

**THE OLD COUNTRY:
A HARROWING TALE OF ESCAPE FROM THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE**

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast, passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers, brought to you by HUC Connect, the Hebrew Union College's online platform for continuing education. I'm Joshua Holo, your host.

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JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast, and our conversation with Lisa Brahin. Lisa Brahin is a Jewish genealogist, researcher and writer. Inspired as a young girl by Alex Haley's *Roots*, she spent many summers audio-taping the stories of her grandmother's traumatic childhood during the 1917-'21 anti-Jewish pogroms in the Ukraine. With the help of curators in four countries, Brahin uncovered documents, written in five languages, that would help to validate her grandmother's tales. In 2003, she assisted in finding the lost location of the original manuscript, *Megilat haTevah*, *The Scroll of the Slaughter*, one of the most important primary sources on the Ukrainian pogroms. These sources were the foundation of our topic today, Brahin's book, *Tears Over Russia: A Search for Family and the Legacy of Ukraine's Pogroms*. Lisa Brahin, thank you so much for joining us on the College Commons Podcast.

Lisa Brahin: Thank you, Josh, for having me. I'm thrilled to be here.

JH: I'd like to start off by framing the book for our audience. In truth, I think, as you know, many Jews, both in Israel and the United States, have at least some remembered connection to the Ukraine, and almost as a corollary, unfortunately, to the pogroms of the Russian Empire. Your book dives into one person's experiences of that world, or really, a family's experiences of that world. Can you frame your grandmother's story for us in the history of the region that so many of us share in our own family stories?

LB: I do believe that most, or many, Ashkenazi Jews around the world have at least one ancestor that they can actually trace back to the Russian Empire, because we're talking about the Pale of Settlement. All of my ancestors come from this region. So there are a lot of people who have a similar story in their background, whether they've uncovered it or not. I think the

majority of our ancestors from this region immigrated to the United States from the 1880s to the early 1920s. So this time period, about four decades, we had three major waves of pogroms in the area. My mother's grandmother's family was from the last of the three waves; this was 20 years prior to the Holocaust. But whether your ancestors came in the 1880s or the early 1900s from this region, chances are they endured similar things that my grandmother's family endured.

LB: When I research, I find that families shared the same journey, the same path, their stories were almost all parallel. I could almost tell where they were going and what they were up against. So it's not just my grandmother's story or my family story, it follows an entire community, her town of Stavishche, which was located a little less than 80 miles south of Kiev. But it also encompassed many families from the region. One that I wanna really bring up, that I really found really fascinating, was actor Dustin Hoffman. Now, his family is not in my book, but I watched an old episode of Finding Your Roots with Dr. Gates, and Dustin was interested in his family's Jewish history, and I found it very striking that he learned for the first time about his grandfather, Frank Hoffman, who was already living in Chicago, who received a letter from his father who lived in a town where my grandmother fled to. It was called Bilozerka.

LB: So my grandmother fled there from Stavishche, this is during 1919, during the pogroms, and their families lived in the same community. And Frank Hoffman, that's the grandfather of Dustin, received a letter from his father, and then another person in my grandmother's family, who lived in Bilozerka, wrote their son in America. So both sons received a letter simultaneously, not knowing about the other one. They were both told, "Look, if you don't come and save us from these pogroms, we're all gonna die." So his family's story is parallel, where his grandfather goes back within two weeks of the gentleman from my family who goes back to save them. And it was a very dangerous time. All the Jews in Ukraine were fleeing from the pogroms, and these two men were really the only Jews trying to get in.

LB: So Frank Hoffman goes back, and he was arrested by the Bolsheviks, and unfortunately, Dustin Hoffman found out on this episode that Frank was arrested by the Bolsheviks and he was executed. And the man in my family, who really has the wildest stories in my book, was named Barney Stumacher, and he set sail within two weeks of Frank Hoffman, and he was arrested when he got into Ukraine. And he was scheduled to be executed, but somehow he talked his way out of it. Soldiers helped him, he escaped execution, and he went back and saved my family. He went back for five people and he ended up with 80. So even though Dustin's family is not in my book, it was very striking to me that there are all of these family histories and stories out there that are very, very parallel to what my family experienced, and I think, when you look into your family history, it's a fascinating journey.

JH: Before we get into some of the particularly really moving and challenging stories in your book, I'd like to ask you to tell us a little bit about the research behind it. It sounds like an adventure tale all its own. As an historian, I'm always keen for our listeners to get a taste of the magic and the mystery of the historian's craft, or in your case, of the genealogist's craft. So tell us a little bit about that story.

LB: My grandmother told me bedtime stories. She never revealed any of those stories to my mother, who is her daughter. I think it was just too painful. But by the time that she was helping care for me and she was telling me these stories, I was a little girl, and I had my mother bring me to the library because I wanted to confirm and learn more about what my grandmother was telling me. So this is a time period from 1917-1921, where I believe there were over 100,000-250,000 Jewish civilians murdered in these pogroms. Where she lived, too; it encompassed that area. So I figured I would find other family stories in the library, and I couldn't find any. And as I grew up, I kept looking, and there were some committee reports that I found and things like that, but I was really searching for that family story.

LB: So I decided, from a young age, that I would write the book. This is back in the 1970s, I was a little girl. I had primary sources that were still living. They were two generations older than me, and I would take my old cassette recorder and I would go interviewing people. And when I got done interviewing, I would email different archives or write to them, because I knew that there were some first-hand testimonies because I saw that the committees took information down. I wrote to four different countries, and they had materials in five languages, and everybody was really nice and sent me what they had. And it was sort of magical, mostly when the translators translated them, because it was like a window opened, and I began to see what she was talking about, but it was very difficult to find such materials.

LB: So, YIVO has the Tcherikower Archive, which does have information about the pogroms. But I would say, back around 2002, an Israeli writer told me, he went to an archive in Israel, Gnazim Archive, and he found Megilat haTevah, which was the original manuscript. Let me back up. This was a manuscript written by Eliezer David Rosenthal, meaning Scroll of the Slaughter. So we've all heard of the anarchist, Emma Goldman, who was deported from the United States. She was sent back to Odessa, which she called Russia but in those years it was really Ukraine. And she writes in her memoir that she meets, in Odessa, Hayim Bialik, the writer, and a man who she doesn't name but she calls him a "literary investigator." And she goes on to say, this man has collected, from over 70 towns and cities, first-hand testimonies and tombstone lists of Jews that were afflicted in this area of Ukraine, of the pogroms.

LB: So when I'm reading this, I'm saying to myself, "Well, she doesn't name him, but I know that this is Eliezer David Rosenthal," and she knew that there was a manuscript out there that was being put together. So I put two and two together and I figured this was all the same manuscript, and I reach out to a couple of archivists in Israel, from my computer. I live in the United States. So I wrote to an archivist at the University of Tel Aviv Archives, and he called over to Gnazim, and they start looking for this manuscript that this gentleman had stumbled upon. He said it was in beautiful Hebrew writing in a brown envelope and he looked at it for hours, and what it was, it was this collective material of Rosenthal's of first-hand accounts and death lists of what was going on in the area. And he put it back in the envelope, and several years had passed, and nobody really knew where it was and they couldn't find it, and I get an email from the archive, "We don't have it."

LB: And I pressed that they should still be looking. They called this gentleman and they went back in search of it. So it took them all summer long, about three months, and finally, I get an

email, "We found it, but unfortunately the manuscript is falling apart," and they can't send me the pages. It needed a whole restoration project. But what did come about was they did feel that it was worthy of a restoration project, and it took a year at the National Library of Israel, and then finally, about a year later, I received a few pages on Stavishche, which also included a death list. And one of the chapters in my book actually has this attack that my grandmother mentioned, but Rosenthal has it in his manuscript, with the names of the people killed. It was just unbelievable. When I had this translated, I was actually holding the pages that verified and confirmed everything that my grandmother had told me during her childhood.

JH: You pointed out the fact that these were written in multiple languages. What languages were you raised around? Other than English, did you hear Yiddish or Russian?

LB: Well, in my own household, we only spoke English, but my grandmother, who was my only immigrant grandmother, she spoke Yiddish, and she also spoke Russian fluently, although she refused to teach me Russian and I really wanted to learn that. But she felt like it was the language of the old country, and she didn't want to associate herself with bad memories there. But she spoke Yiddish with my grandfather. Kind of like in many Jewish households, when they don't want the children to understand what they were saying, they spoke Yiddish, but then eventually the children would catch on to what they were saying. So I did hear a lot of Yiddish, but I did find this really oddball source. A woman was helping me in the Kiev archives, and it was basically a book that listed Jews living illegally in the countryside, which was right outside of Stavishche. My grandmother's mother, Rebecca, who was one of the main characters in my book, her family, she was a child in this family, they were living there illegally, and I was like, "Well, where did that come from?"

LB: Well, it must have come from the May Laws, because in the early 1880s, Jews were restricted where they could and could not live. But why I bring this in now, is her mother's family was raised among the peasants, and all of the children spoke Russian in those years. I think now it's more Ukrainian because it's since become Ukraine. But they all spoke Russian. So what happened was, my great-grandmother and all of her siblings could speak Russian fluently without a Yiddish accent. So when the years came and the Jews were being persecuted, one of the ways that the peasants in this area could tell if you're a Jew, you would speak Russian with a Yiddish accent, a dramatic accent, but her family all spoke perfect Russian. So it was so important because there were several times within my book where their ability to do that allowed them to mingle and gather information, and it also allowed them to survive.

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JH: The College Commons Podcast belongs to HUC Connect, the online platform for continuing education from the Hebrew Union College. HUC Connect includes webinars, syllabi for community learning, and masterclasses for HUC alumni, with interviews, expert panels and classroom materials on topics ranging from the arts to civil society, Israel, and much more. Check us out at huc.edu/hucconnect. Now, back to our interview.

JH: The story of the United States, which occupies a chunk of your book, is always subject to another aspect of all of our family stories as well, which is this idea of the US as the Goldene Medina, this unmitigatedly positive land of opportunity. And, certainly, I think we would all agree that the United States has been that to many, many Jews and many immigrants for a long time. I thought there were aspects of your story that both validate that truth and there were aspects of your story that challenge it, or at least give us pause to recognize that it was more complicated than some kind of fairy tale. How do you see that as your story unfolds?

LB: I think, absolutely, they came to America after these horrible pogroms and what was going on in Europe, and they found freedom, they found liberty, they found peace. But I think also, many of us who have researched our family history about the first generation to come to America, it was very difficult. My great-grandparents never learned English, and this is a challenge that a lot of our first immigrant ancestors from Europe had. And because they couldn't speak English, they had a hard time making a living. They lived in poverty. My grandmother learned English very fast, she was a young girl, and she actually had to leave school at age 14. Her teachers begged her not to leave, but she felt she had to, because they needed to eat, they needed somebody to work.

LB: So she ended up working in a garment factory, and we hear a lot of the ancestors in the 1920s ended up doing this, just to put food on the table. So because of her sacrifices, now my family, two generations later, was able to have a better life. We've become educated if we wanted to, we have better jobs, and I think we're happier. But the first generation, they did it so that their children and their grandchildren could have a better life.

JH: As we kind of zoom forward to current events today, we're all aware of Russia's ongoing war with Ukraine. Has your family's history in Ukraine colored your interpretation of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent war?

LB: When the war first began, we were all watching the news at night, and we saw these scenes of women and children fleeing and children who were killed, and their homes were destroyed, their place of businesses were destroyed. These were scenes of horror, and this is truly how I envision what was going on with my grandmother and her family. Of course, in those years, it was just the Jews that were being persecuted, but now, all Ukrainians are being persecuted. So it definitely hit home. We saw, I think it was in the city of Mariupol, where all these innocent women and children were killed. And it made me think of the city of Tetiiv as my grandmother and her family are escaping Ukraine, and they go through Tetiiv, and this was one of the horrible massacres during this time period. 4000 Jews were murdered, but within those 4000, about 1500-2000 were in a public place. They were in a synagogue, and the synagogue was torched. My family came upon it after the fact. It was after they were all murdered. But it made me go back and think of what happened in Tetiiv that very few people know about.

LB: And one other thing really stuck out in my mind when I was watching the news one night. They interviewed a young woman from Mariupol, she had a backpack, and she was running, and they asked her, "What do you have in your backpack?" I mean, you're running for your life, and of course, she had food in water, and they said. "Well, what else?" And she said, "I have my

family photos, my ancestral family photos with me." And she was showing the news reporter of everything that she could bring. But my family did that as well. They were running for their lives, crossing the Dniester River, which at that time was the border going into Romania and it was an illegal cross. The Romanians didn't want the Jews. So when they're out in the row boat crossing the river, they're afraid they're gonna get shot at by the border guards. So as they're rowing, the boat actually starts filling up with water and it sinks, and they're thrown out into the river. And the adults were able to stand luckily, and they held up the children, but as they did that, my family's photos actually tumbled and fell into the Dniester River.

LB: They tried fishing out as many as they could, and one of the photos that they fished out has a lot of water damage, but you will see it on the cover of my book. Take a really close look, you'll see the white circular dots on this photograph that were damaged. So fast forward to today, where this girl a year ago in Mariupol was carrying her family photos in the backpack, because this is what was so dear to them all. I do wanna say that I'm really happy to see that other countries around the world have been welcoming and have helped the Ukrainian people. It's heart-warming to see that. But back well over 100 years ago, that wasn't the case for the Jewish people who were running.

JH: There's this remarkable scene from the book, set in 1919, in which there's a raid on Stavishche that you detail for us in the course of the book. And there's a kind of temporary, momentary moment of liberation when the Jews, just emerging from the latest round of violence, hear the voice of another Jew who yells out, "Jews and comrades," presumably in Yiddish. And it turns out that the brand new Red Army was serving in this particular moment as a liberator for the Jews, including, by the way, a not insignificant number of Jews who served in the Red Army. How did your grandmother's stories treat and relate to the emergence of the Soviet Union as a force in their life? Did they see it ultimately as a liberator or more as one of the other sources of oppression?

LB: It's sort of two-fold. My family actually left Stavishche in 1920. They got stranded in Romania, because they didn't have visas to come over to the US. So they weren't technically there when it was Soviet Union. General Denikin's raids were like a week long in Stavischche, when the Red Army came, afterwards. So we had a week of violence by the White Guards, and we have about 150 Jews hiding in a bakery at the edge of the town. The man who owned the house, he hears banging in the middle of the night, and he's afraid to come up. They're hiding under sort of a trap door, and he didn't know what to do. And then, as you said, he heard one of the soldiers yell out in Yiddish that they were Jews, Jews and comrades. So for this very short time period, I think Jewish men thought that this was the only group that would help the Jews with all the suffering, and even within the Jewish population, a lot of Jews thought it was wrong to join the Red Army, and some insisted on doing it.

LB: But in this very specific moment in my book, they were thrilled to hear a man yelling in Yiddish at their door, because they knew they weren't going to be killed. And the others had left, the White Army was long gone, and they had been hiding there for a few days, just hoping nobody else came. Because that's what happened during the pogroms, one group would leave, another group would come in. But in this one moment in history, one of the men that I had

interviewed said, well, in this moment, the Red Army were the good guys. That's how I see it. But my family didn't remain there, so I don't know much more as far as what happened after they left.

JH: So let's round out this interview with all the fascinating stories, by asking you to tell us something that surprised you in the course of researching and writing the book.

LB: I think the biggest surprise to me was that, as I had said earlier, I didn't find any other family stories from this very particular time in place and history. A lot of people were murdered. This is 20 years before the Holocaust. Where were all the family stories? There were some academic and historical overviews. There's some good books that have come out, although a lot of them don't agree with each other on numbers, because there wasn't a lot of research done, I don't think, compared to other time periods. So to me, I'm still looking. I mean, I was sitting on this information for a long time, and I worked on it for a long time, but I just wish that a family story about my grandmother's time period was published prior to the Holocaust. If it was published prior to the Holocaust, maybe more people would have been aware of what was going on. I mean, this was a prelude of what was to come.

JH: Lisa Brahin, thank you so much for your fascinating stories. It was a real pleasure.

LB: Thank you for having me, Josh.

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