Chana the Peddler: A Gutsy Immigrant in the American South

by Carole Garbuny Vogel

Why would a 50-year-old Jewish woman in czarist Russia with a successful yeast concession and moderate savings opt to become a peddler in the American South and leave her children behind? Chana arrived in the South in the mid-1880s, two decades after the Civil War, likely speaking no English and finding her Yiddish incomprehensible to most Southerners, white and black alike.

According to family tradition, Chana used her savings to rescue one of her daughters from a miserable marriage. She paid the passage for the 21 year old and herself to come to the United States, with sufficient money remaining to purchase a horse and wagon, plus enough needles, thread, pans and pots to launch a peddling business. Perhaps she also sold cloth, straw brooms, brushes, buckets, twine, laundry soap, coffee and tobacco like many other peddlers of the day.

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Together mother and daughter traveled in a circuit that encompassed several southern states, likely speaking comfortably in Yiddish with each other as they bounced along in their wagon, and learning to communicate in rudimentary English with others out of necessity.

Their specific itinerary is unknown, but it apparently included the rolling hills of Georgia. If Chana followed the practices of other peddlers in the South, her customers consisted of large and small white landowners and black laborers. She likely purchased her wares on credit from wholesale agents in large cities, possibly in Atlanta, Memphis or Charleston.

Was Chana able to adhere to the strict rules of *kashrut* (dietary laws) and other Jewish observances while on the road? Did she develop a hankering for grits, black-eyed peas, collard greens, corn bread, pecan pie and other Southern specialties while eschewing crawfish and pork products? Was she able to spend *Shabbos* (Sabbath) with any of the Jewish families sprinkled in towns and villages throughout the region? These and other questions about Chana's life in America remain unanswerable—how she lived, the routes she traveled, the inventory of her wares, her customers and suppliers. Even her maiden name, married name and birthplace are not known definitively. What can be surmised, however, is that Chana was one gutsy lady and one of the few Jewish women to engage in peddling.

The majority of the two million other Eastern European Jewish immigrants to the United States chose to restart their lives in the North in the proximity of their brethren. At the time that Chana became a peddler in the South, her elder son and a son-in-law immigrated to Philadelphia. We don't know what motivated Chana to pick a difficult itinerant life with a horse and wagon among strangers, rather than live near her kin in a home with four solid walls and a roof above her head. There perhaps are only two logical explanations: Chana may have possessed a fierce adventuresome spirit and seized the opportunity to explore the world, or her daughter's husband might have been so violent and vindictive that Chana feared he would try to find them. Perhaps both of these are true. Being on the move would make it extremely difficult for an abandoned and enraged husband to track them down.

Chana probably connected with *landsmen* (countrymen) from Russia who settled in the South. About a year into the new itinerant life, her daughter met and married a Russian-born Jew who also had been unhappily married. Reportedly, the couple met in Atlanta, at some point moved to Memphis and later settled in Louisville. Did either the bride or groom divorce their original spouses before their new nuptials? We do not know.

Chana went solo as a peddler after the marriage. Relief for her daughter's newfound happiness must have intermingled with profound loneliness. Why didn't Chana follow the younger woman to her new home? Chana must have had a strong constitution to endure the elements and tremendous gumption to travel alone in sparsely populated areas.

Her life came to a violent end in the mid-1890s when a train slammed into her horse and wagon somewhere in the South.

Tracking Ancestors Who Concealed Their Identity

"We will never know most of the story of Chana and her children, not even their real names," explained my mother-in-law, Lydia Juresco Vogel, Chana's great-granddaughter. She went on:

> Chana's son, Aaron Davidowitch, and son-in-law, Moshe Lieb Davidowitch, used assumed names to escape conscription into the Russian army. They bought the identification documents of two brothers named Davidowitch who had served in the czar's army and died afterward. They adopted the dead men's names, immigrated to the United States in the late 1880s and settled in Philadelphia. I do not know their true first and last names or what town they came from.

Fearing deportation for using a false identity, they continued to use their assumed names until their deaths, and these names were carved on their tombstones. The only things we know for sure are that Aaron was the brother of Moshe Leib's wife, Minsa Shaina, and they (Aaron and Minsa) had a sister in Louisville, Kentucky, who had a daughter, Reba, and a son who became a prominent doctor in Louisville.

"About ten years after Aaron came to America," my mother-in-law continued, "he had a terribly upsetting dream and woke up certain that his mother Chana had died. A few days later he received a telegram from his sister in Louisville informing him of his mother's tragic death."

One last piece of information my mother-in-law added: "Aaron's real name was Goldfish, or Goldwine or Gold-something, and he was related to Samuel Goldwyn of MGM fame. He was also connected somehow to Daniel Taradash who won an Oscar for his screenplay *From Here to Eternity."*

Tracking Aaron's Line in Philadelphia

As the family genealogist, I had my work cut out for me. How could I determine the true identities of people who had tried to keep them hidden? To learn more about Chana and her children, I teamed up with Marcy Moore, a great-granddaughter of Minsa Shaina and Moshe Lieb. A cousin gave us Aaron's *ketubah* (marriage contract). According to family legend, Aaron had left Russia via Bessarabia and met and married a young woman along the way. The ketubah proved this true: *Aaron the son of Chaim David married Chava Liba the daughter of Shmuel Moshe [Saler] on 4 Mar 1884. She came from Seroka [now Soroca, Moldavia].*

Gravestones, death certificates and cemetery records from Har Yehuda Cemetery in Upper Darby, Pennsylvania, and Har Nebo Cemetery in Philadelphia provided more clues. Marcy did all the legwork in Philadelphia, including visiting the cemeteries to photograph the gravestones. The inscription on Minsa Shaina's tombstone revealed her father's name: *Chaim David.* So Aaron had used his real father's name in his ketubah.

The epitaph on Aaron's gravestone was somewhat of an enigma. The translation read, "Here lies our dear father, a faithful craftsman who was father and mother to his sons, Aharon, son of *Chaim David Davidovitch*..." So was his true last name Davidowitch after all? What was the meaning of the phrase that he was father and mother to his sons (but not his daughter)?

My mother-in-law provided the back story. Aaron's wife, Chava Liba née Saler, had been raised from a young age by a cruel stepmother after the death of her own mother. Chava Liba had lived the Cinderella story, and she extracted a promise from Aaron that he never would remarry if she died while their children were young. She could not control her own destiny, but she wanted to spare her children a terrible childhood.

What Was Believed To Be True

Chana who married GOLD-something and had at least three children

Son in Philadelphia who used the assumed name Aaron Davidowitch

Daughter Minsa Shaina in Philadelphia whose husband used the assumed name Moses Davis (shortened from Moshe Lieb Davidowitch)

Daughter who lived in Louisville, Kentucky, with her second husband

Granddaughter Reba who might have lived in Florida as an adult

Grandson who became a doctor in Louisville

Familial connections with Samuel Goldwyn and Daniel Taradash

Aaron and Chava Liba's first child, Bunya Gittel (Kate), was born in Bessarabia in 1887 and brought to America when she was two years old. In 1890, Jakob was born in Philadelphia, followed by Mitchell in 1894 and Lewis in 1899. A daughter, Anna, was born in 1896 and named for Chana. She died at age four in an accident eerily similar to the one that killed her grandmother; Anna was rundown by a horse and wagon in front of her home when she bolted into the street.

It was time for me to do archival work. The 1900 U.S. federal census showed that Chava Liba (Americanized to Lizzie) had given birth to seven children, but only four survived. So two other children in addition to Anna had not survived childhood. We surmised that one of these dead children must have been a first-born son named Chaim David after Aaron's father.

We knew that on the first night of Passover in April 1901, Chava Liba died while giving birth to her eighth child. The coroner's report listed cause of death as *heart disease.* A separate coroner's certificate revealed that the infant, *the deceased child of Elizabeth and Aaron Davidowitch* was a *white female, full-term, stillborn.* At the bottom of the certificate it was written that the name of the father was *Herman.* Herman often was used as the secular name for men with the Hebrew name Chaim, so we realized that the notation likely referred to Aaron's father. Records from Har Nebo Cemetery showed that mother and infant were buried together in the same coffin. Three years later, young Lewis succumbed at age four to tuberculosis meningitis.

Aaron kept his promise to Chava Liba and never remarried, acting as mother and father to his two remaining young sons. His daughter Kate was 13 when Chava Liba died and remembered her mother quite well.

Aaron strongly believed in education and sent all of his children to public schools through high school. When Kate graduated shortly before her 15th birthday in 1902, he encouraged her to attend pharmacy school. Gutsiness must run in the family. Kate padded a few years onto her age and

A pregnant Chava Liba Davidowitch née Saler with Anna and Lewis outside the family's grocery store at 509 Queen Street, Philadelphia, in 1901.

enrolled in the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy, one of the few women in the class and likely the youngest of all her classmates. She excelled in her courses, and when she graduated three years later at age 17, Aaron bought her a pharmacy to run. Her brother Jakob became a pharmacist, too, and likewise was given his own drug store. The youngest surviving sibling, Mitch, worked as a pharmacist's assistant and drug salesman.

The 1920 U.S. federal census showed Aaron Davidowitch living in the household of Kate, her husband Samuel Juresco, their young daughter Lydia (who became my mother-in-law) and a cousin, Reba Bornstein from Kentucky, who was a student. I knew that Kate's pharmacy occupied the first floor of the building.

When I read the census entry, I realized instantly that Reba was the daughter of Aaron's Kentucky sister, and I speculated that Reba had followed the new family tradition and come to Philadelphia to study pharmacy. A telephone call to the reference librarian at the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy confirmed my hunch.

Picking Up the Record Trail in Kentucky

Kentucky birth records showed that a Rebecca Bornstein had been born on April 13, 1902, in Louisville to Jacob Bornstein and his wife, Mary Goldfish. Rebecca must have shortened her name to Reba when she was older. World War I draft cards gave me the names of her three brothers: Herman David Bornstein was born July 18, 1891, in Memphis, Tennessee, and likely given the Hebrew name Chaim David. Ale (Eli) and Max were born in Louisville on August 10, 1893, and June 1, 1898, respectively. The draft cards did not provide the mother's maiden name so we looked into other documents.

Herman's birth certificate was filed in 1942 as a delayed birth record, 51 years after his birth. It gave his birth name as Hyman David Bornstein and his mother's name as Mary Grubstein. I sent for the Social Security applications for Ale and Max hoping for confirmation of their mother's maiden name, and I was rewarded with conflicting information. One gave Mary's maiden name as Gladstein and the other as Grubstein. Reba's Social Security application provided the name Goldfish again. Did they have different mothers all named Mary?

The 1900 U.S. federal census for Louisville showed that Jakob Bornstein and Mary had been married for 15 years (a marriage circa 1885), so the siblings all had the same mother. The census also showed that Mary had given birth to five children, but only three were still living. Mary had suffered the same tragic loss of children as Chava Liba.

Jakob Bornstein's naturalization petition papers from 1907 provided a big surprise. He listed his four children with Mary plus a fifth child, a daughter, Elizabeth, born in 1883 in Balta, Russia. Elizabeth must have been the daughter of the first wife and the stepdaughter of Mary.

A quick search on the Internet showed that Jacob was a stonemason and had moved to Louisville in 1890 after a tornado devastated the city. He founded the Bornstein Building Company and helped to rebuild Louisville's business district, and later constructed some of the city's most significant historic buildings, including the Reynolds Building and the Cherokee Road Library. The company was transferred from father to son and, as of this writing, is in the hands of a fourth-generation Bornstein more than 120 years later.

Jakob's grandson, Donald Bornstein (1923–2009) was unable to shed light on the Goldfish, Grubstein, Gladstein name conundrum. My collaborator, Marcy, and I cast our nets wider and wrote for the Social Security application of screenwriter Daniel Taradash. We wondered if it would provide some answers and were nicely rewarded. It showed us how Taradash was connected "somehow" to our family. Daniel was born in Louisville, the son of William Taradash and Elizabeth Bornstein—Mary's stepdaughter. One mystery solved.

Poking into the background of Samuel Goldwyn proved to be fairly easy, as Goldwyn was famous and a biography had been published about him. We learned that his birthplace was Warsaw, then in czarist Russia, now in Poland. He anglicized his original name, Schmuel Gelbfisz to Samuel Goldfish and later to Samuel Goldwyn. Unfortunately, try as I might, I cannot find a connection between Samuel Goldwyn and Chana, but I believe that it must be there.

Back to Philadelphia and the Family of Minsa Shaina

Marcy concentrated her efforts on her line, the family of Chana's daughter, Minsa Shaina, and son-in-law, Moshe Lieb Davidowitch. She learned that soon after immigration to Philadelphia, they had Americanized their names to Moses and Minnie Davis, and were the parents of ten children—all but three of whom were born in the old country. All the children, except one, adopted the surname Davis. The remaining child preferred the surname Davitch.

Children of Minsa Shaina Davis:

1. Phillip (Ephraim Davis) (June 1876–Oct 1851)
2. Sarah (Sorah) Davis Kravitz. (April 1877–?)
3. David H. Davitch (December 1882–?)
4. Max (Mordsche) Davis (August 1884–?)
5. Jennie (Pschame) Davis Rosemont (November 1881–February 15, 1967)
6. Rebecca (Berel) Davis Juresco (September 1887–June 14, 1915). This was Marcy Moore's grandmother.
7. William (Wolf) Davis (April 1889–?)
8. Edward Davis (June 27, 1893–June 1987)
9. Anna (Chana) Davis Levitt (October 1895–?)
10. Rose Davis (May 1898– ?)

We assumed that the third child, David H., likely had the Hebrew name David Chaim and was named for his maternal grandfather, Chaim David, even though the names were inverted. Since observant Ashkenazi Jews did not knowingly name children for living relatives, we surmised that Chana the peddler's husband, Chaim David, had died before 1882.

In addition, the October 1895 birth date of the ninth child, Anna (Chana the peddler's namesake), told us that Chana had died in the fall of 1895 or earlier. Census information between 1900 and 1940 provided a variety of birthplaces for Moshe Lieb, Minsa Shaina and their first seven children. Depending on the year, they were born in either Russia or Romania. We realized that these geographical changes were due to boundary shifts in Bessarabia after World War I. Moses' birthplace was inexplicably reported as Hungary in the 1930 census. The marriage record of their daughter, Rebecca Davis, in 1913 provided a hint at Minsa Shaina's maiden name: It was recorded as Fishgold, a transposition of Goldfish.

Marcy learned from distant relatives that the parents of Moses Davis were named Reuven and Frieda Gelfont. Moses' gravestone inscription partially confirmed this, as his name was written as Moshe Leev, son of Reuven. Marcy has not yet learned Moses' true first name or where he came from.

Looking for Grubsteins

The 1920 federal census recorded Mary's son, Max Bornstein, living in Philadelphia. Since later documents showed that Max had become a physician, I deduced that he was likely studying medicine in Philadelphia at the same time his sister was a pharmacy student. He was not living with either of his uncles, Aaron or Moshe Lieb. Instead, the census showed Max at the home of Mendel Rass-something (it turned out to be Ressner). Also in the household were Mendel's wife, Jennie, their two Kentucky-born children and Mendel's two sisters-in-law, Yetta and Sara Grubstein, who came from Russia. Max was identified as a cousin, and I realized that he was likely a first cousin of Jennie and her sisters.

I checked ship manifests for Grubsteins who immigrated to Philadelphia and found Juda Liebe Grubstein, a shoemaker, born about 1870, who had lived in Balta (the same city where Elizabeth Bornstein had been born). He had arrived in April 1905 at age 35. On the ship's manifest, the name and address of the person he planned to join was listed as *A. Davidowitz, 509 Queen Street, Phila*, and identified as "brother" with the word "father" written above it. "Father" looked as though it was lightly crossed out. Aaron Davidowitch lived at this Queen Street address, but he was too young to be Juda Leib's father. He easily, however, could have been his older brother. Rosenbaum Bank Passage Order Book Records showed that Aron Davidowicz [sic] had purchased the ship ticket for Jude Lieb Grubstein a few months earlier.

The next year, Esther Grubstein and her daughters Scheindle, age 15; Arane, age 6; and Sara, age 4 immigrated to the U.S. through Philadelphia. On Esther's passenger manifest, the "M" for married was overwritten with "Widd" for widow. The name and address of the person Esther and her daughters planned to join was *brother-in-law Maische Dawidowicz, 1427 S. 4th Street, Philadelphia.* This was Moishe Lieb Davidowitch, that is, Moses Davis, the husband of Minsa Shaina. I concluded that the deceased Juda Lieb Grubstein was the younger brother of Aaron and Minsa Shaina, and their family surname likely was Grubstein.

I knew from researching Galician-Jewish families that sometimes children used their mother's maiden name as a surname. It was extremely plausible that Hannah's maiden name was Gelbfisz/Goldfish and that Mary had used it. This would be especially plausible if she tried to keep her whereabouts hidden from her first husband.

I tried to find Juda Leib's death record or tombstone to see if his father were Chaim David, but I could not locate either despite knowing that the year of death was either 1905 or 1906.

Juda Leib's widow and daughters moved to Kentucky, likely to be near Mary. The girls were now called Jennie, Yetta and Sara. A few years later, Jennie married Max (Mendel) Ressner and, in 1912, gave birth to a son Herman David (Chaim David) Ressner. Their daughter, Sophie Ressner, was born in Louisville in 1914. It struck me as odd that Jennie hadn't named her son for her deceased father, Juda Lieb. Subsequently, the family moved to Philadelphia, and Esther Grubstein died there in 1919.

Sometimes one's research comes to an unsatisfactory ending with loose ends that do not tie together in a neat package. I thought this was the case of Chana and her children. Then one day another Grubstein researcher sent me a document that gave me some closure. It was an immigration record dated July 29, 1906, from the Special Boards of Inquiry in District No. 4 (Philadelphia) and was a transcript of an interview between immigration officials and Ester Grubstein. A witness, Moses David [sic] was also interrogated.

In the interview, Ester explained that her destination was the Philadelphia residence of Moses Davis. She said her husband had been dead for two years and that she had no

(left) Moses and Minnie Davis with their children. (right) Moses and Minnie in their later years.

other children on the other side of the ocean. She explained her relationship to her brother-in-law Moses: His wife was her husband's sister. She was one of three sisters: Marie [Mary], Minze [Minsa Shaina] and Zipe. [Zipe was a previously unknown sister to me]. Ester's husband had only one brother, David Davidson.

The interviewer asked her husband's name and when she said Jude Lieb Grubstein, he then wanted to know why her husband was a Grubstein and his brother was a Davidowitz. Ester said she did not know, so the interviewer asked her again how many brothers her husband had, and then this time she said "none." I believe that Ester told the truth the first time. Aaron's real first name must have been David, and this would make sense if his father were Chaim David, that is, Chaim the son of David. Chaim had named his own son after his deceased father.

Ester explained that she was going to Moses Davidowitz and that a Moses Davis had paid her passage. I wondered if she were aware that Moses Davidowitz had anglicized his name to Davis. At the end of her testimony, Moses Davis was sworn in. He explained that he had lived in the United States for 19 years, was a citizen, worked in real estate, had 10 children, two of whom were married and four who were working. He had come for Ester Grubstein and her three children. Moses then explained that his wife, Minze, and Ester's husband were siblings.

I almost fell off my chair when I read the question and answer:

Q: Where is the woman's husband?

A: In the U.S., he is a shoemaker and lives in Louisville, Kentucky.

Q: How long is her husband here? A: 1½ year.

Q: Who paid her passage? A: A brother-in-law in Louisville, Jacob Bernstein [sic].

Q: What are you going to do with the family?

A: Will keep her two weeks and then send to the husband.

Q: How many sisters has your wife?

A: Two more. Marie Bernstein and Zipe Egisman. Marie is in Louisville and Zipe in Europe.

The immigrant was recalled:

Q: Where is your husband?

A: Not there two years.

Q: Where is he?

A: Don't know.

Q: Do you know whether he is in the U.S. or not?

A: Don't know where he is. He never wrote to me.

Q: Did he send any money?

A: No sir. I earned it myself.

Q: Who sent the tickets?

A: From Philadelphia, from brother-in-law Moses Davis.

Q: Do you know one Bernstein?
A: He is a brother-in-law
Q: Where is Bernstein?
A: I don't know.
Q: In what city were you married?
A: Balka [sic] Russia
Q: What was the rabbi's name?
A: It is 10 years. I don't know.
Q: Did you get any letters from husband since he left Europe?
A: No, sir.
Q: Did your husband desert you?
A: Business was bad and he went away to earn something; he said he would go away to look for a living. I received a letter from Moses Davis that she should say he would take care of her and that she was bound to him. (Alien later admitted that her husband was here.)

Ester and the girls apparently were held in detention for several days until August 2, when the immigration officials received an affidavit from her husband and brother-in-law in Louisville, which showed that he was the husband and able to care for his family. Moses Davis received $30 from the husband, and he purchased railroad tickets and deposited them with the steamship company. The family was permitted to stay in America. They remained in Philadelphia for four or five days.

In Louisville, they joined Juda Lieb who now used the name Louis Grubstein. Eleven years later, Louis died of stomach cancer. His gravestone showed his Hebrew name: *Abraham son of Chaim David.*

I did a little research on Ancestry.com and tracked down the married names of Juda Leib's two younger daughters. The family tree for Chana the peddler now looks like this:

Chana Gelbfish (died circa 1894) married Chaim David Grubstein (died before 1891)

Mary (Miriam) Goldfish (1859–1929) married Jacob Bornstein (1861–1930)

Herman (Hyman) Bornstein
Ale (Eli) Bornstein
Dr. Max (Marcus) Bornstein
Reba (Rebecca) Bornstein married William Salzer

Aron Davidowitch (David Chaim) (died 1932) married Chava Liba Saler (1864–1901)

Kate Davidowitch married Samuel Clemens Juresco
Jacob (Jack) Davis
Mitchell Davis
Anna (Chana) Davidowitch
Lewis Davidowitch
(stillborn girl)

Minnie (Minsa Shaina) Goldfish (1855–1929) married Moses (Moshe Lieb) Davis (Gelfont) (died 1939)

Their 10 children

Juda Lieb (Abraham) Grubstein (1869–1917) married Esther (circa 1868–1919)

Jennie (Shaindle) Grubstein m Max (Mendel) Ressner
Sarah Grubstein married Joseph Cahan
Yetta Grubstein married Benjamin Levenkron

Zipe m Eksman/Oksman

Any descendants likely died in the Holocaust

Marcy and I keep hoping that an old newspaper article about Chana the peddler's death will surface one day. Women peddlers were a rarity and her death was tragic, making for a good story indeed.

Carole G. Vogel of Branchville, New Jersey, has written four previous AVOTAYNU articles: "Reconstructing a Lost Holocaust Family," "The Great Garbuny-Gorbunov Hunt," "Oswego, New York: Wartime Haven for Jewish Refugees," and "Constructing a Town-Wide Genealogy: Jewish Mattersdorf, Hungary." She edited We Shall Not Forget: Memories of the Holocaust *and* the Paul Gass Family Website.

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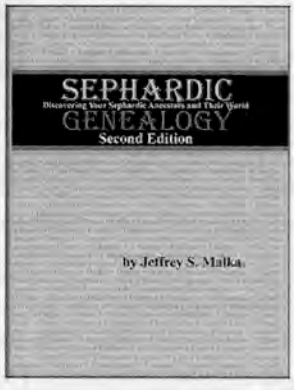

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