Anna’s Shtetl


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“I have pictures in my mind … the place and the event that happened at that … particular time cannot be changed in my mind, because it’s indelible. That’s the way it happened!”\(^1\)

Written by Dr. Lawrence A. Coben, Associate Professor Emeritus of Neurology at Washington University in Saint Louis, *Anna’s Shtetl* has been many years and interviews in the making. The book’s seeds were sown in the early 1990s, when this American-born doctor specializing in memory and aging, first began to interview Ukrainian-born Anna Spector Dien. The interviews were predicated both on Dr. Coben’s medical interests, as well as a personal desire “to recapture a sense of his own heritage.”\(^2\) Out of these 300-some in-person and telephone interviews evolved the present narrative.

Immediately from its opening pages, *Anna’s Shtetl* draws in its readers through the compelling biographical account of Anna Spector (later Dien; 1905-1997), as retold by Lawrence A. Coben in his recent publication. The title, which stands alone without a subtitle to propagate it, needs no further elaboration. This particular *shtetl*, or “small town” of some 10,000 people was named Korsun and was situated on the banks of the River Ros, approximately eighty miles southeast of the Ukrainian metropolis, Kiev.\(^3\)

Later, the site of one of World War II’s decisive battles,\(^4\) during the years when Anna Spector resided there, from 1905-1919, the central Ukrainian town was a place described by Anna as full of pettiness; one in which Jews and Gentiles alike struggled to survive in poverty. It was a place which for many of its residents—especially its Jews—was marked by stifling social intolerance and religious zealotry and tainted by frequent anti-Semitic excesses and pogroms. For Anna Spector Dien, it was a hometown that was “better left behind.”\(^5\)

\(^1\) Anna Spector Dien uttered these words concerning her memories of Korsun, Ukraine during one of her 300-some interviews with the author (Coben, Preface, p. ix).
\(^2\) Ibid., book description on front cover.
\(^3\) For the author’s discussion on the definition of *shtetl* as applied to Korsun, Ukraine, see: p. 9 and p. 201, endnote 1. There are several references in the book to the Ros River and Korsun’s proximity to it. For additional geographical and historical information about the town, see: Room, Adrian. *Placenames of Russia and the Former Soviet Union* (North Carolina: McFarland, 1996) and *Ukraine Magazine*, “Cherkasy”: [http://www.ukraine.mn/content/view/2/2/](http://www.ukraine.mn/content/view/2/2/) (visited on 8-26-08).
\(^4\) The Korsun (also known as the Cherkassy) Pocket was the name of the large pocket formed by German troops between the towns of Korsun and Cherkassy on the lower Dnieper River in south-central Ukraine, during World War II. It was here, in January 1944, that the Soviets succeeded in encircling the invading German lines. Ultimately, the encircled German forces were able to break out, but not without suffering heavy losses and having to abandon most of their heavy equipment. For further information about this critical battle, see: NationMaster.com>Encyclopedia>"Korsun Pocket": [http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Korsun-Pocket](http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Korsun-Pocket) (visited on 8-31-08).
\(^5\) Coben, Preface, p. xi.
Anna’s Shtetl provides a relatively rare snapshot of small-town Jewish life in the Ukraine at the beginning of the twentieth Century set against the backdrop of World War I, the Bolshevik Revolution and ensuing Russian Civil War. Contributing to this unique perspective is the fact that there is a general dearth of autobiographic or biographic literature from a female vantage point, focusing on this specific region and time period. A significantly greater amount of the literature that typifies Jewish life of this period is told through the eyes of men and/or focuses on the immigrant experience in the new world, particularly that of New York’s Lower East Side, the ultimate stage for immigrant Jewish life in America. Diverging from this mold, Anna’s Shtetl is based on the lucid first-hand memories of an elderly woman. Furthermore, it devotes comparatively little space to Anna Spector Dien’s experiences as an immigrant in a small agricultural Iowa town, or for that matter, to her later life in the United States.

The narrative told in the pages of this book is made all the more poignant, because it may be read on multiple levels. On the sheer surface, this is a coming of age story of a young Jewish woman growing up in a small Ukrainian town during very difficult times. In this vein, I refer to Anna’s Shtetl as a virtual “Little House on the Prairie” tale, in which Laura Ingalls has been replaced by Anna Spector, and the hardships of the American prairie have been replaced by the regular struggles for survival with which the residents of Korsun, Ukraine—notably, Jews were forced to contend—both due to primitive conditions, as well as the “deadly anti-Jewish riots begun by various invading military detachments during the Russian Civil War and joined by some of Korsun’s peasants.” Using this model, the pogromshchiki were something akin to the various parties—namely Native Americans, bandits, and outlaws—that targeted the American settler, sometimes, with great ferocity and intention to harm or even kill.

On another, deeper level, Anna’s Shtetl is an oral history and a testament to a way of life that no longer exists. One such illustration is the vivid description of the outdoor

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6 Some exceptions or near-exceptions to this statement are: Bettyanne Gray’s, Many a’s Story: Faith and Survival in Revolutionary Russia (Runestone Press, 1995); Edith LaZebnik’s, Such a Life (William Morrow, 1978); Joann Rose Leonard’s, The Soup Has Many Eyes: From Shtetl to Chicago: A Memoir of One Family’s Journey through History (Bantam Books, 2000); Bella Lown’s, Memories of My Life: A Personal History of a Lithuanian Shtetl (Pangloss Press, 1991); Malkah Shapiro’s, The Rebbe’s Daughter: Memoir of a Hasidic Childhood (JPS, 2002); Rosalie Sogolow’s, Memories from a Russian Kitchen: From Shtetl to Golden Land (Fithian Press, 1996); Miriam Shomer Zunser’s, Yesterday: A Memoir of a Russian Jewish Family (Harper and Row, 1978).

7 Among the more well known books by Jewish women from Eastern Europe written at the turn of the twentieth Century and/or during the early part of the twentieth Century, which depict the immigrant experience in America are Anzia Yezierska’s, Hungry Hearts (Houghton Mifflin, 1920) and Bread Givers (Doubleday, Page & Company, 1925). There are numerous books depicting the “shtetl experience” through the eyes of Jewish men, as well as that of the immigrant experience. Here are just a few such examples, ranging from famous to more obscure works: Benjamin Laikin’s, Memoirs of a Practical Dreamer: From a Russian Shtetl to an American Suburb (Bloch, 1971); Sholom Aleichem’s, From the Fair: The Autobiography of Sholom Aleichem (Viking, 1985); Isaac Bashevis Singer’s, In My Father’s Court (Farrar, Straus, and Girouz, 1964); Abrasha Wilcher’s, Mother and Son: Tales of a Shtetle, 1908-1923 (First Person Press, 1992).

8 Front flap of Anna’s Shtetl.

9 This is a term of Russian origin used more than once by the author in his book, to conjure up the image of the pogromists who often attacked and robbed the Jewish and Gentile residents of Korsun, Ukraine and other nearby towns.
marketplace,\textsuperscript{10} teaming with Christian peasants from the hamlets and villages surrounding Korsun who regularly bartered their wares, as well as the indigenous Jewish and Gentile customers and their consistent side by side haggling. Other memorable passages in this narrative are those that shed special light on the peasant way of life and the common points of intersection between the Jewish way of life and the former.\textsuperscript{11}

Indeed, as the author rightfully acknowledges, the theme of Jewish-Gentile relations in the \textit{shtetl} milieu is one that has been scantily dealt with in the English-language literature, notwithstanding such works as \textit{Life is With People: The Jewish Little Town of Eastern Europe} by Zborowski and Herzog (International Universities Press, 1952), \textit{The Shtetl Book} by Roskies and Roskies (Ktav Publishing House, 1975), a few scattered scholarly essays,\textsuperscript{12} and now, \textit{Anna’s Shtetl}.\textsuperscript{13}

One case example of these inter-religious and inter-ethnic interactions may be seen in terms of the Ukrainian peasant woman named Polashke who had worked for Anna Spector’s maternal grandmother, Beyla. Polashke had begun working for Beyla years before Anna was ever born, while Polashke was yet a young girl. This occurred in an era “when peasant girls were often given away by their parents into a life of virtual slavery.”\textsuperscript{14} Like many other peasant girls who grew up working in Jewish households, Polashke spoke Yiddish fluently. Ironically, it was she who taught “the Jewish morning prayer to Anna’s mother [Leya] and to Beyla’s other daughters.”\textsuperscript{15}

As part of its historical value, our narrative sheds light on an important—albeit bloody—period in Jewish and Russian-Ukrainian history: Bolshevik versus White ideology, the Russian Civil War, and most notably for “everyday Jews” like Anna Spector’s family and approximately 50% of the local Korsun population, the mass murder of Jews “on a scale that was surpassed only during the Second World War.”\textsuperscript{16}

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\textsuperscript{10} An entire chapter (7) of \textit{Anna’s Shtetl} is devoted to “The Marketplace.” For further details see: Coben, pp. 34-40.
\textsuperscript{11} Chapter 11 (pp. 60-67) is specifically devoted to the subject, “Between Jew and Gentile”; however, the theme in fact pervades the entire narrative of \textit{Anna’s Shtetl}.
\textsuperscript{13} The author states that Zborowski and Herzog’s book was essentially the first full-length work to discuss the relationships between Jew and Gentile in the \textit{shtetl} of 1850-1919. He also adds that this is an area of continuing research, as seen in Polonsky’s edited collection of essays in “The Shtetl: Myth and Reality,” \textit{Polin} 17 (2004). Ibid., p. 206, endnote 3.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p. 45.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p. 45.
\textsuperscript{16} Peter Kenez, in his highly informative essay, “Pogroms and White Ideology in the Russian Civil War,” in \textit{Pogroms: Anti-Jewish Violence in Modern Russian History} (edited by John D. Klier and Shlomo Lambroza; Cambridge University Press, 1992), states that in ca. 1919-1920—the period during the early 20\textsuperscript{th} Century marked by the worst Ukrainian pogroms—the majority of Jews who remained in the part of the Russian Empire which later became the Soviet Union, lived in the Ukraine. It was this region that had, according to Kazen, “by far the richest history of pogroms.” Moreover, he concedes that “nowhere was the Civil War more bitter and more confusing than in the Ukraine” (Kenez, p. 293).
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It was in the midst of this terrifying and chaotic time that Anna Spector and her immediate family: her mother, Leya and two younger sisters, Gussie and Mayna finally set out for America by way of Moscow, where they remained from 1919-1921 and later, Petrograd (today, St. Petersburg), where they resided for the bulk of 1921—all the while, living in refugee camps.

It was during this two year period that Anna Spector had her first taste of urban life, roaming the great city of Moscow and witnessing the amazing art and architecture of Petrograd which formed the basis for her later professional work in the field of interior design. Life in the provincial backwater town of Korsun had offered her little in the way of aesthetic beauty, something that had always disturbed her artistic soul. Thus, in Moscow, she visited such memorable sites as the Hebrew National Theater, Habimah, when the show-stopping Hannah Rovina was appearing. She also visited the world-famous ballet company, the Bolshoi Theater and Tretiakovskaia Galeria, which she later compared to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. Later on, in Petrograd, Anna Spector would likewise visit the theater, seeing such performances as Maeterlinck’s *The Blue Bird* and a Shakespearian production. Indeed, her experience in Petrograd was so life-changing and positively influential that when she would visit the cities of Europe much later on in life, she would find that little compared to the beauty she had witnessed in her youth in Petrograd. In her mind, “Rome and Paris did not compare … Petrograd, for her, was the most beautiful of all.”

Ultimately, Anna Spector, her mother and sisters would make their way safely to America by way of Bremen, Germany; Minsk, Belarus; and Kaunas, Lithuania. Her family docked at Ellis Island, New York on March 6, 1922. From there, they traveled by train to Marshalltown, Iowa, a small agricultural town where they were reunited with their father and husband, Aaron Spector, who was a Hebrew teacher to many of the town’s children and an active member of the local synagogue. By the time she was twenty, Anna Spector had relocated to St. Louis, Missouri, where she met and married Joseph Dien in 1925, and went on to have three children of her own: Albert, now a professor emeritus of Asian languages at Stanford University; Saul Dien, an architect in St. Louis; and Jane, a fund-raiser for a number of Jewish institutions, based in New York City. Anna Spector Dien died in October, 1997 at age ninety-two, having lived a very full and active life up until her last years.

In conclusion, *Anna’s Shtetl* is a scholarly, thoroughly researched, and well-documented biographical and historical account of one woman’s life in the face of turbulent times. The narrative is unique not only in that it provides insights into pre-World War I and revolutionary Russia from the perspective of a Jewish female, but also, in that its author has made a sincere and concerted effort wherever possible to find literary, historical, and

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17 The patriarch of the Spector family, Aaron Spector, had already left Korsun in 1912 to immigrate to America. The rest of the immediate family now intended to join him there, regardless of the hurdles they might have to face in making their way to the new country. Leya Spector saw the writing on the wall and realized that the situation in Korsun was not about to improve. Life in the Ukraine had simply become too intolerable for her immediate family to continue living there any longer.

18 Coben, pp. 152-153.

19 Ibid., pp. 165-166.

20 Ibid., p. 166.

21 Ibid., Epilogue, pp. 170-173.
scientific sources to substantiate Anna Spector Dien’s experiences as a young woman coming of age in Eastern Europe between the years 1905-1921. Furthermore, as a medical physician whose interests lay in the different forms of memory as they manifest themselves in the elderly, the narrative is followed by an appendix entitled, “How True to Reality is Anna’s Shtetl?” This is an additional feature which contributes to the particular uniqueness and reliability of this work.

Finally, given the complicated historical context of Anna Spector Dien’s formative years, Anna’s Shtetl is the type of narrative that strongly encourages and indeed, demands further, supplementary reading on the part of its reader. For this purpose, the author has provided an extensive array of reading material consulted during the writing of this narrative. In a word, Anna’s Shtetl is a work that will be greatly valued by laypersons, genealogists, historians, scholars of Women’s Studies, scientists, and physicians alike.

Consulted Works


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22 The author states in Appendix B of Anna’s Shtetl, that “While writing this book, I sought information that would confirm or refute Anna’s recollections—memories whose apparent authenticity ranged from strongly probable to moderately improbable” (Ibid., p. 184).

23 In Appendix C (Ibid., pp. 187-193), the author, in the role of a third-party medical physician states, “I have tried to judge the truthfulness of this memoir—the degree to which it records what actually happened—on the basis of four criteria: Did Anna have a clinical disorder affecting her memory? Was her memory consistent (reliable)? Was her memory accurate (valid)? Is the present text faithful to her account (Ibid., p. 187)? By going down a virtual checklist of reasons why Anna Spector Dien’s account is overall reliable and valid, the author manages to reach the following conclusion: “I conclude that the present text of Anna’s experiences is faithful to her account” (Ibid., p. 193).


