



SOKOLIFKERS  
ARE BEAUTIFUL

SOKOLIFKE BUMPER-STICKER

... more than 80 have been put on cars

## Sokolifke

# Buffalonians preserve memory of area's transplanted shtetl



MRS. CHAIKA SHUMAN

... matriarch Sokolifker

Sokolifke was once a shtetl in Western Russia.

It was a small village of one-story homes and 3,100 inhabitants, 80% of them Jewish. But Sokolifke does not exist anymore.

It was torn apart by pogroms, emptied by emigration, and finally destroyed, along with 33,000 other villages, by the Nazis.

In its place today stands a Soviet farm.

Though Sokolifke is not a reality in the Soviet Union today, it is a vivid memory to many Buffalo area residents.

When Sokolifke's Jews began to leave in the midst of the World War I pogroms, the road for many of them ended here. No exact figures are available, but Charles Shuman of Williamsville, the son of Sokolifke natives, estimates that 75% of the village's Jewish emigrants settled in Buffalo.

Few Sokolifke natives are alive today, but "a couple hundred" of their descendants live in the Buffalo area, according to Dr. Max

Gelman, a Town of Tonawanda dentist whose father was born in Sokolifke.

One of those descendants, Dr. Reuben Kaiser, a Williamsville physiotherapist, whose mother migrated from Sokolifke, is trying to keep the village's memory alive.

Through bumper-stickers.

He read an advertisement a year ago about a local firm that produces custom-made bumper-stickers. He ordered two with the words: "SOKOLIFKERS ARE BEAUTIFUL."

It was "sort of a nostalgia thing... sort of a 'Roots' thing," Dr. Kaiser explains. Everywhere he drove he received requests for the bumper-stickers. He had more printed, a dozen at a time, until the demand "mushroomed" beyond his control.

"People stopped me in the street, people followed me," Dr. Kaiser says. He turned the job of handling requests over to the Fingold

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**SOKOLIFKERS IN BUFFALO**—The memorial stone on the left was dedicated in 1964 in Cheektowaga's Holy Order of the Living Cemetery, in honor of the nearly 250 Jews who

were killed in Sokolifke's pogroms. The above picture was taken at the 1930 banquet of the Ustingrader Unterstutzung Verein, the organization formed by local Sokolifkiers.

## Buffalonians preserve memory of Sokolifke

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Cousins Club, of which he is a member. Since then, he says, about 80 bumperstickers have been printed and distributed. They can be found on the cars of former Buffalonians who now live in Florida and Virginia.

The bumperstickers can be ordered by calling Mrs. Rose Gandel at 838-4678.

Why this interest in a village that hasn't existed for 35 years?

Because "we're very proud of the people that came from there," Dr. Gelman says. And because second- and third-generation Sokolifkiers are trying to capture some of the camaraderie that existed among the first-generation emigrants.

### Lived and died together

When the Sokolifkiers came to Buffalo, they lived together in the East Side, studied together with a Sokolifker Talmud Torah teacher, bought their beef from a Sokolifker butcher, had their chickens slaughtered by a Sokolifker shochet, worshipped together in the Sokolifker Shul on Sping Street, and were buried together in the Holy Order of the Living Cemetery in Cheektowaga.

Buffalo was a "carry-over" from Sokolifke, says Mrs. Fay Dankner of Williams-ville, Charles Shuman's sister. Their mother, Mrs. Chaika Shuman of Buffalo, is at 86 the oldest Sokolifke native living in this area.

Sokolifke, says Mrs. Shuman, was "a typical shtetl." Like Anatevka of *Fiddler on the Roof*—just like Anatevka.

Mrs. Shuman—maiden name Alinitz—was the oldest of nine siblings, four of whom

died as infants. Her father was a blacksmith, her mother a housewife.

Sokolifke, during Mrs. Shuman's childhood, was a "poor" village.

And to be accurate, Sokolifke was not actually Sokolifke.

### Expelled from village

The Jewish residents of Sokolifke were expelled during the early 1800's, and settled across the tributary of the Bug River on which Sokolifke was located. The Jews called their village Ustingrad, in honor of a non-Jewish woman named Mrs. Ustina from whom they bought their land.

Nevertheless, the residents of Ustingrad called themselves Sokolifkiers, and they continue to refer to Ustingrad as Sokolifke. "How though it was really Ustingrad, in their hearts and minds it remained Sokolifke," Mrs. Dankner says.

(In keeping with the Sokolifkiers' practice, Ustingrad is referred to as Sokolifke in this article.)

Sokolifke's residents made their livings as skilled artisans—money-changers, tailors, shoemakers, carpenters, carriage-makers, etc..

### Six synagogues

The village had four shochetim, one rabbi, and six synagogues, each of which had its own chazan and Torah-reader. It did not have a fiddler on the roof, Mrs. Shuman says, but it did have one elderly man who sang and danced on the roof of his house when affected by holiday spirits.

When Mrs. Shuman was 12, she moved to her uncle's farm—ten miles from Sokolifke

—to learn wigmaking. She prospered.

At 15 she bought a plot of land in Sokolifke for her family, and helped them build a brick house.

She married Peretz Shuman, an egg-candler, at 21, and they lived in her family's home for three years.

At 24, Mrs. Shuman and her husband moved into their own home in Sokolifke.

### 250 killed in pogroms

In 1918 the pogroms began. Every "once in a while" armed groups of Russian peasants rode into the village, attacking property and killing Jews. Nearly 250 Jews died in Sokolifke's pogroms.

Mrs. Shuman's four brothers were killed in one pogrom in 1917. Her father was killed the following year.

In 1918 the Sokolifkies left Sokolifke.

They lived for one year in Uman, a city 25 miles from Sokolifke, and a few years in Berlin. In 1921 they took 1 boat from Hamburg, Germany, to Camden, N.J. The Shumans lived for two weeks with Mrs. Sokolifke in Philadelphia, then came to Buffalo, where Mrs. Shuman's sister and brother-in-law were living. Mrs. Shuman's mother joined them a few months later.

"Many" Sokolifkies had settled here by then, Mrs. Shuman says. Nearly all found work as fruit or junk peddlers. A few Sokolifkies settled in New York City, Boston, Philadelphia and Detroit.

Why did most Sokolifkies come to Buffalo?

### Became peddlers

Because the "best opportunities" for work existed here, Mrs. Shuman says. Few jobs,

including those of peddlers, were available to immigrants in other cities.

Many Sokolifkies were able to start peddling operations because of aid from the Hebrew Benevolent Aid Association, she says.

The children and grandchildren of those self-educated peddlers are today's college-educated doctors and lawyers and merchants, and leaders of the Buffalo Jewish community.

Mrs. Shuman worked as an egg-candler for six months here, before beginning work as a junk peddler. He retired in 1951, and died in 1970.

Mrs. Shuman raised her four children, and worked for two years during World War II as a riveter in a local airplane factory. In her spare time she wrote poetry and short stories in Yiddish.

The early Sokolifkies in Buffalo formed a group called the Ustingrader Unterstutzung Verein. It was a typical "landsmanshaft"—an organization of translated Jews from one city.

During World War I and the pogroms, members of the Verein sent clothes and money to the Jews remaining in Sokolifke. They helped settle the Sokolifkies who came to Buffalo, held annual banquets, twice-monthly social meetings, and occasional lectures.

Similar groups were established in New York, Philadelphia, Boston and Detroit, but the Buffalo chapter was the largest.

### Sold shul

The Sokolifker Shul, which was founded about 1916, was sold in 1940, as the East Side Jews moved on mass to the Humboldt Parkway section. The Verein ceased functioning about 15 years ago, as the original Sokolifkies moved away from Buffalo or died, and their descendants lost interest.

A monument to the Sokolifkies killed in the 1918 pogroms was ordered in 1964 near the entrance to the Holy Order of the Living Cemetery. Similar memorials have been dedicated in New York City, and on Kibbutz Maschabi-Sadeh in Israel's Negev Desert. Buffalo's Sokolifkies several years ago raised money for the construction of a clinic on the kibbutz.

During a trip to the Soviet Union in 1965, Dr. Gelman visited the site of Sokolifke. He found no trace of the village or its cemetery. He learned that the village had been established by the German Army in World War II. A Soviet agricultural settlement has been built there.

### Might hold reunion

Dr. Gelman says the bumperstickers are an attempt to keep the memory of Sokolifke from being forgotten.

There is "a little bit of talk" about a reunion of Sokolifkies and their descendants, Dr. Dankner says, but no action has been taken.

But Mrs. Dankner says an attempt to revive the Verein would probably fail. "There's no need for it," she says. "There are new worlds to conquer."

But Mrs. Shuman says "I don't want to forget it. I want my children to remember what happened to the Jewish people."

## Mrs. Chaika Shuman describes a pogrom

January 1918. The tenth day in Tsvet. The solid brick house that we had all hoped to build was the last house in the village of Ustingrad. Beyond us was the woods.

An ordinary day. From the busy blacksmith shop that stood before our house, Tata had just sent my husband to buy horseshoe nails. From the window, he glanced casually after him...

**Soldiers! A crowd of soldiers!**  
Tata ran out after him. I went out him to see. My husband ran in one direction. Tata ran in another, the wrong direction. Soldiers stopped him.

"Where is your house?"

"I have no house," he answered.

We saw them lead Tata to the momentarily unoccupied house next door. Mama, my sister-in-law, Pessie, with her five-month-old infant, and I, with my two-year-old daughter, fled to the house of David Abramowitz, a poor man. His family was sick and they were sleeping on the oven for warmth.

Beyond the door was a large wardrobe. Beyond that a bed. We crouched behind the wardrobe.

Even to this poor man's house, the soldiers came. But they did not enter. The

open door hid us, saved us. It did not save David Abramowitz. The soldiers shot him.

Now we cowered under the bed, the corpse of David beside us. Three days and three nights we hid there.

Where was my husband? Where was Tata?

They had been like a beloved father to Pessie, a kind man to me. What was he?

Mama scraped snow from the window so that Pessie would have strength to nurse her baby. And for three days and three nights we hid there.

On the third day, we could no longer bear the cold nor the smell of the corpse. We went outside. But it was not yet safe. Two handbats stopped Pessie.

"Where is your house?"

"I have none," she answered.

"Where is your husband?"

"He went to war, and I don't know what happened to him."

"Take us to a rich house. If we find something worthwhile, we won't touch you."

She took them to our house. They dug a hole in the blacksmith shop. They found silver, other valuables. They allowed her to go with my mother, Pessie and her baby

ran to the home of David Abramowitz, also a poor home, attached to David's. A crowd of people were there. They were sitting in great pain.

I fled in another direction. They didn't see me. I saw our neighbor, Bessie. She was wearing two coats. We wrapped the quilts around my daughter. We entered a broken shack, put the baby on the floor—then we sat on the baby. That's how crazy we had become with fear.

When the soldiers had finally left, I took my child to Bessie Abramowitz's house. There were so many people there, we couldn't breathe. A neighbor gave me a crust of bread to strengthen me. I gave it to my baby, and someone, crated with hunger, snatched it from my mouth. This was nighttime.

The morning, I went to another neighbor's house. She was a doctor. I had gone to ask her for a glass of tea for Pessie. When I came back, she was hugging her baby and saying, "Now you are a real orphan."

They understood that Tata was dead. My husband came from hiding. He sent me, by horse and wagon, to the village of Kamenka. He went to dig a grave and bury my father and two others, one of them the dead man I had lain beside for three days.