

The following are portions of an interview of Bessie Zoglin by Lillian Sanders in 1977. Some grammatical changes have been made for clarity.

I was born in Gomel, White Russia, in 1893. My name in Yiddish would be Bashie. My maiden name was Raskin. My family consisted of 12 children: seven girls and five boys I was the oldest of them all.

Of a good time in childhood, I have no good memories at all. I had a mean father. He was an honest man and he would do favors to strangers but when it came to his children, he was very, very mean. When we used to see poppa coming home from some place, we were shivering in our boots. We were scared to death of him. He hardly ever smiled. When he gave a smile, Rose said, 'Oh, zoll zein tsores' (there'll be trouble). I didn't see him beat on momma, but I've seen him throw things at her. He had his shoe shop at the end of the kitchen and if momma would say something to him that he didn't like, instead of talking to her, he would throw one of those heavy forms.

We lived in Gomel. Gomel was a big city. There were a lot of Jews and a lot of families. Where I lived, five people had homes on a small street. It was a thru street, a shortcut. It would lead from one long street to another long street and people used to go through. We had very nice people. Each one owned their own home. There was a tailor, a shoemaker, a painter, a cap maker and there was one woman who was a widow woman and had children. All the people of the five families were Jewish. They didn't have too many children, but they were very good people. And they knew what my father was doing to his children but, you see, you don't mix in.

Poppa had two tenants. There were two small dwellings in our yard and he got a little rent out of it. My home had two long rooms: A living room, the same size as the kitchen. In the kitchen there was an oven. Then there was a small room, called the dining room, a dark room. Then there was a bedroom. The only bed was for poppa and momma. The children had to sleep on the floor, no beds for them. Momma made mattresses out of gunny sacks. She put in straw for all the children. The boys slept on one side of the living room, on the floor, and the girls on the other side. For covers, momma bought old material -- or maybe she tore coats apart -- and made covers for them. In the winter time I was the one that had to get up in the morning and sometimes in the middle of the night to cover them up because they would tear the covers off of one another. They kept the fire going in the oven and that was the whole heat that had to go all over the house. It wasn't too warm in the wintertime. I couldn't sleep through the night because of the responsibility that I had to cover them up. If not, I would get a beating from poppa. Momma would once in a while put her hand on but that was mild. Momma couldn't stop poppa. She would only say to him, 'Die doff nit schlogen zey.'

Poppa lost two boys, 3 and 2 1/2 years old from diphtheria and scarlet fever. He had a Torah ordered, like a memorial for the children. Poppa got the man that writes the Torahs. It took a whole year to write the Torah. Once a week he would come to the house until the whole thing was through. He wrote a line and he brought that line to the house and momma gave him a schnappes and some pastry and they made l'chayim over each line. Then he made a Simcha Torah. When the whole thing was ready, he gathered up all his friends, and they rented music and they all walked on the street with the Torah in their hands and carried it home. Now it's in Rabbi Solomon's shul. They brought it to Kansas City.

Momma prepared meat and chicken and the regular Friday night meal. That was the big meal. She would bake her own bread and her own challah and then she had compote. When there were guests the children had less and they weren't very happy about it. If she didn't have guests the children would have more.

We were not allowed to have other children visit besides our own family. Poppa didn't want anybody to come. If other children would come maybe we would get spoiled. So he kept everybody away. I had to play with my own sisters and brothers. I didn't have any social life whatsoever. I loved to hear music. We didn't have music of any kind in the house.

I didn't have any schooling then. He got us a private teacher to teach us Russian and Yiddish and how to read and write. Later, when he decided to go to Israel, he wanted me to learn Hebrew, too. It was just Isreal and I. The others got no education whatsoever.

We had an orchard that the neighbors had. When I was eight years old I went over there and asked him if he would sell me some apples and he said he would. Momma had a big basket. It had a handle in the middle so it was a pretty big one. I said, 'Would you fill up this basket with apples?' I spoke Russian to him. He was a Russian fellow. He said yes. I said, 'How much are you going to charge me?' He said, 'I'll charge you fifty cents for the whole basket.' So, naturally, I picked the biggest I could find! I was a healthy girl. So, I would take that basket and drag it to the union station. That was about a mile from our house and it was heavy, believe me. In Russia, they have no sidewalks. They had cobblestones. I dragged that basket on the cobblestones and I was small. I used to wear myself out shlepping that basket. By the time I came to the union station I was a gonner and waited for the train to come along. The passenger train. People would come down and buy my apples. I sold them for whatever they gave me...not less than ten cents an apple, ten kopeks. A lot of people came down and I had a chance to sell the apples and, if there were a few left, I waited for the next train. The

next train was four hours later. In the meantime, I was very hungry. I didn't have anything to eat so I would take an apple and eat. When I sold all the apples, I went home. With an empty basket, it was much easier.

When I was through with the apples, I had another job. A next door neighbor dug a well. We had rain water to wash clothes. We would take the clothes to the river which was about six blocks from us. Poppa told him that I could pull up the water with a rope and a bucket. People came with a yoke. On each end there would be two buckets. By the time I had filled up those buckets, I had pulled the bucket up from the well about twenty times. When I filled up the buckets I had to give half of it....it was ten cents a bucket....to the owner and half I gave to momma. I didn't give poppa any money at all. I felt that he had money from his shoemaker business and he didn't give momma enough to get along.

Then my father opened up a haberdashery place. It was a very small place in a business section. Next to the wall of a shul they had a built in "closet". That's where I had my merchandize. I carried the responsibility of buying and selling. I was 11 years old.

In 1903 and 1905, we had pogroms. When poppa went through the 1905 pogrom, he made up his mind that he was going to Palestine. He was a Zionist. So he left momma with a big stomach and the rest of the children and he went on to Palestine. He went through HIAS, the Jewish Immigration Agency.

He wanted us to learn Hebrew so when we'll come there (Palestine) we'll be able to speak Hebrew. He went to Petak Tikvah and Rishon L'Zion. He couldn't find work and he had nobody there. He was almost starving. He promised that he would send money but he didn't send it. He couldn't: He didn't have it. It was a good thing that I had this little place of business of my own. I had to take care of the business and take care of momma and see that she had a little money on hand. Nobody helped us because poppa was supposed to not be a poor man. When he worked, he made money. He was a good provider.

He was there (Palestine) a year and eight months. I enjoyed the time. The children were free. It was like a load off of your head. We got along very nicely and momma would dance with us. I was learning how to dance. So we enjoyed while he was gone. We wished he would be gone longer.

Then momma got sick. She got yellow jaundice when she was carrying Sara and she was very, very sick. Momma wasn't able to do any cooking. I did what I could. The

neighbors were very good. I had to go and get medicine from a hospital.

I didn't write to poppa about it. A neighbor, one of our tenants, did. When he came back, the trouble started again. That was a habit of his: hitting, hitting. When he came home, momma felt better. She had Sara while he was away.

When he came back, it was close to 1907. He was then around forty-five, maybe, forty. The pogroms were over. Poppa went across the rail road tracks and rented a house. One of his customers who lost her husband had a big home. She was a pretty well-to-do woman, a goy, and she rented a house to poppa. We had much more space than we had in the other house. It was on the outskirts of the city. For poppa it was easier to work. He had a special room for his work and he always had two men that he was teaching. He was a very good mechanic. He was known for such. He gave his house to the rabbi, or whoever it was, so that he could have a cheder there. He didn't charge him rent.

In 1907 my father went to America. When he left, he said, 'I'm going to America and I intend to do the same thing there that I thought I would do in Israel. I prefer to be in Israel and make my home in Israel but it didn't work out. And I still want to protect my family. So, I'm going to America. And if I find America much better than Israel, I shall remain there and then bring the family over.' He told me that I'll have to look after the whole family while he's there. So he went to America and we remained. I was still in business. So I had all that to look after: the business, momma, and the children.

In 1909, Poppa sent for my brother and I and momma remained at home with the rest of the children. During those two years he got a job at Barton Brothers Shoe Factory here in Kansas City.