence used his own imagination, informed as much as possible by historical fact, while writing about a historical subject; and I decided that his method was the best way for me to tell my great-grandmother's story. My narrative is largely based on the historical facts of the average life of Russian Jews within the Empire. I excerpt this passage from my REAP final paper below:

The children in Lena's village did not grow up listening to the scary stories of witches and ogres, elaborate monsters created to keep them obedient and safe. They didn't need ogres to keep them scared into obeying their parents; the village had enough of its own monsters. First were the Gentile children. They ran wild during the day and at night, screamed, "Jews get out!" and threw handfuls of mud at Jewish houses. After weeks of this, her father's patience erupted. He called the children 'monsters' among other, worse names. His inability to protect his house and family from these injustices was heartbreaking. He could do nothing but wipe off the mud and curse the perpetrators under his breath. If he confronted the children's parents, they would spit in his face and tell him to go home. If he went to the authorities, they would mock him, saying that they saw no difference with a 'filthy Jew's' house whether or not it was covered in mud. If he caught a Gentile child and slapped him, he would be arrested, beaten, and fined.

With their own father rendered helpless, the children grew up knowing that no one could keep them safe. They learned early to not be caught past the borders of the settlement by watching the young men who tried, nearly always dragged back, bleeding and bruised by a policeman. They learned they could not walk down certain village paths without a group of Gentile children stuck to them like the mud on their houses, chanting 'Filthy Jews, go home!' They learned there was something wrong with them in the eyes of the Gentiles, the police, and the Cossack soldiers. Something had to be wrong. If all were well, they could play without fear. If all were well, their houses wouldn't be festooned with the remnants of the manure heap. If all were well their fathers would have work, and if all were well, they wouldn't be hungry for food, warmth, and happiness. They could dream, but dreaming wasn't enough if you woke up to the ghetto. Jews in Russia could not turn dreams into reality.

## **Lena's and Betty's Life in America**

In America, Lena grew up and married Austrian Jewish immigrant Jacob Coopersmith in either 1911 or 1913. The couple's first child, my grandmother Betty, was born in 1913 in Brooklyn, New York. Soon after, they all moved to the small railroad town of Altoona, Pennsylvania. They resided in the town's Jewish section, a few blocks away from the conservative synagogue. Lena's elder sister Bessie also lived in the town, but the rest of her family's whereabouts is unclear.

I included the history of Jews in Altoona in my research. This meant reading local historical accounts and communicating with the curator of the local genealogical library in the Blair County Genealogical Society, in present-day Altoona. I was in search of Lena's obituary, hoping it would reveal information about her life. I eventually found her obituary but could find little substantial information on any of her family members.



*Betty and Gustave Nilsen, the author's grandmother and great-uncle. Approximate ages 15 and 13, New York City.*

In 1914, Lena gave birth to her second child, a boy named Gustave. A year later at age twenty-nine, she would die of pleurisy. Soon after her death, Jacob would move the two children to New York City, place them in the foster care system and leave to work as a tobacco salesman.

At the time, Betty was two years old; Gustave was one. Their experiences with foster families were extremely unhappy. They were moved from place to place, sometimes together and sometimes apart. Their foster parents were often unable to support additional children. As Betty grew older, she became increasingly independent. By age seventeen, she lived alone and took on jobs to support herself and eventually made enough to pay for her younger brother's schooling. She, Gustave and Jacob were reunited briefly during her teenage years; all three worked together at the Acme movie theater in New York City's Union Square, where Jacob was the projectionist.

During this time in her life, Betty first encountered anti-Semitism. While filling out job applications, she found she was far more likely to gain employment if she put down "Christian" or "Protestant" instead of "Jewish." My grandmother's early separation from Altoona had severed all positive connections to the family and Jewish community she had briefly experienced. For a young girl who was now only experiencing the negative aspects of being Jewish, there was no reason to publicly admit her heritage. These mild attacks on her Jewish identity made Betty think of discarding it completely.

## **A Secret Heritage**

The secrecy surrounding my heritage made me determined to discover more about my grandmother Betty's life in addition to the lives of Jacob and Lena. To do so, I conducted eight interviews with my parents, older siblings, and uncles. Before the interviews commenced, I applied for approval from UNH's Institutional Review Board. This process involved my formulating interview questions for my subjects and having the IRB approve the questions and look over my interview approach. After a process of a few weeks, I was awarded IRB approval for the project.

My discussions with my family members about Betty exposed her reasons for keeping our ancestry secret. Interviews with my father and uncles revealed much about her life as a wife and mother. Unfortunately, my grandmother's marriage to my grandfather, Louis Nilsen, an immigrant from Norway, was not particularly cheerful or emotionally supportive. A successful sail maker with his own business, my grandfather provided well for his wife and five sons; but he was also emotionally distant and at times cold and harsh. A quintessential patriarch, he usually had "the final word" in every argument. Betty's early separation from her family was emotionally damaging. She had once explicitly told a grandchild that her lack of family made her feel isolated and socially unsure. Louis's temperament was not always beneficial in these situations.



*Betty Nilsen, the author's grandmother*

Besides the tensions within my grandparent's household, there was also a good deal of secrecy when it came to the past. My father and his brothers could not recall their mother ever discussing her background when they were children. It was years later during my father's college days, that he began to wonder about a Jewish heritage. He had enrolled at St. Olaf College in Minnesota, in the heart of Scandinavian America. Even with his Norwegian name and heritage, my father began to wonder if Betty's heritage was different. Tall and handsome, my father's brown hair and eyes were accompanied by more typically Jewish features. "Some people called me Ishmael," he laughed.

He started wondering about other possible family origins. "I started discerning what physical characteristics ... that there were. You know, there are, in racial and ethnic groups ... distinct characteristics. So, I started thinking ... if anything, my name was Scandinavian but I didn't have the blue eyes and blonde hair of a Scandinavian."

My father's suspicions grew when Betty later mentioned that her parents were from Russia and Austria. He knew that millions of Jews had emigrated from both countries and thought his grandparents could have made such a journey. He also remembered a few brief visits Betty's father and brother had made to Louis and Betty's home in Pound Ridge, New York, when he was a child. Though the physical characteristics of his Grandfather Jacob and Uncle Gustave probably made little impression on him at the time, in college he dwelled on it more. "If anything ... they didn't look Irish; they didn't look Italian." They certainly didn't look Scandinavian, but rather "somewhat Semitic."

My father confronted my grandmother about his suspicions nearly twenty years later, around 1991. Betty confirmed that both her parents were Jewish, then demanded that my father never tell anyone. Nevertheless, he firmly believed that his own children had a right to know their heritage. A few months later, he told my brother and sister. My sister confronted my grandmother about the secret soon after, setting off a rift in the family that would never be fully healed. Growing up, I was never explicitly told by either of my parents that Betty was Jewish. It was alluded to from time to time, but I rarely asked further questions or wondered about my ancestors.



*Betty Nilsen's grandchildren and great-grandchildren. The author is fifth from left (in black.)*

My sister, more than anyone in the family, talked to our grandmother about her life. Twenty years older than I was, my sister interviewed our grandmother a number of times after the initial discovery of the secret. She discovered over the course of these discussions that my grandmother kept our Jewish heritage a secret because, as she told me, her "fear was if she told anybody, and told us, then we would tell other people, and then it would be ... generally known that we were Jewish. And then, in her [Betty's] words, 'when the next Holocaust happened,' we would all be killed." This fear was the main reason for my grandmother's secrecy surrounding her heritage.

While Betty's fear may seem to have been extreme, it is not so much when one considers that the European Holocaust was occurring when Betty was a young mother to small children. She had never experienced a positive Jewish community; her sole encounters with her Jewish heritage were negative. My grandmother had once said that she did not feel Jewish; there was nothing from this identity that could resonate with her, given her experiences with anti-Semitism. To save her family from persecution, she simply chose to not tell them about a piece of their past, a piece she felt could only ever be detrimental.

## Family Connections

Looking back at my family's journey, I have come to realize the stories of my great-grandmother and grandmother are those of resilience. In a strange way, the persecution that drove my great-grandmother Lena from her native country in Russia came back to haunt her daughter Betty in the United States. Through a complicated series of events that no one could have foreseen, Betty experienced the very same shame about her origin that the Russian government hoped to foster in their Jewish citizens. Betty was denied work in the United States on the basis of her Jewish ethnicity, as her ancestors had been in Russia. Because of the loss of her parents, she was cut off from the community her parents were part of in Altoona, Pennsylvania.

Betty's own personal experience is strikingly similar to that of the entire Russian Jewish community that came to America. Nevertheless, like the Russian Jews, Betty's story endured. It endured in her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. It continues to endure in the eagerness with which her descendants wish to learn more about and celebrate their heritage. Our family secret is no longer secret. It has become part of a long and rich story that will continue for years to come.

*My thanks to all who helped me successfully complete this project: my project advisor, Professor Cathy Frierson, the Blair County Genealogical Society in Pennsylvania, and the Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research for the grant which made the project possible. Most of all, I thank my family. Without their help and support, I could never have done this.*

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### **Author Bio**

*Ella Nilsen of Dalton, New Hampshire, is a sophomore history Honors in Major student at the University of New Hampshire. In her research project for Dr. Cathy Frierson's history course, Ella focused on the Jewish experience in the late Russian empire. Dr. Frierson nominated Ella for the Research Experience and Apprenticeship Program (REAP) award she received for the summer of 2010. In addition to working with Dr. Frierson, Ella was determined to learn more about the Russian Jewish background of her own family and explore, in particular, the reasons behind her grandmother's decision to keep the family's Jewish ancestry a secret.*

*Ella's research with Dr. Frierson of the history of Russian anti-Semitism greatly informed her understanding of events that unfolded in her own family. Dr. Frierson encouraged her to write about her research for Inquiry. Ella said, "The process of discovering this family history and uncovering the family secret was certainly difficult but incredibly rewarding." Learning the contents of the family secret as well as why it was kept for years has brought her family closer together and was the most satisfactory part of her project. For Ella, "the project made history come alive . . . as it involved piecing my family story together. It reinforced the value of research and learning for me." Ella will graduate in May 2013 with a Bachelor of Arts in history and plans to pursue research and investigative journalism.*

### **Mentor Bio**

*Professor **Cathy A. Frierson** has been a member of the Department of History at the University of New Hampshire since fall 1991. Professor Frierson is Ella's faculty advisor and nominated her for a Research Experience and Apprenticeship Program (REAP) award for the summer of 2010. Ella provided research and editing assistance on the introductory essay discussing oral history methods for an anthology of interviews Professor Frierson conducted with survivors of Soviet repression. That volume is currently under review at a major university press. A frequent mentor, Professor Frierson believes the writing and research involved in writing for Inquiry are invaluable experiences for students in the discipline of history.*