

A BRIEF MEMOIR: BERNARD SANDERS, 1907-1984

Preface by Frances Sanders McKinley ©2012

Daddy died on October 14, 1984, and during the summer before, he reread what he had written. He felt that he had written enough and went no further. This was his story, the only corrections made by others were in spelling and grammar. My guess is that Daddy enjoyed recording his memories. He was proud of his family and all that they had overcome. His story is not much different from that of other Jews of that time. The difference is that it is our story.

Memoir by Bernard Sanders

I was born in the year 1907 in Stavisht, county of Tarashta, state of Kiev, Ukraine, Russia. Both my maternal and paternal grandparents lived in our small town. My father's parents, Chaim and Freda, had six children, five boys and a girl. There was no railroad in Stavisht and my grandfather Chaim was able to support his family by driving a carriage. He was a travel agent for merchants who visited the small towns of the Ukraine. My grandfather had a modest income, but there was little money left over for the children's education. My father, Boris, had to work as an assistant to the teacher in order to pay his tuition for the cheder, the Jewish school.

My mother's father, Yehuda Leb Postrel, nicknamed Pitzie, was a more worldly man. He and his wife, Rachel Leah, had nine children. My mother, Frima, was the second oldest. Pitzie taught his daughters at home and was able to send his sons to cheder. I remember Pitzie vaguely. I was about five years old when he died. He was an overseer for a relative on a forest near Stavisht. One day while riding his horse, he fell off and injured himself. His next job was as the keeper of the bathhouse in Stavisht. Since this was not enough to make a living, Pitzie was also a bookkeeper for some businessmen in town.

Although my grandfather was more educated than the average Stavishter he found it difficult to support his big family. So for a short time, my Aunt Rifka helped the family by working for a tailor on the Graf's estate near town. Jews were not allowed to own property in Czarist Russia. Although Stavisht was a Jewish town, it was owned by a Polish family, the Grafts. After awhile, Aunt Rifka married Uncle Pacy and emigrated to America. Shortly thereafter, my Tanta Chayah also left for America. My Uncle Israel, being the eldest son, had a better education. He went to a Yeshiva for a couple of years and then he, too, went to America. Soon after his brothers, Shlema, Mordecai, and Joe followed. In 1904 or 1905, my grandparents tried to emigrate to the United States. They got as far as Belgium, but then my grandmother failed the medical examination due to poor eyesight. My grandparents returned to Russia.

After her brothers and sisters left, my mother felt a responsibility for the rest of the family, especially my grandmother who was not well. I suppose she also had an eye on my father. They were next door neighbors and had known each other since childhood. Eventually, they married. Then in 1913, my grandmother left for America with her two youngest sons, Philip and Lewis.

My mother felt very lonely without her family, but my father refused to leave Stavisht. Not only was his family there, but he was doing well in his business. My father made and sold fur hats. Then when World War I began, opportunities for emigration became almost impossible. After a while, correspondence between my mother and her family stopped.

Then in 1917, the Russian Revolution broke out. The Jews of Russia were made to suffer terribly. They were made the scapegoats for the Russians' problems. Segments of the Russian army broke loose and were fighting the Bolsheviks. Since there were no police or any other law enforcement authorities, these anti-semitic armies were free to roam through the Jewish villages robbing and murdering at will. I remember my father dressing me up to look like a Russian peasant at this time. He would then send me out to see what was going on in Stavisht. It became so bad that when we heard that these armies were on their way to our town, my family and hundreds of other families left in a hurry. We felt that we had to leave Stavisht although the risks were great. There was no hope of survival there. In fact the Jews that left later were murdered on the road. That was the last time I saw Stavisht. Being only 12, I was not aware of all the risks and dangers ahead of us. Yet my childhood had been spent in fear of the pogroms. I knew that we were helpless to improve our lives in Russia.

My grandfather and his family could not leave. The Jews of Russia were not allowed to own horses, and our escape was on foot. My grandparents could not handle such a trip. My parents felt that they had no choice but to leave and seek a better life for their children.

First we went to Bella Tzerkov, where my father had a brother living. We stayed there until after the Jewish holidays. In the meantime, my father went back to Stavisht. There he was able to sell the house and furniture and get his money together. In Stavisht he was told that after we left, the army had gathered all the Jews into the synagogue and demanded their money and jewels. My father's mother became so frightened that she died of a heart attack in the synagogue. My father brought my grandfather back with him to Bella Tzerkov where he lived till his death.

In June of 1920, I was thirteen years old. It was time for my Bar Mitzvah, but I had not gone to cheder for over a year due to the pogroms in our area. Since my father was not with us, my grandfather woke me one morning and told me that I was to have my Bar Mitzvah that day. We went to a synagogue in Bella Tzerkov where I was called to the Torah and said the blessings. That was my Bar Mitzvah.

The following winter we heard that many families were leaving for the Besarabian border. This now belonged to Rumania. There was an American Embassy there as well as a branch of the Jewish agency, HIAS. It was through them that we hoped to contact my mother's family in America.

About three families got together to make the trip to the border. We each hired a wagon, two horses and a driver. We left Bella Tzerkov at the end of November, 1920. My father never saw any of his family again. They corresponded for many years but eventually lost contact. It was only in 1979, that we discovered that one of my father's nieces had survived the pogroms and the Holocaust and had settled in Israel.

It took us about two weeks to reach a small town on the Dniester River which separated Russia and Rumania. In this town there were many Jewish families waiting to cross the border. The Jewish people living there tried to give us temporary living quarters wherever there was extra room in their little houses. They even opened their synagogue to accommodate some people.

A couple of Jewish men came to my father to advise him how to cross the river. Since we had to cross secretly, he advised my father to wait until the river was frozen. In the meantime, my father made arrangements with an agent to help us cross the border. My father paid the agent a sum of money in advance. On a very cold night in January, 1921, the agent told us to be ready by midnight. At that hour someone was to bring us to a certain spot on the

riverbank. When we got across there, another party was to pick us up and bring us to the nearest town. Four or five other families shared in these arrangements.

It was a very cold night and the moon was very bright. That worried us since we did not know who would spot us first, the agent or the border guards. It was the border guards who saw us first, but not until after we had climbed a steep hill about two miles long. When we got to the top we found stacks of hay piled very high among the trees. The agent told us to wait for his partner. We waited several hours but he never showed up; apparently he had been scared off by the border patrol. By daybreak, we saw several soldiers coming towards us with their guns pointed at us. They asked the adults questions, and then told us to march several miles to the police station.

We knew that we were in trouble, but who cared. We were already half frozen. I had no hope that we would ever make it to Rumania but then a beautiful thing happened. A couple of Jewish men and women from this village heard of our plight. They came to the station with food and hot tea. They consoled us and said that they would help us in any way possible.

The chief of police told us that we would be sent back to the river to cross into Russia. Three policemen with a sled and two horses arrived. They ordered all the women and small children into the sled and the men and older boys were to walk beside it. When we reached the river, the police told us not to turn back even if the Russian patrol aimed at us. If we turned back, the Rumanians said that they would shoot us.

We began crossing the river, and luckily we did not see any Russian soldiers patrolling the area, but most of the people and small children were so cold and exhausted that they hoped they would be caught and, thus, end their suffering. When we reached the shore of the river we again had to climb a very steep hill until we reached a little village.

Miraculously, a couple of Jewish men from this village met us and brought us to their homes. They told us to stay until dark. They, then, brought us back to the town where we had originally stayed. They told us to get in touch with the agent who had made our escape arrangements since he was responsible and should try to help us.

The owner of the house where we stayed helped my father locate this agent and told him what had happened. The agent said that he would need more money to try again. My father told him he could not pay any more money. The agent made a deal with my father. He told him that he could only take two members of the family. We decided that my father and my sister, Ethel, should go. A couple of weeks later, my father and sister were able to leave successfully.

I remained to help support my mother and sisters from January to April. The small house that we lived in had a brick stove. In order to heat the stove, I had to get wood from a forest at the end of town. I would chop off a couple of big branches and drag them back to the house. There I would chop the branches into fire wood. Not far from the house there was a butcher. I helped him in his shop and traveled with him to town on market day. In exchange he gave my mother enough meat for the week.

My father and sister crossed the border into Rumania. There they reached a town where the Jewish people helped them to find temporary living quarters. Since my father was a skilled hatmaker, he was able to find work in a local shop. My father and sister lived in the shopkeeper's home. My father's boss told him about the Jewish agency, HIAS. He explained that this was the organization which helped refugee families to locate relatives in America or other parts of the world. HIAS had an office in the city of Kishinev which was not too far from where my father and sister were living.

My father wrote to the HIAS immediately and gave them information about my mother's

family in New York City. It was by chance that at the very same time my mother's brother, Phil, was in Kishinev looking for us and other members of the Postrel family.

The Postrel family in New York had gotten together and decided to send a member to Europe. They chose my mother's brother, Phil, since he was a World War I veteran and not yet married. The members of the family felt that he would have some prestige with American counselors and, at the same time, he had no responsibilities to a family.

When Phil heard that my father and sister were in Rumania, he immediately wrote to my father. He made arrangements with a more responsible agent to bring the rest of us across the border to Rumania. However, this was springtime and the ice on the river had melted so we crossed in a rowboat after dark. When we reached the other side there was a man with a team of horses waiting for us. The wagon was filled with a lot of hay. The driver told my mother to cover my sisters with the hay in case we were stopped by the police. He would tell them that we were going to the market in the next town.

When we arrived in the town where my father and Ethel were staying, my father immediately arranged for a bus driver to take us to Phil in Kishinev. Incidentally, it was not a bus but an old truck with two long benches on each side. It was a dirt road and every time the truck went over a bump we would hit the roof of the truck. I remember that my mother got sick from the trip.

When we arrived in Kishinev, my Uncle Phil met us. He took us to a house he had rented for us. He told us that we would have to live there until we could secure visas to the United States. In the meantime, other Postrel families arrived in Kishinev.

After living in Kishinev for about two months, my Uncle Phil received a letter from the U.S. Consul. The letter stated that whomever he wished to bring to the United States must come to Bucharest, the capital of Rumania. So we packed and went to Bucharest where we lived for three months until we received our passports.

Then some trouble began. There were many people from Stavisht in Rumania. They had problems getting passports since the United States had strict quotas. They also needed relatives to sponsor them. Many people had been waiting a year or longer. A couple of families approached my Uncle Phil and asked him to sponsor them. He explained that he had more of his own immediate relatives to sponsor than the quota permitted. Out of jealousy, they reported my uncle to the Consul accusing him of sponsoring people who were not his relatives. Phil went through a lot of red tape in order to prove that this was not true.

At the end of August, 1921, we received our visas and left to board the ship. It was to be the Olympia of the Cunard Lines. First, we went by train from Bucharest to Antwerp, Belgium. There we stayed about a week. From there we boarded a ship to London. The voyage through the English Channel from Antwerp to London was very rough, and a number of people got sick on the trip. In London, my mother became ill with gallstones. She remained in London with my youngest sister, Edith, who was then 5 years old. My father, sisters and I left London on October 6, 1921 and arrived in New York City on October 11. I remember that we observed Yom Kippur while on our trip. We fasted and had services on board our ship. Due to my mother's weakened condition, my uncle changed her reservation from third class to second class for the transatlantic voyage. She joined us about a month later in New York.

My mother's brothers, Joe and Phil, owned a stationary store in Manhattan. In the back of the store there were two rooms which we lived in for about three months. Then we rented an apartment in the neighborhood, and my sisters and I started school immediately. My father got a job as a hatmaker but was unable to adjust to the shop. A relative of ours did a good business as

a fruit and vegetable peddler. He asked my father to join him as a partner.

I also worked. I helped my uncles in their stationary store. I delivered newspapers in the morning before school. A few months later, when I was able to read, write and speak a little English, I found another job. I worked in the afternoons, picking up and delivering clothes for a dry cleaning store in our neighborhood. I worked from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. each afternoon and made three dollars a week plus tips. I would give my money to my mother. There was no such thing as allowance, but somehow I always managed to have some change in my pocket.

After a couple of years, my father left his partner and went into his own fruit and vegetable business. It was very hard work with little future for him. Since my uncles were doing well in the candy and stationary business, they advised my father and me to look for that type of business.

In January of 1927, a relative told us about a storekeeper in his neighborhood who wanted to sell his business. When we visited the store, my father and I found it to be in a state of neglect. The owner was a bachelor and a very peculiar man. He would not talk business with me because I was too young. Since my father spoke little English, we had to call an older relative to negotiate with him. We were able to buy the store at a good price, but we were then faced with the big job of renovating it. We did this with the help of my Uncle Shlema who was in the construction business.

On April 1, 1927, we opened for business. In a couple of years, we paid all of our debts. We did well in this store especially considering that this was the beginning of the Depression. Our store was located at the foot of an elevated railroad station in Brooklyn. Many people used this station to go to work. That is how I met my wife, Sylvia Schnall. She used to come into the store and I made a point to wait on her. We began keeping company, and about a year later we got married, in June, 1933.

Five years later, my father and I sold the business and my father retired. I then bought a newspaper route in Peekskill, New York with my mother's youngest brother, Uncle Lew. In those days it was considered quite a distance away from the family, but Sylvia and I did not want to raise our family in New York City.

This was 1938, and due to the on-going Depression, the business was not as profitable as we expected. During those first years, we struggled to make a living. After a few years, business improved and Uncle Lew and I were more encouraged. We were able to employ school boys at low wages to deliver our papers. Then World War II was declared and these boys were hired away by the defense factories that opened up in Peekskill. Then Uncle Lew and I had to work much harder, and I began to hate the business. It was degrading to have to do the work of schoolboys. To make matters worse, I was drafted into the army in the spring of 1944. There were about one hundred men drafted from Peekskill at that time, and most of us were married and had families. The government gave me thirty days to settle my business and report to the draft board.

The draft board divided our group in half. Fifty of us were to leave in March and the rest in April. I happened to draw a high number and was put in the April group. As it happened, according to the news in the press and on radio, the United States and our allies were doing very well. They predicted that the war would soon be over. In the meantime, the men that left in March were already serving in the army, and my group was still waiting to be called in April. Then on April 1, I received a letter from the draft board saying that those married men with children were exempt. Soon after, the war was over. This took a lot of pressure off my mind.

After the war, our business picked up a little but I was still dissatisfied. It was hard work

especially since the help was unreliable. I told Uncle Lew that I wanted to sell the store. Uncle Lew did not like my idea, but he knew that I was unhappy, so he finally agreed to sell the business.

After the war things began to settle down and men began to look for employment. Even so, it was not easy to find a buyer for our business. After a couple of years, I was successful in finding two partners who bought our newspaper route.

Now I had to make plans for myself. For eleven years, I had been partners with my father, and then I had been partners with my Uncle Lew for twelve more years. So, now, I decided to buy a business of my own, of course, with the help of my family. After months of looking for a business, I bought a stationary store in Mount Vernon, New York. That was in November, 1950.

The business was very good, but the landlord was not reliable, and I did not feel secure with him. I was on the verge of canceling the deal, but the real estate agent knew that the building next door was for sale. I bought the property and after about three years, I moved into my own building and modernized my store. I was doing a fair business. Even though I worked six and a half days a week in the store, I was happy and hoped in a few years to be able to retire and receive a fair income from my business and my real estate. Unfortunately, it did not work out as I planned.

In the early 1960s, I read in the local papers that Mt. Vernon had received a large sum of money from the government to be used for urban renewal. Soon after, I saw people surveying the neighborhood where my store was located. The city announced that it planned to build apartment buildings on that block. Soon after, all the properties on my block including my business were condemned by the city.

The other businessmen on my block and I retained lawyers, not to win our real estate back, but at least to get more money than what the city offered. It helped a little and I was able to stay in my business until the very end of July, 1967.

I hardly had time to think about my future, when a stationary salesman called me about a job. He told me of a store that could use my services. The owner of the store was a widow who could not manage her business alone. She wanted to sell her store but was looking for a manager until she could get an offer. I took the job and happened to like it. The store was the same type as my own plus I had more time for myself and less responsibility.

Afterword by Michael Greenberg

The memoir ends here. It was transcribed from the typewritten copy exactly as is - with no corrections except for a couple of typographic errors. Very few people who immigrated to the United States during the big period of Jewish immigration in the late 19th and early 20th centuries left memoirs as detailed as this one. It has proved to be an invaluable tool for geneology research on the Postrel family and most importantly as a personal account of conditions in the late Russian empire and the early Soviet Union .