

Interview with Sam Neger

Reminiscing about Dynów

This month, we bring you the interview with Sam Neger (1930–2008). Sam recollects his childhood years spent in a small town in western Galicia. His story touches on family traditions, business practices, and the things simply done for fun, as they were remembered many decades later. Below are excerpts from the interview conducted on May 2, 1990, Green Bay, Wisconsin by Judy Gerardi. The interview was adapted with the assistance of Nina Talbot, Sam's great-niece and a member of Gesher Galicia.

Judy (J): Where and when were you born?

Sam: I was born in Dynów, April 24, 1930.

J: Who was the first family member to settle in this country, in the United States?

Sam: My sister Bella came to the US after the First World War. She was the eldest of eight children from my father's first wife.

J: Let's talk about your grandparents. Do you know where they were born, what their names were, and how they made a living?

Sam: My mother's parents were born in a town called Kańczuga, but I never knew them because they had passed away before I was born. They were in the fruit business with their children, namely my mother's sister and brother.

My father's father, Chaim Aaron Neger, was born in Dynów. He was in the meat business, as were my father, his brothers, and their sons. My father used to say that you were better off in Europe if

you were in the meat business. You were called a tough guy, dealing with animals that had to be slaughtered to feed people. Butchers went to slaughterhouses and people stayed away from them; they worked hard and prayed hard.



Bella Neger (1904–1978), the first from the family who emigrated from Dynów to the United States

J: How many children did your paternal grandparents have? Did you know these uncles?

Sam: They had four sons: Mendel, Israel, Menashe, and my father Abraham—I knew them.

Uncle Mendel was the richest. Every Thursday he went to a bazaar where people brought their wares to sell. In the afternoons, when I got out of school, I went to see him, and my Uncle Mendel would give me a coin. I used it for ice cream cones or pumpkin seeds. I carried the pumpkin seeds in my pocket. In those days only “rich kids” could afford to have pumpkin seeds!

Remembering Home

J: Did you have a *bubby* (grandmother) even though you didn’t know any of your real grandparents?

Sam: Yes, the mother of my father’s first wife, Bubba Chaya. She had an apartment building across the street. Though my mother was not her daughter, she treated her as a daughter because she spent all her time with us helping out. She was in her house when the Nazis invaded. German soldiers were getting everyone to go across the river. Some of them drowned. She said that at her age she wasn’t going anywhere. That was the last time I saw her.

J: Please talk about your parents.

Sam: My mother Rivka Neger, maiden name Knoll, was brought up in Kańczuga, about 30 kilometers (or 18 miles) from our city. When she married my father, he had five living children. She was a poor girl coming from a family where they made a living selling pieces of fruit on the sidewalk. People walked by and bought a pound of plums or a pear or an apple. It was a hard way to make a living. I don’t know if that was why she was marrying my father. My father made enough from his meat business for everyone to eat, but it takes someone special to marry a man with five children.

In 1939 I was nine and my father was around fifty, so he was born in the 1880s. I was born in the same house where my father was born, and he

told us that in those days that part of the country used to belong to Austria. When I was born it was Poland, even though it was the same house.

The house had an attic, and there was a wooden ladder leading up to it from the hallway. There we had 200- or 300-pound sacks of flour, which was treasured because people were so poor they didn’t have any money to buy anything, and they accumulated flour so at least there was something to eat. The cellar, in turn, was full of potatoes. Potatoes were key. In there we chopped the potatoes and took them to the country where the farmers kept cattle.



Abraham (c. 1882–1939) and Rivka Neger (née Knoll, c. 1895–1939), Sam’s parents circa 1937

J: Was there heating, electricity, or plumbing in the house?

Sam: We had two ovens for heating and baking. One oven was in the hallway where my mother used to bake bread, and the other one had a metal griddle on top where she cooked pancakes from grated potatoes. We had electricity for light, but it was expensive. There was a light bulb in the ceiling in each room, which several times a day had to be turned off because it cost too much. We had a well outside the house with a pump. We went with a couple of pails and brought the water home for cooking and drinking.

J: Did your father talk to you about his mother and father?

Sam: My grandfather Chaim Aaron liked to drink a bit. On Saturdays he came home from synagogue, and he always took a shot of whiskey before he touched any food. He was also born in the same house. The house was quite old, made out of logs with clay in between.



Sam Nager (center; 1930–2008) with his brothers, Chaim (1924–1975) and Leib (c. 1917–1939)

J: Two bedrooms and 13 children altogether?

Sam: At that time, as I recall, there were only six, not thirteen children at home. Two sons and a daughter from his first marriage died during the First World War. There were two older boys from my father's first wife living with us.

Sam: Did your mother tell you about taking over his children?

J: She was in full command. When I was a little boy, the two older boys were already at the age where they worked together with my father. Whatever my mother said in the house was the rule. So, it was that way from the beginning, because you know, for someone to take over a household with a family already and then have a large family of their own, they must be in command.

Family Business

J: Was the business successful?

Sam: My father, his brothers, and their children were very busy, and their business was successful. They sold live cattle and bought calves. I remember, Thursday was the busiest day in the market because all the Jewish people came to buy meat for the Sabbath. My father took the cattle by foot to another city with my older brother. They would walk them over there on a Thursday afternoon; stayed overnight, and Friday mornings came home by foot.

Besides the cattle, he bought milking cows and put them up among farm people. The farmers didn't have anything; they couldn't afford a single cow. My father would give the cows to them, and they would feed them. They had a grazing area, kept the milk, and when it had a little calf, the farmer kept the calf. When my father brought the cow home, it went to the slaughterhouse.

He often had a wagon with a horse, and if he bought some calves he brought them back with him. His brother, who was already a rich guy, instead of going to the country to buy, came to our house to buy cattle from my father. My father sometimes brought half a dozen calves, which were lying in the wagon, and then he sold them to Mendel or to other people, and that's how he

made quick money every day. According to the standard of living in Poland, we were considered successful.

J: Were all his meats kosher? Were all the customers Jewish? Would the non-Jewish customers also buy the kosher meat?

Sam: All his meats were kosher, and the customers were mostly Jewish. My father sold the hind-quarters to other butchers because those parts are not kosher.

J: How many days a week did your father work?

Sam: He worked all days, except Friday afternoon and all-day Saturday. On Saturday night, the minute the stars were out, my father had a pipe in his mouth and he went to the slaughterhouse.

J: Did you go with him to the slaughterhouse?

Sam: Yes, and there was a *shoykhet* (butcher) who was killing the cattle and poultry. It was scary...

Bathing Suits and More

J: Do you remember your neighbors?

Sam: One neighbor, Menashe Kep, was my private teacher. My father sent us to him, and he taught us how to read the Bible and Jewish laws. My father paid him for the service he gave at the *cheder* (Jewish school). I was three years old—at that age Jewish boys were already enrolled in the *cheder*. Anytime anyone was goofing off in the *cheder* or didn't want to listen to a teacher, Mr. Kep would pick us up by the ear and drop us down on the floor. Everybody knew what he was going to do, so we all listened to him. Afterwards they served us pickled herring.

Dynów was not large, about 1,500 in total. About 80 percent of our town was Jewish. We had three synagogues, and before my birth, my father told

me, there was a famous rabbi, the Dynov Rebbe. I remember when my father put a *tallis* (prayer shawl) around me; I will never forget this.

J: What were you like as a child?

Sam: I was mischievous. Saturday afternoons my parents would take a nap, as [was] customary for Jewish people on the Sabbath. There was a Jewish fellow with a long beard in our neighborhood who had a fruit orchard on a hill. We children used to go up the hill where the fruit trees were. At that time, I just took it as a gesture for fun, which today of course it would be called stealing. But I didn't think of it as stealing—I just thought of it as having a good time.

The owner used to chase us away with a broom. Of course, that didn't do much because we outran him. Once he hid in a wooden barrel on top of the hill, and as we were coming up from the bottom, we found out that he was in the barrel, so we started rolling it downwards with him in it. Unfortunately, we didn't know any better. Today, I think, I can tell this story with laughter, but it could have been quite serious.

By the age of seven, boys would wear long pants. We tied up the bottom of the pants, and filled our pockets and leggings with the fruit, which was part of our fun.

J: Did your parents ever find out?

Sam: No. If they did, we would have never done it again.

J: What else did you like to do for fun?

Sam: You don't see them today—the old-fashioned wooden barrels that had three metal rings. Instead of having bicycles, we would buy one of those metal rings, get a stick, hit the metal ring, and run after it. We used the stick to guide. That's what we played with.

In the middle of our town was the San River, where we went swimming on Saturday afternoons. Our bathing suits were big, more like nightshirts—that’s what we wore for bathing at my young age. We had enough food but didn’t have much luxury, and more fashionable bathing suits would have been a luxury.

J: What were some of the diseases people were afraid of getting?

Sam: Typhoid fever was one of them. Once when my father had trouble breathing, the doctor came, opened his briefcase and took out about ten small glass containers. He put something into those glasses to heat them up, then put them on my father’s back for about 15 minutes. Then took them off, leaving red marks, which went away afterwards; and that’s how the fire cupping supposedly drew out the impurities.

I don’t remember how you call them, something black, we caught in the river [leeches]. They were also used for drawing out infections. The doctor did that once to my father too.

J: Let’s close by talking a little more about your father’s character. Was he very religious?

Sam: He was very strict with the children. I don’t recall him hitting us, he just looked at us, and we knew what he meant so we obeyed. Whether it was the youngest or the oldest, whatever my father said was final. We knew those were the circumstances and when he said we had to do something we did it. My father thought very much about the lives of his children.

He was very religious. He had a long beard and never shaved the sides. It was hard for him to get up every morning at four. The first thing he did was put on his *tallis* and pray at the candlelight. After that he went to the country by foot, bought a few cattle, came home, and my mother would

greet him no matter the time of day with a glass of seltzer and a chocolate filled with liquor.

My mother had what we call a *sheitel*. It was not for making her hair look good—it was for religious purposes. She cut the hair short, like a man would, and then put the *sheitel* on out of respect to religious beliefs. Father loved my mother and the kids very much, I know that.



Sam Neger

Postscript by Nina Talbot: *On September 15, 1939, the second day of Rosh Hashanah, the Nazis massacred the Jews in Dynów. For the next year and a half, a farmer hid nine-year-old Sam before he wound up in Buchenwald, where the Allies liberated him in 1945. After a period in a displaced persons camp, Sam Neger came to New York in 1947. He took an offer for housing and employment in Duluth, Minnesota, where he married and began to rebuild a successful life.*