

*From Pogost to New York*



*The Long Journey of the Korobok Family  
from 1909-1923*

## *Acknowledgements*



I waited almost a lifetime to learn these stories of my mother's family, the Koroboks of Pogost, Minsk, Belarus. I had heard about the existence of an interview video of Aunt Lee, but didn't acquire it until 2009. When I learned of the existence of a second interview video, which included both Aunt Zelda and Aunt Lee, I was able to add much more to the story.

The first video was made in October 1994. Leah Cohen Kitzes Harris, my Aunt Lee, at almost 96 years of age was filmed by her granddaughter Edina as she was interviewed by her daughter, Shelley. Shelley asked her about her early life in Belarus and Poland, her immigration, and her first years in America. The second video was filmed in May 1995 by Fran Beallor. This time Lee's greatnephew Kenneth Gluck interviewed her again, along with her sister, his grandmother Zelda.

I would like to express my gratitude to Shelley Tenzer and Milton Gluck for sharing the video recordings of these interviews and to Edina Bader and Fran Beallor for filming them.

## About The Korobok Story

I compiled The Journey of the Korobok family, from accounts of family history, both recorded and oral, from genealogy research and from other sources.

Seeing my aunts on video and listening to their voices as they told their stories, I was transfixed by the world they described, a world whose existence I had always suspected and had been waiting a lifetime to discover. I was thrilled to be able to glimpse the lost times and lost places that their words revealed.

When I saw the connections between the dates and places in these stories to historical events, I began scurrying to the Internet where I found online communities who shared my fascination and were posting a variety of materials: images, first-hand accounts, and scholarly articles. As a result, I have included some material from these resources along with my family stories.

The stories my aunts told have also given me a personal gift. They have linked me to the fragmentary memories I have of stories my mother told me. They have also linked me to the people I had been getting acquainted with through Ellis Island genealogy research, the grandparents, uncles, and cousins, most of whom I know only through this research. I was finally able to travel back in time and share the lives they had lived in Eastern Europe before my life began in America, the country of their dreams.

*Rosalyn Shaoul*

# Chapter One

## Early Life in Pogost: The Secrets of its Forest

Aunt Lee first recounts that her parents, Rachel Pasterak Korobok and Schmuel “Munye” Moische Korobok (who later became Morris Cohen in America) were married for 6 years before she, their first child, was born in 1898. Two years later, when twins Chaim and Benyomin were born, Aunt Lee remembers becoming a helper, rocking the boys and doing her mothers’ errands. Another daughter, Sara, was born two years after the twins. Sadly, she died at the age of two when the next daughter Tsivya, my mother, was born in 1904. A last girl, Zelda, was born 1 year and 5 months later.

Aunt Lee describes how her parents and her maternal grandparents’ adjacent houses were some of the larger structures in the Jewish section of their town of Pogost in the province of Minsk in Belarus. She remembers Pogost as a quiet little town that rarely saw a stranger, except for the occasional beggars that would pass through as they walk from town to town.

Pogost was surrounded by woods for hundreds of miles. Grandfather Pasternak worked for the Graf (Count) Pototski (the local nobleman who owned the surrounding forested land). His job was to manage the cutting of the trees in the forest near their town and he made a very good living doing so. He would choose the trees to be cut and hire peasants to cut, split, and send them by river to the Ukraine.



*Logging and Grandfather Pasternak*



The split logs were tied together and floated down a tributary, the Berezina River, to the Dneiper and to Kiev in the Ukraine, where lumber was scarce, since only fruit trees grew there. Her grandfather used to go into the forest every autumn to mark the trees that were ready to be cut. As Leah was the oldest grandchild, he would often take her with him on these trips. She remembers being impressed that he knew the age of every tree.

A memorable incident took place during one of these journeys into the forest. The local peasant who was employed to drive her grandfather's buggy suddenly warned of a wolf following them, trying to attack the horse. There had been many cases where horses were attacked and killed by wolves. An improvised torch didn't scare the wolf off, so the driver drew a pocketknife, put some food on it for bait, and went down to confront the wolf. When it lunged at him with an open mouth, he plunged the knife into its throat, delivering a deathblow.

Aunt Lee remembers how, upon their return, the story about the peasant killing the wolf became a sensation all over town. Listening to Kenneth's interview, I learned more about life in Pogost from Aunt Zelda. She described how the whole town would run out to see the Graf Potoski when his droshky (carriage) arrived in town. Grandfather Pasternak, with his family lined up behind him, would go up to the carriage, greet the Count and give him a report on the trees that had been cut. He would also present him with a cake that Grandmother Pasternak had baked.

The Potockis were a prominent noble land-owning Polish family with a castle in Lancut, Poland. Below is a photo of the Count Roman Potocki (1851-1915), who inherited the title in 1889. Roman Graf Potocki remodeled the family distillery and funded the last modernisation of his family's palace, including water, sewer and electrical systems. He was described as "a passionate gambler, blessed with extraordinary luck at cards."



The Count Potocki looks like quite a dandy to me. I like to imagine him coming to Pogost in a droshky and accepting the homage of the village and Great-grandmother Pasternak's cake!

The Pasternak grandparents were an unusual couple. he was very tall and she very small, under 5 feet (like my cousin Monita). Aunt Zelda remembered that he would often pick up his tiny wife and carry her around. Grand-father Pasternak was highly respected in the town, and many of the men in the town came to him for advice.

Rachel Pasternak, my grandmother who died before I was born, was also considered an elite member of her community, like her father. The women of the town would come to her for advice. Aunt Lee told a story which gives an idea of the kind of role her mother Rachel played in the town, and also of the life in those times. It seems that there was a deaf mute young woman in the town who used to play with the children. One day Leah and her playmates heard her scream. When they went to investigate, they saw her trying to fight off a young man called Efroyim, from across the street, who was on top of her. Leah hit him to stop him, and then he ran away. When they told their mother what they had seen, she realized what had happened. Then she, along with the girl's mother, Malka, went to Efroyim's parents. When his father understood what he had been doing, he hit him so hard that he nearly killed him. Rachel defended Efroyim, saying that it was not his fault, that they needed to get him married. Rachel and Malka arranged a match for him with an orphan girl and organized a wedding for them. According to Aunt Lee, the marriage was a success and they had a happy life together. Hearing this story reminded me of a Yiddish song about a wedding that my mother loved to sing during her last years.

Mom spent 1993-95, her last two years, in a nursing home. During the first year, my Dad would visit her every day and they would sing this song together. He died in July 1994, so in her last year she would sometimes sing it for me by herself. I always wondered what connection she had to this song. I wonder if Efroyim's wedding was something like this.

# Mom's Wedding Song

In dem groisen dorf, frailach iz atzint,  
(In the big town, happiness is everywhere,)

Chasene macht higt, Yanishke, zine kind,  
(A wedding is coming today, Old John is marrying off his daughter,)

In a lieben claidle, di kale oizgeputzt,  
(In a linen dress, the bride is all decked out,)



Dem chasen's nye shtible, mit tzhegachts iz geshmert,  
(The bridegrooms' new boots have been smeared with tar,)

Shtort an alter goy, ungespart in vant,  
(An old "goy" is leaning against the wall,)

Er halt a awremashke, er iz der moosicant,  
(He's holding an accordion, he is the musician,)



Nisht daw ain shtullen benk, shtait men by die vent,  
(There isn't a single bench, everyone's standing by the wall,)

Mishl daw cain lefel guple, est men mit die hent.  
(Not a spoon or fork either, so they're eating with their hands.)

As for the children's education, Aunt Lee tells us that her family hired a private tutor to teach her Russian. The teacher, who was Jewish, would come once a week to teach her, and it was her job to then teach what she had learned to her younger sisters. For Hebrew lessons they would go to a rabbi. Leah would also listen in at the back window of the boys' Yeshiva to learn what she could.

The next milestone Aunt Lee recounts is how her father left for America in 1909 when she was 11 years old. She was very angry with him at that time, and long afterward, because she was a witness to her mother's sadness and tears after his departure. Her father had been making a modest living as an accountant, doing bookkeeping for local businesses. At the same time, he, like many of his generation in Czarist Russia, belonged to a socialist group, which met in the woods to plot "how to get the Czar off the backs of the people." In answer to Kenneth's questions, Aunt Lee confirmed that this group belonged to the Jewish Labour Bund, a secular Jewish socialist party in the Russian Empire, active between 1897 and 1920.

It seems that an informer had revealed Munya Moishe Korobok's activities to the authorities, and he received a warning that if he didn't leave, he would be sent to Siberia. Two soldiers were to come and arrest him and take him to Borisov. The very next day a cousin from Berazin, Moishe Rubincik, arranged to get a him a false passport and to bribe the soldiers to let him escape to a safe house, and from there to Minsk. A week later, having borrowed the necessary sum for passage, he was on his way to America, leaving Rachel behind with 5 small children and a large debt.

**PASSENGER RECORD**

*American Family Immigration History Center® at Ellis Island*

First Name:	<i>Mowsche</i>
Last Name:	<i>Koroback</i>
Ethnicity:	<i>Russia, Hebrew</i>
Last Place of Residence:	<i>Pogosk, Russia</i>
Date of Arrival:	<i>Aug 31, 1909</i>
Age at Arrival: 34y	Gender: <i>M</i> Marital Status: <i>M</i>
Ship of Travel:	<i>Russia</i>
Port of Departure:	<i>Libau</i>
Manifest Line Number:	<i>0030</i>

  
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On the 1909 ship manifest Moshe listed his occupation as “tailor” and his contact in the U.S. as his brother-in-law Solowey, residing at 1105 Second Ave.

*Family Portrait, 1909*

*The Family Before Moshe Departed for America*



Back: Benjamin and Chaim, Middle: Rachel, Leah, Moshe  
Front: Tsviya, Zeld (on her father's lap)

## Chapter Two

### Life After Father's Departure: Leaving Pogost and the Outbreak of World War I

During the next five years Munya Moishe would send sums of money to the family from New York, but half the funds that he sent had to go for repayment of the debt incurred for his escape to America. Finally, by 1914, the debt had been repaid, and the family had enough money for passage to America to join him.

They left Pogost after selling their house and their cows and set out for a railroad station 100 miles away, where they planned to get a train to a port from which they could embark for America. The group was led by Leah, age 16, since, by this time, Rachel was already quite ill and weak. The rest of the group consisted of the twins Benyomin and Chaim 14, Tsivya. 10. and Zelda, 8. The town where they were going to get the train remains nameless in Aunt Lee's first interview, but Kenneth Gluck learned that it was Stansia Slavnaya (Slavnaya Station), a town with a train station on the route to Minsk. Carola Murray-Seegert, the organizer of the Byerazino KehilaLink, did some wonderful research and found that it is a town previously know as Sloveni, now called Славное, between Krupki and Tolochin.

Halfway through their journey, the family stopped for the night at an inn in a small village, which may have been Krucha. That night, in that village, news arrived that war had broken out! As a result, when they finally made it to the station the next day, they were not allowed to board any train. Their long-anticipated journey to America to be reunited with their father was brought to a pre-mature end by the outbreak of World War I. There seemed to be no way to continue, and the family remained stranded in Stansia Slavnaya for 6 years until 1920. During that whole time, there was no news from their father in America. Aunt Lee blamed herself for the predicament they were in and regretted all her life that she hadn't been able to find a way for the family to continue their journey.

The approximate location of Stansia Slavnya can be seen on the map below on this 1911 Russian map - just near the red number 124. In Russian it is written Славное . The next station going west is Bobr. Minsk is farther to the west, written in big capital letters across the split between the pages. The River Beresina thin blue line running north/south



Thank you to Carola Murray-Seevert for finding this map and finally clearing up the mystery of the location of the town where my family was stranded for 6 years from 1914-1920.

Lee tells us that in Stansia Slavnaya they had an aunt who had eight children. The aunt, like the town, remains unnamed by Aunt Lee. Unfortunately, we don't even know if she was a maternal or paternal aunt. At first they lived next to this aunt, but later moved to another apartment.

During the first years of WW I, there were German soldiers continually passing through town. Aunt Zelda added some important details about this period during Kenneth's interview. She remembered how when the Germans first entered the town with their guns drawn, many of the townspeople ran to hide in the woods. The family was running with them, but their mother had a weak heart and couldn't keep up. Luckily some peasants took pity on her and took her into their cart, and the children continued to run behind it. Aunt Zelda says that if these peasants hadn't helped their mother, the whole family would likely have perished. They would have fallen behind, and the Germans would have shot them. She says that half of the Jews in the town were killed during this invasion.



It is chilling to think that the family barely survived the German invasion

Times were hard for them in Slavnaya. During wartime there was no more money coming to them from their father in America. Aunt Zelda tells how, soon after their arrival, her mother sent her to Minsk for a while to live with an aunt who would bring her to the market to sell apples. Once again this makes us realize that the Pasternak family was represented in many of the towns of the region.

Once the Germans occupied the town, they took over the family's dining room and the peasants were ordered to bring their wheat and potatoes there. A German officer decided that "the little dark one," meaning

Zelda, was to interpret for him. If she didn't come fast enough or translate quickly enough, he would hit her with his riding crop. She says, "As soon as he would hit me, I would remember the word."

Aunt Lee told of a less negative side of the occupation. She said that when wounded soldiers who were going home were billeted in their home, at least they gave them bread and supplies in exchange for shelter. During this period Benyomin took sick during a dysentery epidemic and died, and then Chaim was drafted into the Russian army. The 3 sisters made a living by baking bread and selling it to soldiers who came through the town and by knitting sweaters, which they bartered with the townspeople for food.

Zelda was the nervy sister, the one that, though she was the youngest, was sent to do all the errands, even going in the middle of the night to get the doctor for her sick mother. One incident that Aunt Lee remembers occurred when Zelda came back from delivering a sweater they had knitted. She quotes Zelda as saying, "I saw it with my own eyes. There was butter on the table and they were putting it on bread. I saw it. Don't tell me I made it up!" Aunt Lee explains that they hadn't seen butter for years. During this period as refugees, they only thought of the essentials, bread and milk and cheese, not butter, which was an undreamed of luxury for them. From the perspective of her American life with a wonderfully healthy diet, Mom (Tsivya, later known as Sylvia) used to marvel to me that during this period they had often subsisted on just black bread and coffee. Aunt Lee tells of days in which there was only one piece of bread, which their mother divided up into 4 pieces, always taking the smallest piece for herself.

There are a few other stories from Aunt Zelda about that period. She tells how Tsivya, my mother, the shy one who had the homemaker's skills, was the main baker of the dark bread that they would sell. One time Tsivya had mixed up such a big batch of dough that she had to actually get into the tub to knead it. When she got stuck there and couldn't get out, Zelda and their brother had to pull her out, covered with dough. Zelda also tells how she would be sent to take the bread Tsivya had baked to the station every day to sell to the departing soldiers. As a very young bread seller, Zelda was an easy target, and she told me how the soldiers would

sometimes grab her wares and jump onto the trains without paying her. She says that she learned to run away with her bread when she would hear the train coming.

In those days in Belarus, firewood was essential for heating during the severe winters, and the family could not afford it. During one especially harsh winter Leah formulated a desperate plan to acquire it. She would take her two younger sisters to the station where there were piles of wood, which were used to start the coal fires in the locomotives. She would instruct them to steal pieces of wood one by one and bring them to her as she stood hidden behind a tree. Her idea was that Tsviya and Zeldia had to commit the actual thefts since if she were to be caught stealing, she would be considered an adult and jailed, leaving her family helpless.

One day the girls were caught. She had instructed them that if a gendarme were to catch them they should tell him to talk to their sister. When she saw what was happening, Leah came out of her hiding place. The gendarme said to her, “ Oh, that’s what you teach your sisters – to steal wood?”

Leah answered, “I don’t have anything to tell you. I want you to come to my house. When you come there, I won’t have to tell you anything.” He agreed to come to their house. There he saw their mother in bed with every piece of clothing they owned on top of her. The house was freezing, colder than the street, where at least there was some sun. After the gendarme saw this, he took Leah back to the station, where he told the officer, “From what I saw there, these children need wood.” |

After that, wood was delivered to their house every day. Leah’s plan had worked. If she hadn’t brought the gendarme to the house, he would never have believed her. Yet even with these deliveries of firewood, life in the town after the armistice of 1918 wasn’t easy since 1917 had brought the advent of the Russian Revolution. Aunt Lee didn’t mention this, but my mother told me that the revolutionaries, like the Germans, were also billeted in their rooms.

The ***Yivo Encyclopedia of Jewish History*** details the same series of occupations for Minsk that our family told of, first German, then Soviet and finally Polish. In November 1917 the area became a part of the

Soviet Union but was still occupied by Germany. The Soviets took power in December 1918, but in August 1919 they were once again defeated, this time by the Polish army that occupied Minsk until 11 July 1920.

## **Chapter Three**

### **On the Road Again, This Time to Pinsk**

Before WW I Pinsk had been part of Belarus. The Yivo Encyclopedia tell us that in the postwar 1918–1920 combat, Pinsk changed hands several times among Ukrainians, Soviets, and Poles, and was finally conquered by Poland in September 1920. This corresponds to what we next learn from Aunt Lee about the family’s fate during that year.

By 1920, after 6 years in Stansia Slavnaya, the family was anxious to leave. It was at this critical time that a cousin, Yasef Pasternak (a brother of Basha and Hannah - the cousins who later emigrated to Isreal and established Kibbutz Gvat), came to the aid of the family. Aunt Lee describes him as being “a big shot in Russia” during those days. It was a moment in history when those Poles who had fled east to Belarus during the German occupation of their towns during the war were being repatriated westward to Poland. Yasef provided the family with the names of some Poles who were entitled to leave Belarus for Poland and instructed them to assume their identities.

Leah was told by Yasef to speak for the group. She had to study and remember all their false names and identities when they boarded the train. They were hoping to get to Warsaw, but when they were told that they would not be permitted to go all the way to Warsaw, they got off instead in Pinsk, where Yasef’s father, their uncle, lived with his family. All they knew about their Uncle Pasternak, their mother’s brother, was that he was in charge of a match factory. So they hired a horse and buggy and found their way to the factory. When they asked for him there, their uncle was summoned over a factory loudspeaker. He came to the gate, where he paid for the buggy and sent them to his family, who took them in.



A Match Factory in Pinsk  
From the digital collection of  
The Center for Jewish History

At that time their aunt, the mother of Yasef, Hannah and Basha, arranged for another cousin of hers to join their family, since he was also trying to get to America. So the five of them, Rachel, the three girls, plus this cousin, were given a room in the Pasternak's home. It had only one bed, where Rachel slept. The four young people were consigned to the floor. Now they were finally able to try to contact their father in America for funds so that they could join him at last.

Cousin Yasef had given Leah 25 rubles to use in case of emergency until money came from their father. He had instructed her to give the money to his mother if she didn't need it. Finally their father began to send them money for their expenses and for their passage to America. The money was sent to a relative of their aunt, who was to give them Polish currency for their expenses and keep some of it to get them the passports they would need for the journey. Now that they were getting money from America, Leah went to her aunt to give her the 25 emergency rubles that Yasef had given her. The aunt accepted the money with great suspicion, saying, "Are you sure he only gave you 25 rubles?" Aunt Lee was so insulted by this remark that, as she recounts this tale 76 years later, her voice is still full of bitterness.

## Chapter Four

### Leaving Pinsk for America

Once they started to get their own money, they moved out of their uncle's home, renting two rooms in Pinsk. Aunt Lee doesn't mention it, but it seems probable that Chaim joined them there after a time. My mother once described their life in Pinsk as they waited with their ill mother for more than two years for a chance to leave. Mom told how, as their mother lay dying, the young people kept her company, playing cards around her sickbed all through the nights.

The man entrusted with managing the money that came from America for them and getting them passports took a whole year to do so. He kept delaying them, until their mother died there, in those rooms in Pinsk. The very next day after her death, Aunt Lee recounts, he brought them the passports. Later they found out from "one of the sisters (Hannah or Basha), who were furious" that he used to exchange their money on the black market, but that he took the regular price from them. Aunt Zelda remembered that this was confirmed when they finally got to America and saw all the letters that he had sent their father regarding the money to be sent. What was especially galling about this was that this man was himself well-to-do, owning several drug stores in Pinsk.

Another problem the family now encountered was that in order to leave for the U.S. immediately under their father's citizenship papers, without being part of an immigration quota, they had to be under 18. They had previously fixed their ages to show that all 4 siblings were under 18, with Leah and Chaim claiming to be twins. However, after the one-year delay, Leah and Chaim were now too old to leave as minors. Therefore only Tsivya and Zelda could leave immediately, and Leah and Chaim had to wait 6 more months until they were finally able to get into the next immigration quota and join their family in New York.



United at last (left to right):  
Tsivya, Leah, Zelda and Chaim.

**PASSENGER RECORD**

*American Family Immigration History Center® at Ellis Island*

First Name:	<i>Cywja</i>
Last Name:	<i>Korobok</i>
Ethnicity:	<i>Russia, Hebrew</i>
Last Place of Residence:	<i>Warsau, Poland</i>
Date of Arrival:	<i>Apr 17, 1923</i>
Age at Arrival: 17y	Gender: <i>F</i> Marital Status: <i>S</i>
Ship of Travel:	<i>France</i>
Port of Departure:	<i>Le Havre</i>
Manifest Line Number:	<i>0021</i>

  
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Tsivya's name was spelled in Polish here. Her age had been altered by one year; she was actually 18 when she immigrated. She was held over at Ellis Island because of her fingernail fungus.

**PASSENGER RECORD**

*American Family Immigration History Center® at Ellis Island*

First Name:	<i>Zelda</i>
Last Name:	<i>Korobok</i>
Ethnicity:	<i>Poland, Hebrew</i>
Last Place of Residence:	<i>Warsaw, Poland</i>
Date of Arrival:	<i>Apr 17, 1923</i>
Age at Arrival: 15y	Gender: <i>F</i> Marital Status: <i>S</i>
Ship of Travel:	<i>France</i>
Port of Departure:	<i>Le Havre</i>
Manifest Line Number:	<i>0020</i>

  
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The NYC address that Zelda and Tsivya gave was 1425 47th Street, Brooklyn, Aunt Etta's home.

**PASSENGER RECORD**

*American Family Immigration History Center® at Ellis Island*

First Name:	<i>Leja</i>
Last Name:	<i>Korobok</i>
Ethnicity:	<i>Poland, Hebrew</i>
Last Place of Residence:	<i>Pochosoz, Russia</i>
Date of Arrival:	<i>Sep 01, 1923</i>
Age at Arrival: 18y	Gender: <i>F</i> Marital Status: <i>S</i>
Ship of Travel:	<i>Estonia</i>
Port of Departure:	<i>Danzig</i>
Manifest Line Number:	<i>0028</i>

  
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Leah's name is written in Polish, and her nationality is listed as Polish. She gave her occupation as a "tailoress" and her age as 18 although she was actually 25. She lists her address in NYC as 62 E. 104th St.

**PASSENGER RECORD**

*American Family Immigration History Center® at Ellis Island*

First Name:	<i>Chaim</i>
Last Name:	<i>Korobok</i>
Ethnicity:	<i>Poland, Hebrew</i>
Last Place of Residence:	<i>Pochosoz, Russia</i>
Date of Arrival:	<i>Sep 01, 1923</i>
Age at Arrival: 18y	Gender: <i>M</i> Marital Status: <i>S</i>
Ship of Travel:	<i>Estonia</i>
Port of Departure:	<i>Danzig</i>
Manifest Line Number:	<i>0029</i>

  
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Chaim, who was 23, is also listed as 18, making him Leah's twin. He listed his nationality as Polish and his occupation as "Worker."

*Chaim and his Fiancee*



Chaim Korobok was killed during his first year in America as he crossed Eastern Parkway. He left behind his fiancée and his three sisters.