

Philip Silverstone Sopkin comments of Sopkin history edited 9 9 14

All those interested in Sopkin family history owe a great debt of gratitude to Phillip Silverstone Sopkin.

Cali, Colombia, 10 August 2001

Dear Mr. Fox,

Thank you for your recent e-mail about the Sopkin family tree. I am glad that after many years, there is finally another person interested in the Sopkin family tree. When I was working on the family tree in the 1970's, I encountered vehement opposition on the part of some members of the family. After much work, I finally gave up on this project after I went to Colombia; I didn't have time to continue with the project. I had once intended to publish a book on the subject, but I suppose that now I'll never get around to it (I'm almost 62, and I've got other things to write in my own field of biology that have priority).

In 1997, I had the good fortune to visit the ancestral home of the Sopkin family, Tal'ne, in the Ukraine, where my grandmother was born. Tal'noye and Tal'ne are the same town; Tal'noye is the Russian name and Tal'ne is the Ukrainian name. Through an interpreter, I spoke with the mayor of Tal'ne.

There are no Sopkins left in Tal'ne, and the Jewish cemetery there was bulldozed years ago to build an elementary school on that site. The Germans killed all the Jewish people in the district when they occupied the Ukraine in 1942. I also visited the nearby town of Uman', where my grandfather was born. I saw buildings that my grandparents must have seen when they lived there. They left in the 1890's. I saw a Polish church in Tal'ne that must have been built no later than the 18th Century, because the Poles were kicked out of the Ukraine in the late 18th Century. I also visited a botanical garden in Uman' that was founded by a Polish count in 1796. Two of my grandfather's sisters never emigrated to the U.S. They stayed in Uman. He tried to contact their families through the Red Cross after World War II, but without success.

By the way, my grandparents on the Sopkin side were first cousins, and there were about seven cases of marriages between cousins in the Sopkin family.

I don't know if some members of the family sent you a complete family tree that I made, or only the short one that includes only the people with the surname Sopkin. If you don't have the long one, I can send you a photocopy. I am interested in any information you might have that is not in the genealogical tree that I made. At the time I was working on the tree, the 1910 and 1920 censuses were not available to me.

My grandmother's brother Harry Sopkin, who was Mel Torme's grandfather, told me that there was only one Sopkin family, but I think he was wrong. Aside from two men who changed their name from Sapozhnikov to Sopkin in the U.S., there are other Sopkin families in Russia. The story I was told about one of the men in the U.S. is that one man in Chicago admired Ben Sopkin so much that he changed his name to Ben Sopkin. Ben was angry about this. My sister, saw on television, a Russian film director named Alexander Sopkin. When I visited Moscow in

1998, a friend introduced me to another man named Sopkin; he is a retired Soviet air force colonel. He said his grandfather was born in the Ukraine, but apparently this family is not Jewish. So unless there was conversion somewhere along the line (which is possible), there is more than one Sopkin family (some of them still in Russia or the Ukraine).

As to your questions: I don't know when nor why there was a separation between the New York and Chicago lines. You said that the 1900 census shows Harry and Louis Sopkin living next door to each other in New York. But I think that these might have been two of my grandmother's brothers, not the Louis Sopkin of the New York branch. I know that there was still contact between the two branches at least until the 1920's, because Frances (Fannie) Sopkin (Beatrice's sister, who married Dave Leonard) told me that in the 1920's, she went to Chicago to visit her cousins Ben and Louis Sopkin, and she gave me a picture of Louis's daughter Ann Sopkin that Ann had given her.

But apparently the generation after that lost contact; my mother and her sister told me that they never heard of the New York branch of the Sopkin family. I don't think there was any hostility between the two branches. They just lost contact after two generations. Ben Sopkin did help some of his relatives of the Chicago branch sometimes, but I don't know if he helped the other branch.

Ben Sopkin definitely was not wealthy when he came to the U.S. All the men in the family were tailors in the Ukraine. Ben came with his father Max and some of the older children in 1892; they lived in New Jersey. When he came to the U.S., Ben was about 19 years old (born about 1873, in Tal'ne). Different documents give different dates of birth for Ben, but I think the most reliable is from a photo that my grandmother gave me, with information written on it in her handwriting, that says 1933, aged 60.

Ben Sopkin was my Grandmother Esther Sopkin's oldest brother. Ben founded a dress manufacturing business with his brother Louis. I think that Louis later left this business to found his own business. Ben's company was the Wentworth Manufacturing Company, which was in Massachusetts, and later moved south, where labor costs were cheaper. The information that I remember is that the company went bankrupt in the 1970's, because they couldn't compete with cheap clothing imported from the Orient. The family didn't go bankrupt, just the business. I don't know if it still exists, but I doubt it. Ben's line was the only really wealthy branch of the Sopkin family. My grandparents weren't wealthy. Their sons, George and Henry, were classical musicians. George is the only one still living, in Maine. My mother died in 1992, at the age of 86.

I think that the Estelle Sopkin shown by the 1910 census on your website as living with her children in Chicago was Tillie Sopkin, widow of Jacob Sopkin, who died in 1909. Jacob was a brother of Max Sopkin, my great-grandfather. One of the children with a partial name "Olo" or something like that must be Solomon Sopkin. There were two brothers with the same name (Charles) in that family. One of the Charles was a lawyer. Their father, Jacob, was a tailor in Russia, and made garments for the Russian orthodox priests, I was told. One of his clients warned him to leave town fast, because there was going to be a pogrom. He got out of town rapidly; when he came back, he found that his house had been burned down. All that was left was rubble, but sitting on the rubble there was a black cat.

The pogroms were one of the reasons that the Sopkin family emigrated. My great-grandfather, Abraham Sopkin, was blinded in a pogrom in Uman' in 1905. A peasant hit him on the back of the head with a club and damaged the visual region of the brain. His eyes weren't directly hurt, but he lost his vision. After that, he decided this wasn't a place to bring up children. So he gathered all the money he could raise, and sent his second wife and two daughters by his second marriage across the border to Rumania, and thence to the U.S. (Boston). They crossed the border to Rumania hidden in a wagon of hay. The plan was for Abraham to join his family later in the U.S. But he never made it, because the U.S. immigration laws did not permit blind people to emigrate to the U.S. He died in Uman' in 1910.

I hope that we can keep in contact in the future about the genealogy of the Sopkin family. If you are interested in the history of the Jewish people of Russia and Poland, there is a good historical work on this subject written by Dubnow: Dubnow, S.M. 1916. History of the Jews in Russia and Poland translated into English by I. Friedlaender, Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia. This was reprinted in two volumes in 1974 by Ktav Publishing House.

Sincerely,

Philip A. Silverstone-Sopkin (8/10/01)

[For more information about Tal'noye or Tolnoye go to <http://jewishwebindex.com> and click on Ukraine section - Tolnoye is in list of cities. A wonderful site for all genealogy researchers and history buffs.]