The Ties that Bind: Jewish Kinship Networks and Modernization in Darbenai and its *Diaspora*

Professor Eric L. Goldstein

From the outset of work on this project, I have developed a very large bank of data on which to base my conclusions concerning Jewish life and family networks and in the *shtetl* of Darbenai, Lithuania and its *Diaspora* during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The project has taken me to Lithuania, where I have conducted extensive research in various state archives and conducted interviews with local (non-Jewish) residents in the town of Darbenai who remember the Jewish population; to Israel, where I conducted about a dozen interviews with surviving natives of Darbenai and their descendants; and to several locations in the United States and Canada (Harrisburg, Pittsburgh and Punxsutawney, PA; Paterson, NJ; New York and Long Island, NY; Halifax, NS; Saint John and Moncton, NB), where I interviewed descendants of immigrants from Darbenai and also mined records in local courthouses and Jewish institutions and recorded names and dates in Jewish cemeteries. When added to extensive on-line research in U.S. Census and immigration records, the result of this work has been to produce an extensive database that captures almost every known Jew who lived in Darbenai between 1834 and 1941, and every migrant from Darbenai who is documented in existing emigration and immigration records. I have also entered the data into Family Tree Maker genealogical software in order to chart the extensive interrelationships between the town's Jewish families. Being able to view the data in this way allows me to better understand how family relationships both reflected and determined patterns of economic life and occupations, geographical mobility and migration, social stratification and communal leadership.

My working thesis is that in traditional *shtetl* life, family ties were the most central building block that determined where one lived, what occupation one followed, and the range of social and economic connections one had not only in one's town but in the larger region (since family ties also connected one to many surrounding towns). Yet because these networks changed and their stability and efficacy were challenged over time, they also provide an excellent mirror of the transformations Jews experienced during the modern period, with its attendant processes of immigration, urbanization and modernization. For much of the nineteenth century, these family networks operated in ways that balanced forces of stability and change: marriage choices (within the same small circle of families who shared particular occupations or a particular social status, or to cousins, for example) often operated to preserve and strengthen the social structure and social mores that prevailed within the *shtetl*. Marital choices, however, could also operate in a more entrepreneurial fashion, to improve the social standing of a family, or to extend its economic and social ties to new geographical areas. Although poor and wealthy families relied on family networks in somewhat different ways – the poor often as a basic tool for support and economic survival, the wealthy as a more elaborate system through which marital alliances could be forged and communal power maintained – these networks were critically important in maintaining and, in some cases improving, the lives of all Jews.

As major economic and political changes began to alter the lives of *shtetl* Jews toward the end of the nineteenth century, however, the system of family networks found itself challenged. Jews in Darbenai faced unprecedented economic and political hardship and began to leave the *shtetl* and travel to distant towns, cities and countries as never before. In some cases, Jews were able to turn to their family connections to meet the challenges posed by political change, urbanization, immigration and modernization. Darbenai Jews, for example, forged immigration networks based on family ties, carrying hundreds of interrelated families to specific locations around the globe (Paterson, NJ; Krugersdorp and Kroonstad, South Africa; the Jewish settlement of Rehovot in Palestine; small towns in the Maritime Provinces of Canada). In these locations, the networks that had long operated in the *shtetl* often helped immigrants find work, marriage partners and social support as they adapted to their new settings.

Yet even as family networks played a decisive role in the immigration process, they were ultimately unable to provide the sense of cohesion and order that they had offered in Lithuania, and in many cases immigrants separated totally from the *shtetl* network in search of new frameworks for social and cultural identity. Of course, the role town and kinship networks played in the lives of the immigrants varied depending on factors such as age and geographical

location. In Maritime Canada, Jewish communities in the small cities of Saint John and Moncton consisted of dozens of families from Darbenai who were able to some extent to reproduce occupational and social patterns that had pertained in the *shtetl*. These communities included both older and younger immigrants, a situation that contributed to the persistence of a town-of-origin identity, with even second- and third- generation Canadians marrying into the same social network and maintaining community organizations made up of Jews descending from Darbenai immigrants. This was less true, however, in the United States, where greater social and geographical mobility led Jews from Darbenai to scatter from original places of settlement more quickly and branch out on their own. In South Africa and Palestine, where most of the immigrants were young and single, there was even less cohesion based on family networks and town of origin, and young Jews were more likely to marry those from other locations and search for communal and social relationships with Jews from a variety of backgrounds.

Although the social landscape in each immigration point differed, the central challenge in all of these settings was that, in the face of the disintegration of previous social and kinship networks, Jews from Darbenai had to develop new means to support and sustain themselves, new definitions of "family" and "community," and new ways of understanding where they fit within the broader Jewish and non-Jewish collectives. In some cases, the loss of the supportive and defining presence of the Darbenai kinship network led individuals to travel far from the traditions and culture of their youth, in some cases even separating themselves to varying degrees from Judaism and the Jewish community. Thus, we may understand the separation from old-world social networks as part of the process of social integration and assimilation, particularly in Western countries. In other cases, parts of the legacy of the home-town culture remained (such as a preference for small-town living or a certain occupation), while other elements (such as religious orthodoxy) evaporated. The social forces could also work the opposite way, with Darbenai Jews moving to a highly urban environment and taking on totally new occupations but remaining religiously and culturally traditional. In many cases, Jews from Darbenai did remain strongly connected to a Jewish environment, but one far removed from the small-town, close-knit, traditional atmosphere of their youth (becoming, for example, a member of the massive urban Jewish community of New York or changing into a secular Jew in Palestine). In these cases, Jews from Darbenai participated in the fashioning of new, modern Jewish identities, based on associations and symbols quite different than those of the *shtetl*.

Whether one remained traditional or not, or connected to Jewish life or not, breaking away from the small-town kinship network was often experienced as a liberating escape from a stifling, and highly determinative social system that limited social possibilities in new, post-migration settings. On the other hand, separation from the supportive environment of the *shtetl* and its kinship ties often led to feelings of religious and cultural loss, and in some cases personal dislocation and familial rupture. Letters between Darbenai immigrants and their families back home— dozens of which have been discovered and copied during the course of this project—express in human terms not only the sense of excitement and possibility of "venturing out" but also the tremendous costs associated with the transformations that took place, as individuals left the *shtetl* and grew distant from its social protections.

Using the personal stories of Darbenai residents and members of its *Diaspora*, I am currently weaving the data collected during the course of this project into a detailed narrative that illustrates the trends discussed above. I also hope to develop these themes further by examining what happened to family networks in Darbenai itself for the period between 1914 and 1941, when the Jewish population declined precipitously in the wake of emigration and the efficacy of family and social networking was challenged even in the *shtetl* itself. In pursuing these goals, I aim to recover the social networking of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century *shtetl* as a major component of Jewish life and identity in eastern Europe and illustrate how its transformation and decline was a central component of the modernization of eastern European Jews in various settings across the globe.