

THE SONS OF DOBRIN c1890 – 1912; a London *Landsmanshaft*

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Dobrin (Dobrzyn nad Wisla) , like every other town in Poland or the Pale of Settlement, contributed to the great westward wave of Jewish migration that occurred in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Some of these migrants ended up in London and founded a *landsmanshaft*, a benefit society for Jewish immigrants from the same town or city.

The Jewish population of London rose from 45,000 in 1881 to 180,000 by 1914. Most of this population was concentrated in a specific Jewish quarter, the East End. By the outset of the First World War, London contained the third largest number of Jewish East European immigrants in the world, after New York and Chicago. Among these were Jewish *Dobriners*, some arriving as early as the 1870s, economic migrants or young men avoiding conscription into the Tsar's army.

In nineteenth century Britain, in the absence of the mechanisms of a modern European welfare state, one of the principal protections against personal and family misfortune was mutual self-help through associations called 'friendly societies'. As London Jewry expanded, so did the number of friendly societies that Jews created to meet their needs. For poor East End Jews, these were the most important social institution after the synagogue. Membership might be based on a particular trade or religious or political conviction, but many were *landsmanshaften*.

For the investment of a shilling (current value \$0.08) each week, a Jewish workingman might get the promise of fifty pounds (\$80) payable on his death, ten pounds (\$16) on his wife's death and other amounts in other circumstances. Finding the shilling might however be a stretch for, say, a boot-finisher on only sixteen shillings (\$1.30) a week.

The Sons of Dobrin Benefit and Tontine Society was founded in about 1890. Its records have not survived, but its history can be pieced together from mentions in the Jewish press. "Tontine" means that a portion of sums invested would not be paid out but be retained for its last surviving member. Its founder was a Mr M Lazarus. He came to London some time between 1878 and 1881. His first name in official documents is sometimes "Morris" and sometimes "Marks" and over twenty years his recorded occupation changed from tailor to clothier to real estate auctioneer to jewelry dealer. He seems to have been a rather mercurial fellow.

In the 1890s, the society's presidents included a Mr S Simmons and a Mr M Clapper, but it then fell into the doldrums, its revival being attributed to the perseverance of its secretary, a Mr J Levy.

In 1895, my uncle Maurice Applebaum arrived in London, aged about twenty. The eldest son of a cantor, he, his father and mother were all born in Dobrin, although his family left town when he was about a year old. He nevertheless gravitated to the Sons of Dobrin. At the tender age of 23, he became its vice president and a year later its president, a position which he seems to have held for the rest of the life of the society.

The Sons of Dobrin never grew beyond a single lodge. By 1903 this had 132 members, declining to something more than 100 by the end of the decade. Were these all actually *Dobriners* ? It is unlikely. Friendly societies vied with each other for members and often became overstretched creating concern for their financial stability. Working men who had two or three shillings to invest each week would place a shilling each with different societies to spread the risk. A *Plotzker* (from Plock) or a *Lynshitzer* (from Leczycz) might choose to invest with the Sons of Dobrin just because they believed the society to be well managed and financially sound.

But there was a new draw after Maurice Applebaum's arrival on the scene. His elevation to president seems to have coincided with a change in mood whereby the society became much more a vehicle for social fun and frolics. The big feature of its activities became its annual concert and ball, where there were opportunities for dressing up, dancing to a band, and amateur and semi-professional vaudevilliana, including singing, dance routines, recitations and comedy acts. It was also intensely patriotic. Its active members, many of whom were still Russian nationals, were keen to be accepted as loyal Britishers. In 1900, a collection was made for the families of British Empire soldiers fighting the Boers in South Africa. In 1902 a loyal message of congratulation was sent by the Sons of Dobrin to King Edward on his coronation, which Buckingham Palace officially acknowledged.

In 1912, the society was dissolved at the request of its members. The precise reason for this is not known. One factor may have been a new legislative regime which caused members to move to larger societies. The times were also changing. As individuals and families prospered, they moved out of the East End, joining new synagogues and making new friends. A new generation of Jewish Londoners had also sprung up with less connection with Eastern Europe than their parents and little interest in celebrating it. All that remains of the society now are the gravestones of members which had been paid for by the society. One of these is the gravestone of Maurice Applebaum's father, my grandfather, located in a locked and rarely opened cemetery, and on the base of the stone is inscribed in small letters: "Member of the Sons of Dobrin".