

Searching for a Young Woman's Travel Route Back to Her Shtetl

Forum Name: Independent Study 2020

Topic: Elaine Elinson - Immigration Ukraine

Introduction:

Anna Feldman was born on a country road in the Ukraine "on a dark, cold holiday evening" in late autumn 1899. Her parents, Ida Reader Feldman and Eli Feldman, were attempting to travel from their home in the shtetl of Pavoloch to her mother's parents' home in the town of Skvere -- but they did not make it in time. Shortly after her birth, her father was drafted into the Czar's army and she did not see him until he returned to Pavoloch when she was six. He worked in the mill there and her two siblings, Ethel and Sam, were born. Her father left to join his wife's brother, Yossel, in Chicago; Anna and her mother and siblings joined him there in 1905. Anna worked in a garment industry sweatshop, joined the Bund, and, suffering from a lung disease, spent several months in the Winfield Sanitarium. In 1910, she decided to go back to Pavoloch -- a single young woman by herself! -- and spent about 18 months there, returning to Chicago in 1911. She kept a diary for much of this time.

I am working on a novel based on Anna's life, primarily based on her diaries. Some aspects of her life are written about in great detail, others -- especially her time in pre-Revolutionary Russia -- are left to the imagination. Questions like: How much money did she have (and did she need European currency -- where would she get that)? Did she carry some food with her? Where did she buy food? Were there sleeping cars? Toilets? What did she do for sanitary supplies? How did she cope with male predators? What kind of papers (if any) did she need? This was when Jews needed a permit to be in Kiev -- what would have it been like when she arrived at the train station? Could her relatives meet her to take her to Skvere? How would they have traveled -- horse carriage? Though I don't know for sure, I am assuming that her mother's brother Velvel, who never emigrated to America, met her at the train station.

Goal:

I want to better understand the experiences of this bold, independent spirit and am especially trying to envision what it must have been like for a young woman traveling by herself across Europe: what were the challenges, dangers, excitements, emotions and practical problems of such an adventure.

Three objectives:

- 1) To understand the possible route Anna most likely took from America and how long would it have taken.
- 2) To find what it was like for a single young woman to travel at that time.
- 3) To compare information about her initial trip (with her mother and siblings) to the U.S. and her second trip (in the company of another family) back to the U.S. six years later.

Outline descendant tree:

(my mggg) Yossel > Joseph READER, b. 1859, Pavoloch, Russia; e.c. 1890; d. 16 October 1911 in Chicago;

(my mggf) Eli FELDMAN, b. in Russia, 1867, e.c. Chicago, August 25, 1900, d. 16 February, 1947 in Chicago;

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Married: Russia, 188? to

(my mggm) Chaia>Ida READER, b. in Russia, 10 August, 1869, e.c. 1905, d. August, 1962
Chicago;

(my mggu) Velvel Volf READER, b. 1870 in Russia, d. 1943 Babi Yar, Kiev;

(my mgm) Channe>Anna FELDMAN, b. Skvere, Russia, 18 October 1889

(my mga) Ette>Ethel FELDMAN, b. Russia, 1894

(my mgu) Schliom>Sam FELDMAN, b. Russia 1 August,

Sources:

My main source is the diary that Anna kept from 1907 to 1918, written in Yiddish and Russian in her own hand. We did not find (or even know about) these diaries until our mother May Gomberg ELINSON passed away in 2010 and we were going through her papers. We had them translated professionally and they are about 300 pages. They are beautifully written, and mostly interior thoughts and emotions (so very few details about how much the rent was, how much a ticket cost, what kind of hostel she had to stay in while waiting for the ship, etc.).

My brother has done research on immigration records and shipping manifests.

First trip to U.S.: 1905, sailed from Hamburg on the Pretoria.

Trip back to Russia: 1910, sailed from NY to ?? and then train to Kiev

Return trip to U.S.: 1911 from Libau, Latvia on the Birma.

I will ask my brother for URL or copies of the passenger records that he has.

Notes

My brother and I (and our spouses) traveled to Pavoloch, Skvere and Kiev in 2018 to have a better sense of where Anna grew up and returned to as a young woman. I visited the Red Star Line Museum in Antwerp, where I learned a great deal about preparing for the ocean voyage. I have also used many secondary sources -- books about Jewish immigration to/life in Chicago, the role of the Bund in Chicago and Kiev, Jewish women's life in the shtetl.