

The Hacker's Journey: From Galicia to Missouri

By Leslie Friedman

This story begins in Galicia, a place that no longer exists. The history of this small kingdom extends long before the Middle Ages. A 1328 European map shows Galicia-Volhynia, the crossroads of Central and Eastern Europe, bordering Lithuania, Mazovia, Poland, Hungary, Moldavia. Poland annexed it, 1352. The Austrian-Hungarian empire, Poland, Russia punted Galicia back and forth. It disappeared as an entity, but everyone knew where it was. Krakow, city of learning and art, was in it.

My mother, Dorismae Hacker Friedman, told me what she knew of the Hacker family which originated in Galicia. I re-tell it now to honor her memory. She passed away, age 100 and 7 months, May 30, 2021.

The man who became her great grandfather left Galicia for England. While there, he married. The young couple came to the US, arrived and lived in Baltimore, had two children there. One would be my paternal grandfather, Sam Hacker, and one would be my great aunt, Ida Hacker Wolff.

From Baltimore, the Hackers moved to Madison, Illinois. They moved because St. Louis, MO, across the Mississippi from Madison, was a national railroad center. There was work in Madison for men who could paint railroad cars. Great grandfather Hacker was a painter. When they arrived, he immediately took that job.

When did they move to Madison? My mother could not say.

Counting backward, I believe they arrived in Baltimore 1890 or earlier. My mother was born in 1920. My grandmother Hacker, a native St. Louisan, passed away in 1984, age 86. That means she was born in 1898. My grandfather Hacker passed away in 1972. He was born circa 1892.

My mother told me the story that her parents told her. The elder Hackers walked around Madison. Dora Hacker crossed a street and stood in front of an empty stretch of land. She held her arms open and said, "This is a good place to have a little store, and it will grow."

After a while, the family bought the property and built the store. It was named the Star Store. It sold men's, ladies, and children's clothing, and shoes. One of the best selling items was men's work clothes. It was an industrial area not only for railroads but also for mineral works. Peabody Coal was an enormous company. I remember seeing its red, electric sign dominating the view from St. Louis. Peabody Coal was also about lead. I think of how unhealthy that work was. At that time, for Madison and other small towns, it was a source of steady income.

Visiting the store when I was very young, I explored the aisles, clothing on display, shoe boxes. I liked to stand on a machine which no longer worked: a fluoroscope. Stand on it with feet under the machine, and it would light up. One could see one's feet. It had been a very modern machine when it was new, but by the time I tried it, it was known to be dangerous. Such a disappointment!

My mother's memory of the store's design was that there was a ladder across the front rail of the upper floor. Her father or mother could push it down and see the rows of supplies. First row, shoes; 2nd row, men's; 3rd row, ladies and children. I am fascinated by the ingenuity put into the construction of the store and the family home that was behind it. No one in this family had been a builder, architect, plumber or electrician. They figured it out and built it.

The living area was behind the store facing a back garden not the street or store. There was a kitchen, dining room, living room, bedrooms, bath. When Dorismae was a baby, she stayed upstairs so her parents could hear her. There was an upright piano which their parents had brought from Galicia to England to America.

My mother told me that she did not realize that “living behind the store” was something that should have embarrassed her. When it was time to go to Sunday school, she waited in front of the store for a friend’s family. She walked to daily school from the store because that was the door that faced the street. Their dog, a chow, followed her to school and waited for her.

The family home was private, another world. Her mother, Ruth Rubenstein Hacker, was a wonderful gardener. I found a little black and white picture of young Dorismae lying in grass surrounded by flowers. They had pear, apple, and persimmon trees. The elder Mr. Hacker put in a grape arbor and made wine.

There was another store in Madison. The people who owned it were jealous of the Hackers’ success. That family lived behind the fence at the back of the Hackers’ gardens. The jealous wife poured creosote over the fence and killed Ruth Hacker’s flowers.

The towns were segregated by ethnicity, but the Star Store sold to anyone. My mother said that others were surprised that they sold to the Poles who lived in their own community.

My grandfather was an attractive, sunny man. My mother said he was “handsome and sweet.” Customers lined up out the door so that Sam Hacker would be the one to help them. My grandmother worked in the store, but her work took her to Chicago, too. She was the only female buyer to visit suppliers. The Hackers did not set out to be innovators, but they were.

When Dorismae, was 15, Ruth, saw a young man chatting with her. He was a good-looking boy from a Polish family. There were few Jewish families anywhere nearby, Ruth was worried. How would Dorismae find an appropriate Jewish man? My mother quoted her mother, “Sam, I am taking Dorismae, and we are moving to St. Louis. You can come if you want.” He did.