

Yosef Ratner, Shochet

by Linda Rattner Nunn

The earliest record that I could find for our Ratner family was from the Revision List dated June 2, 1858, in Zhitomir. Yosef Ratner is listed along with his parents, Yankel Moshe and Asna Ovsiova. He was the oldest of their four children: Yosef (8), his brother, Ovsej (4), and his sister, Basya Ozra (6) and his youngest sister, Brukha (2).



Yosef grew up and moved to the bigger city of Kiev where he married Tzirlia. My Aunt Ruth remembers that her grandfather told her that he had "special" papers to allow him to move to Moscow. It was quite an honor as most Jews had to live within the Pale of Settlement in Russia. Only rabbis and specialized Jewish craftsmen were allowed to live in Moscow. Yosef Ratner was a shochet, a kosher butcher, by profession, and was allowed to move there.

According to the official "Birth Records for the Jewish Community of Moscow", on the 15th of December, 1880, at 1:00 am, their first child was born to Yosef Ratner, "a registered resident of the Volynskaya Guberniya" and his wife, Tzirlia Idelovna. Yosef, the father, is listed as a "bird slaughterer" on the birth certificate. The circumcision is also listed on the registry to have taken place on the 22nd of December. The baby was given the name of Alter Aaron. The family's home address was registered as the 1st Police District, in Seleznev's house, City of Moscow.

The happy couple soon had their second child, another son, born on the 19th of December 1881, at 9:00 a.m. They named the boy Efraim. Yosef and Tzirlia were still living in Zaryad'ye, in Seleznev's house.

In 1882, unfortunately, the political climate changed with the appointment of Prince Alexandrovich. He enacted the dreaded "May Laws" of May, 1882, which severely restricted the rights of Jews. Persecution of Jews was extensive everywhere after that.



<http://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/Moskva/>

However, Yosef and Tzirlia endured the pogroms long enough to have two more children born in Moscow, Russia. Their daughter, Osna, was born on the 16th of November, 1884, and named after Yosef's deceased mother, Asna. Two years later, another son was born on the 15th of April, 1886, in Moscow. He was named Zalman (Solomon).

Life was getting more and more dangerous and anti-Semitic. By 1890 the Jewish population had grown to 35,000 Jews living within the borders of Moscow, approximately 3% of the total population. It was such a small minority of the population, yet they were relentlessly singled out for persecution.

"On March 28, 1891, (Passover Eve, 5651), a law was issued abolishing the rights of all Jewish craftsmen to reside in Moscow and prohibiting their entry into that city in the future." [Encyclopedia Judaica, p. 364]. This cruel law meant that Yosef and Tzirlia and their children were expelled along with thousands of other Jews back into the Pale of Settlement.

Yosef Ratner and his family then moved to Berdychev, Russia, the Czar's "Jewish nest", which was 90% Jewish and was famous for its many tzaddikim, including the holy Levi of Berditchev. Yosef made sure that his sons had a good Jewish education and sent them to study at the famous Slobodka Yeshivah in Kovno, Lithuania, where both Samuel Alter and Solomon received their rabbinical ordinations (smichas). My cousin, Shirley Rattner Lieberman, remembers that her father, Sol, brought his rabbinical papers to America and showed them to her. Over time, however, they somehow were lost.

As the turn of the 20th century was approaching, it was clear that Yosef could no longer tolerate the killings and persecution of Jews and wanted a better life for his family. Along with thousands of other Jews, he joined the Great Migration going to the United States of America. Only a man who feels the heavy responsibility of raising his children in a safe and peaceful environment would make the decision to uproot his family and leave everything behind them.

For Jews who wanted to leave Russia, it was not easy. Most of the Jews did not have any legal passports, so they had to be smuggled out of the country. Since there wasn't enough money for everyone to go, Yosef and Tzirlia decided that Yosef would take his youngest daughter, Osna, and go first and then send for his wife and his sons.

In 1901, Yosef and a small group of other families from Berdychev had to sneak across the nearby border into Austria-Hungary in the middle of the night. It was dangerous, because the soldiers were patrolling the Russian



<http://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/Moskva/>

border. He and Osna had to walk miles through the forest before he arrived in Brody, just over the Austria-Hungarian border. From there they traveled together to Rotterdam, Holland, and eventually bought tickets to sail across the Atlantic to Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. Yosef and Osna could only afford to stay in the steerage compartment of that ship. The Jewish Federation's Historical Society of Pittsburgh chronicled their experience.

Yosef Ratner and many other families from Berdychev decided to continue traveling from Nova Scotia down the St. Lawrence River and eventually settled in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in America. Yosef Ratner settled in a house at 21 Townsend Street, Pittsburgh. One of the first things that this group of Jewish immigrants did was to hold services in Rabbi Rattner's home on Townsend Street. In 1901 the congregation was officially chartered by the city of Pittsburgh and named Congregation Machsikei Hadas. According to the commemoration brochure dated February 9, 1936, on the Fortieth Anniversary of the founding of Congregation Machsikei Hadas, the membership had grown from a few members emigrating from Berdychev, Russia, into hundreds of members.

Meanwhile, Yosef worked hard at his butcher shop in Pittsburgh and saved enough money to send to Zierle so she could buy tickets for herself and their sons to come to America. On June 26, 1902, Zierle, Alter, Efraim and Zalmen set sail from Bremen, Germany, on board the steamship, *Cassel*, for America. The only things that Zierle brought with her from Russia were her two, tall, brass Shabbat candlesticks, which now reside with her granddaughter, Shirley Rattner Lieberman. Sixteen days later, on July 12, 1902, the family was reunited at the dock in Baltimore, Maryland!

One of the first things that family did was to change their given names to Americanized names. Yosef and Tzirlia became Joseph and Celia. They were first listed in the 1905 Pittsburgh City Directory and then in the 1910 Federal Census. They are listed along with their children, Samuel, Frank, Osna and Solomon. However, that was as far as Joseph Ratner would change. He was a very traditional man.

I have only one sepia photograph of Joseph Ratner that was given to me by my cousin, Shirley Rattner Lieberman. In this photograph, Joseph is wearing a traditional Russian yarmulke and a heavy, wool coat. According to the family legend, Joseph refused to have his photograph taken, because he believed that this new technology was against Torah laws, which forbid the making of a graven image. In order to get this photograph, he was tricked into sitting in the dentist's chair. He had to be photographed through a hole in the door while he thought he was waiting for the dentist!



<http://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/Moskva/>

Joseph and Celia lived in the same house in Pittsburgh the rest of their lives. Joseph passed away on the 26th day of the Hebrew month of Iyar, May 18, 1917, and was laid to rest in the beautiful cemetery of Congregation Machsikei Hadas. Celia passed away on December 30, 1928.