

MEMORIES OF MORRIS PLOTKA

KOLUDNA, RUSSIA TO MOBILE, ALABAMA

SEPT. 8, 1895 - FEB. 21, 1978

THERE WAS SO MUCH THAT WAS GOIN ON THAT IT'S HARD TO REALLY ... THE TIME THAT I REMEMBER IS WHEN MY FATHER LEFT TO THIS COUNTRY, THAT WOULD BE IN ABOUT 1908.

I NEVER DID KNOW JUST HOW OLD I AM. IN DEM DAYS IN EUROPE, SOMETIMES WHEN A CHILD WAS BORN, YOU HAD TO GO TO THE NEXT LITTLE TOWN TO GET IT RECORDED, WELL LOTS OF TIMES, THEY JUST NEGLECT IT. SO THEY NEVER KNEW EXACTLY. IN MY CASE, I NEVER KNEW WHETHER THEY RECORDED ME OR NOT. WHEN I HAD TO GO TO THIS COUNTRY, I HAD TO HAVE SOME KIND OF PAPER TO SHOW THAT I WAS AROUND. SO MY MOTHER WENT, LIKE YOU WOULD GO HERE TO A COURTHOUSE, AND SHE ASKED AROUND. ALWAYS IT WOULD COST A FEW RUBLES. SO THEY MADE A BIRTH CERTIFICATE FOR ME AND IT STATED THAT I WAS BORN ON SEPTEMBER THE EIGHTH, IN RUSSIA. THEY WAS TWO WEEKS BEHIND OR TWO WEEKS AHEAD, BUT NOW THEY GOT IT STRAIGHTENED OUT - THE SAME DAY HERE AS IN EUROPE - BUT IN THEM DAYS IT WAS TWO WEEKS DIFFERENT. IF IT WAS THE EIGHTH OVER HERE, IT WAS THE TWENTY-SECOND OVER THERE. SO SHE GOT THAT CERTIFICATE AND IT STATED IN THAT CERTIFICATE THAT I WAS BORN SEPTEMBER 8, 1895, AND THAT'S WHAT WE GONE BY. WHETHER IT'S TRUE OR NOT, WE DON'T KNOW.

FATHER CAME TO THIS COUNTRY ¹ - I WAS STILL IN RUSSIA. IT WAS A VILLAGE

¹ (AS TOLD TO DAUGHTER, MOLLYE, SEPTEMBER, 1977 IN SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS: MENACHEM-MENDEL BOUGHT SACCHARIN ON THE AUSTRIAN BORDER WHERE HE WAS STOPPED AND SEARCHED. WHEN IT WAS FOUND IN HIS PACKET, HE WAS ARRESTED AND SENT TO SIBERIA FOR A YEAR. HE HAD TO REPORT TO THE AUTHORITIES ONCE A WEEK. WHILE IN SIBERIA, THERE WAS NO WAY FOR HIM TO MAKE A LIVING. THEY LIVED UNDERGROUND, LITERALLY AND HAD TO KILL ANIMALS IN ORDER TO EAT. ONE DAY, HE JUST LEFT AND WENT BACK HOME.

HE WROTE A LETTER TO TANTE PRESS, HIS SISTER, WHO WAS ALREADY IN AMERICA, AND ASKED THAT SHE SEND HIM A TICKET TO COME TO AMERICA.

AFTER MENACHEM-MENDEL LEFT FOR AMERICA, MORRIS TOOK OVER THE DYING OF FABRIC, WHICH WAS ONE OF THE MANY WAYS MENACHEM-MENDEL HAD TRIED TO MAKE A LIVING FOR HIS FAMILY)

NAMED KOLUDNA. I WAS 13 YEARS OLD. I WANTED TO WORK BECAUSE THERE WAS NO INCOME. MY OLDER SISTER, SHE WAS SEWING FOR PEOPLE, AND I WAS IDLE. (TZIPPI) THEY STARTED TO BUILD A FENCE AROUND ABOUT 40 ACRES FOR A POSSESSOR, YOU KNOW A LAND POSSESSOR? IN KOLUDNA. THEY MADE A FENCE ABOUT EIGHT FEET HIGH FROM CEMENT. THEY HAD TO DIG A FOUNDATION. THE FOUNDATION WAS ABOUT 3 FEET DEEP AND ABOUT 2 FEET WIDE. I GOT A JOB DIGGING THAT FOUNDATION, ME AND ANOTHER BOY, FOR TEN CENTS A YARD. IN EUROPE, THEY DIDN'T HAVE NO GRAVEL THAT YOU MIX WITH CEMENT TO MAKE PAVEMENT OR A WALL OR ANYTHING, THEY HAD TO MAKE THE GRAVEL. SO THEY BROUGHT ROCKS FROM SOMEWHERE - BLUE ROCKS THAT WHEN YOU HIT IT THERE WERE SPARKS FLYING ALL AROUND - SO YOU TAKE A BIG ROCK AND USE IT FOR A FOUNDATION, THEN TAKE A FIVE POUND HAMMER AND PUT ANOTHER ROCK ON THAT ROCK AND BEAT IT UNTIL YOU MAKE A LOT OF SMALLER ROCKS TO USE FOR GRAVEL. I DONE THIS FOR PRACTICALLY THREE MONTHS. I GOT TEN CENTS A BARREL. AFTER YOU BEAT OUT THAT ROCK, YOU FILL UP A BARREL TO KNOW HOW MUCH YOU MAKE. OVER HERE CEMENT COMES IN A BAG, 150 POUNDS OR SO, BUT OVER THERE IT USED TO COME IN A BARREL THAT WEIGHED 750 POUNDS OR SO AND WOULD TAKE SO MANY MEN TO HANDLE IT. AFTER THAT BARREL WAS EMPTIED OUT, YOU USE IT TO MEASURE HOW MANY BARRELS YOU MAKE IN A DAY. THAT'S HOW MANY DIMES YOU GOT.

SO THEY GOT FINISH WITH THAT WALL AROUND 40 ACRES. THEY FILL UP THAT TRENCH THAT WE DUG WITH CEMENT AND PUT AN IRON RAIL ABOUT EVERY 8 FEET, THEN THEY PUT BOARDS, 8 FEET HIGH, AND POURED THE CEMENT AND THE RAIL WOULD BE IN THE MIDDLE AND THAT'S WHAT WOULD HOLD THE WALL STEADY.

NOBODY COULD KNOCK IT DOWN. SO WHEN THAT JOB GAVE OUT, THEY STARTED TO BUILD A PALACE FOR THAT SAME RICH MAN, THEY CALLED HIM A GRAGH, THAT WAS THE NAME OF THAT RICH POSSESSOR. THEY STARTED BUILDING FOR HIM A PALACE IN ANOTHER VILLAGE FOUR MILES AWAY FROM WHERE WE LIVED. SO I GOT A JOB DERE. I HAD TO BE DERE AT SUNUP. WE HAD NO CLOCK IN THE HOUSE. HOW DO YOU KNOW WHAT TIME IT IS AND WHAT TIME TO GET UP AND GO? SO WHEN YOU LAY DOWN IN THE EVENING AFTER DARK AND WAKE UP, YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT TIME IT IS, SO I USED TO LOAD UP. THAT'S ALL I ATE WAS BREAD - YOU KNOW THAT BLACK BREAD WITH ALL THAT SHAWTS IN IT. YOU KNOW WHAT SHAWTS IS? WHEN THEY GRIND THE RYE, THE FIRST COMES OFF IS A KIND OF A HARD SHELL. UNDERNEATH THAT SHELL COMES THE BRAN. BUT THERE'S ANOTHER LAYER COMES OFF, IT'S THIN AND DARK BROWN AND THEY CALL IT SHAWTS. IN THIS COUNTRY THEY FEED IT TO THE CATTLE, BUT IN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES IT WENT INTO THE BREAD. THEY TOOK OUT ONLY THE COARSE BRAN AND EVERYTHING ELSE WENT INTO THE FLOUR. DAT'S WHERE ALL DE VITAMINS ARE. SEE HERE YOU GO INTO A STORE, YOU SEE A WHOLE SHELF FULL OF VITAMINS. OVER THERE THEY NEVER HEARD OF SUCH A THING. IT NEVER EXISTED. IN THE FOOD, IN THE BREAD, THESE VITAMINS WAS THERE AND THAT'S THE REASON THEY COULD EXIST AND LIVE. HERE THEY TAKE OUT AND LEAVE JUST THE FINE DUST FROM THE WHEAT. MY MOTHER USED TO BAKE THE BREAD. IT WOULD BE ABOUT THAT ROUND AND HEAVY AS A ROCK. A LOAF OF BREAD WOULD WEIGH BETWEEN TEN AND TWELVE POUNDS. THAT WAS HARDLY ENOUGH FOR ME FOR A DAY. I WAS YOUNG AND HAD A WONDERFUL APPETITE BUT NOTHING TO EAT.

SO YOU'D GET UP SOMETIME DURING THE NIGHT. I DIDN'T WALK EVERY DAY THAT FOUR MILES BECAUSE THEY HAD BARRACKS OVER THERE TO SLEEP. WE ONLY WORKED FIVE DAYS A WEEK. SATURDAY, YOU KNOW, SHABBOS. SO I LOADED UP FIVE LOAVES OF BREAD IN A SACK ON MY BACK AND STARTED WALKING THESE FOUR MILES.

SOMETIMES WHEN I GET THERE IT WOULD BE IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT. SO YOU REST. IN THE MORNING YOU HAD TO GO TO WORK, SIX O'CLOCK. I'D GET UP IN THE MORNING I'D BE HUNGRY AS A WOLF, SO I'D CUT OFF A SLICE OF BREAD AND EAT BREAD. THEN WE WORKED TWO HOURS AND COME BACK AND HAD BREAKFAST. THERE WAS A WOMAN THAT MADE TEA. I USUALLY BROUGHT SUGAR WITH ME AND MAKE THE TEA SWEET. TEA AND BREAD, THAT WAS THE BREAKFAST. ANOTHER SLICE OF THAT LOAF OF BREAD. THEN WE WORK TILL TWELVE O'CLOCK AND HAD AN HOUR FOR DINNER. ACROSS THE WAY WAS A JEWISH MAN, HE BROUGHT UP THE MILK. THE SAME RICH MAN, HE HAD ALL KIND OF POSSESSIONS - A DAIRY, LOTS OF COWS. THAT JEWISH FELLOW, HE BOUGHT THE MILK AND PUT IT UP IN CONTAINERS, WHAT YOU CALL IT HERE, PITCHERS, OUT OF CLAY. HE PUT EM UP AND LET EM STAY AND THE CREAM SETTLES ON THE TOP AND THE SOUR MILK BE LEFT ON THE BOTTOM. HE TAKES THE CREAM OFF AND MAKES BUTTER OUT OF IT AND SELLS THE BUTTER. THE BOTTOM, THAT SOUR MILK, I USED TO BUY ME ONE OF THEM CONTAINERS FOR FIVE CENTS, AND TAKE ANOTHER SLICE OF THAT BREAD AND EAT IT UP AND IT HAD A HEAVENLY TASTE. OH, IT WAS SO GOOD I COULDN'T FORGET IT. THAT'S ALL THERE WAS TO EAT. THEM PEOPLE THAT I WORKED AMONG, THEY WOULD COME, YOU KNOW, PLAIN OLD GOYIM, AND SOME OF THEM WAS VERY NICE. THEY OFFERED ME FOOD! BUT SINCE I WAS JEWISH, I COULDN'T EAT THEIR FOOD, IT WAS TRAIFF - EVEN BREAD. WE WASN'T ALLOWED TO EAT THEIR BREAD. IT WAS SO WRONG, I CAN SEE IT NOW. I WOULDN'T HAVE TO DRAG FIVE LOAVES OF BREAD THAT WEIGHED 60 POUNDS ON MY BACK WALKING AT NIGHT IF I COULD EAT THEIR BREAD. THEY HAD THEIR OWN. WE HAD TO BUY EVERYTHING. THEY HAD THEIR OWN - MILLING, YOU KNOW, TO RAISE THE RYE AND MILL THE FLOUR. THEY OFFERED ME BREAD, BUT I WAS SO FANATIC, THAT'S THE WAY THE JEWISH PEOPLE WERE IN THEM DAYS. THEY WASN'T ALLOWED NOTHING FROM THE GOYIM TO EAT, SO I HAD TO LIVE ON PRACTICALLY DRY BREAD.

THEN WE WORKED TILL THREE THIRTY AND WE HAD A HALF AN HOUR FOR A SNACK, LIKE HERE THEY HAVE A COFFEE BREAK. WELL, I COME IN AND I WAS ALWAYS HUNGRY LIKE A WOLF, SO I HAD ANOTHER SLICE OF THAT LOAF OF BREAD. WHATEVER THEY HAD, A GLASS OF TEA OR WATER TO GO ALONG WITH IT. THEN WE WORKED UNTIL EIGHT O'CLOCK IN THE EVENING. YOU KNOW THE SUN WOULD STILL BE UP EIGHT O'CLOCK IN THE EVENING? DAT WAS SUPPER TIME. WELL, WHATEVER WAS LEFT OF THAT BREAD, THAT LOAF, THAT WAS SUPPER. SO, YOU KNOW, WHEN I TELL PEOPLE HERE I USED TO EAT TEN POUNDS OF BREAD A DAY, THEY THINK I'M JUST TALKING NONSENSE, JUST TO BE TALKING. BUT THIS IS REALLY THE TRUTH. THAT'S THE WAY I LIVED.

ISIDORE, THE OLDEST, THEN CELIA (TZIPPI), THE NEXT, THEN BETWEEN CELIA AND ME, I THINK THERE WAS ANOTHER BABY, BUT IT DIDN'T LIVE. I COME AND THEN THERE WAS PHILLIP. I THINK BETWEEN PHILLIP AND ABE WAS ANOTHER BABY THAT DIDN'T LIVE. THEN THERE WAS ABE, AND THEN THERE WAS RACHEL THAT'S IN CALIFORNIA. THEN THERE WAS ANOTHER LITTLE BROTHER THAT WE LOST, HE MUST HAVE BEEN ABOUT EIGHT. SOMETHING HAPPENED, HE GOT SICK AND PASSED AWAY. THAT WAS WHEN I WAS ALREADY HERE.

SO WHILE I WAS WORKING IN THE VILLAGE HELPING BUILD THAT PALACE, THERE WAS THIS ARCHITECT THAT WAS A GERMAN. HE HAD AN OLD FATHER THAT WAS AN ARCHITECT TOO, BUT THE SON TOOK OVER THE BUSINESS AND THE OLD MAN WAS MAKING DECORATIONS FOR THE PALACE. THEY BUILD UP FOUR POSTS, UP TO THE SECOND FLOOR, AND ON THE TOP OF EACH WAS A PIECE OF CEMENT THAT WAS MADE IN A PATTERN. THAT PATTERN WAS MADE OF A KIND OF MATERIAL, THEY USED TO CALL IT "GIPS", IT'S SOMETHING LIKE LOOSE LIME. YOU MIX IT UP WITH WATER. AND YOU PUT IT IN A PATTERN AND IT GETS HARD, JUST LIKE CHALK. YOU CAN CURL IT, YOU CAN DO ANYTHING WITH IT. THE FATHER OF THAT ARCHITECT, HE MADE ALL THESE FRAMES; HE TOOK A LIKEN TO ME AND I WAS HIS RIGHT HAND

HELPIN HIM.

I HELPED HIM MAKE THESE FOUR, THEY WEIGHED ABOUT TWO TONS, WITH ALL KINDS OF PATTERNS ALL AROUND. AFTER THAT THEY WAS MAKIN, WHAT YOU CALL IT HERE THAT THEY PUT ON THE ROOF? SHINGLES? I SEEN SOME HERE THAT ARE MADE OF RED CLAY, BUT THERE THEY WAS MADE OUT OF CEMENT. WE HAD PLATES, MADE OUT OF STEEL THAT YOU PUT THE CEMENT IN AND PAT IT DOWN, WORK IT DOWN, THEN PUT IT OUT IN THE SUN. YOU WATER EM EVERY DAY, YOU KNOW WATER MAKES CEMENT STRONG AFTER IT DRIES. SO I USED TO MAKE THAT, AND WHEN I GOT TO MAKIN ALL THESE THINGS OUT OF CEMENT, THEY RAISED MY WAGES TO 60 CENTS A DAY. THAT WAS GOOD MONEY, 3 DOLLARS A WEEK ABOUT. THAT WAS AS GOOD AS MY FATHER WAS DOING IN NEW YORK WORKING IN THE SHOP, FOR 3 DOLLARS A WEEK. SO I WAS A BIG MACHER. THAT WAS ALREADY 1913.

MY FATHER WROTE ONCE A WEEK, ONCE EVERY TWO WEEKS, BUT YOU NEVER KNOWED WHEN YOU WAS GOING TO GET A LETTER. THE NEAREST POST OFFICE WAS IN THE TOWN WHERE I WAS WORKING. WE ONLY WORKED THROUGH THE SUMMER BECAUSE IN THE WINTER THERE WAS PILED SO MUCH SNOW AND ICE YOU COULDN'T DO NOTHING AROUND BUILDING. SO DURING THE WINTER, WHENEVER YOU WANT TO KNOW IF THERE'S A LETTER, AND WE WAS ALWAYS CURIOUS, SOMETIMES HE SENDS FIVE DOLLARS TO MY MOTHER, SO I GET OUT THERE AND THE SNOW AND WIND BE BEATING YOU IN THE FACE. YOU KNOW WHEN THE NORTH WIND BLOWS AND THE SNOW BEATS YOU IN THE FACE, IT BURNS LIKE FIRE. SO I RUN. FOUR MILES THERE AND SOMETIMES THERE'S NO LETTER, AND RUN FOUR MILES BACK, ALL DISAPPOINTED. BUT THAT WAS THE NEAREST POST OFFICE.

DURING THAT TIME, MY AUNT PRESS THAT WAS LIVING IN CALIFORNIA, SHE WAS THE ONLY SISTER THAT MY FATHER HAD LEFT. THERE WAS ANOTHER ONE BUT SHE PASSED AWAY. SHE SENT HIM A LITTLE MONEY FOR EXPENSES, SO HE COULD BUY

A TICKET TO NEW YORK AND PAY IT OUT. YOU'D BUY A TICKET FOR A PASSENGER ON A BOAT AND PAY PART OF IT. THEN WHEN THAT PASSENGER COMES, HE STARTS WORKING AND PAYING ON IT A LITTLE EACH WEEK. HE COULDN'T PAY MUCH BECAUSE HE WAS ONLY MAKING 3 DOLLARS A WEEK. ANYWAY, THE COMPANIES IN THEM DAYS WAS WILLING, SO SHE BOUGHT A TICKET FOR HIM. THAT WAS IN 1908. AND HE COMES TO THIS COUNTRY, AND STARTED TO WORKING AND PAYING ON HIS TICKET. BY THAT TIME HAD PASSED ANOTHER TWO YEARS AND MY OLDER BROTHER CAME.

IN THEM DAYS IN RUSSIA, WHEN A BOY GOT TO BE 21 YEARS OLD, HE HAD TO GO IN THE ARMY FOR THREE YEARS. THEY PAID HIM 50 CENTS A MONTH IN WAGES. THE DISCIPLINE WAS THAT THEY WORE BOOTS UP TO THE KNEE AND THEM BOOTS HAD TO BE SHININ ALL THE TIME. THAT 50 CENTS WAS HARDLY ENOUGH TO BUY BLACK BOOT. THEY GIVE HIM FOOD AND CLOTHES BUT NO MONEY.

JEWISH PEOPLE JUST DIDN'T HAVE NOTHING TO SERVE FOR. THEY WAS DISCRIMINATED ALL THE TIME. WHEN A JEWISH BOY WENT TO THE ARMY, WHAT HE HAD TO PUT UP WITH ALL THE OTHERS ALWAYS MAKIN IT HARD FOR HIM AND LAUGHING AT HIM AND CALLING HIM JEW, AND THIS AND THAT. SO MY FATHER GOT A TICKET IN THE SAME WAY, PAID DOWN FIVE DOLLARS, AND HE SENT FOR MY BROTHER, AND THEY GOT HIM ACROSS THE LINE. THAT WAS IN 1910.

HE COME AND STARTED WORKING IN THE SHOP, SAME WAGES. I WAS STILL OVER THERE, DOIN WHAT I CAN AND WORKIN WITH THESE PEOPLE TILL IT PASSED ON TO THE END OF 1913.

THERE WAS NOT ENOUGH JEWISH PEOPLE, YOU HAD TO HAVE A MINYAN, YOU KNOW, TEN, BUT THERE WAS ANOTHER VILLAGE 3 MILES AWAY, AND A FEW JEWISH FAMILIES FROM ANOTHER VILLAGE, AND THEY COME. THE SHUL WAS IN OUR HOUSE. MY FATHER RENTED A HOUSE THAT HAD TWO ROOMS ON ONE SIDE AND TWO ROOMS ON THE OTHER SIDE AND IN THE MIDDLE, A HALL, FOR 30 RUBLES A YEAR. YOU COULDN'T RENT BY THE MONTH, ONLY BY THE YEAR. HE WAS PAYING 15 RUBLES

FOR THE TWO ROOMS THAT WE OCCUPIED, AND THEY WAS GETTING TOGETHER EVERY-ONE TO PAY FOR THE OTHER SIDE. EACH ONE PITCHED IN WHAT HE CAN, AND THEY WAS PAYING 15 RUBLES FOR THE OTHER SIDE TO BE A SHUL. THEY HAD A SAFER TORAH AND THEY USED TO GET TOGETHER ON FRIDAY EVENING. IT WAS JUST A HOUSE, YOU KNOW, BECAUSE THE JEWS WERE NOT ALLOWED TO HAVE A SHUL. SO IT WAS HIDDEN. BUT THEY USED TO GET TOGETHER ON FRIDAY EVENINGS AND ON SATURDAY MORNINGS AND WHEN IT HAPPENED THERE WAS A HOLIDAY. THEY'D BRING A CANTOR FROM ANOTHER TOWN AND HE DONE THE DAVENING. THE SMALLER ROOM WAS FOR THE LADIES, THE BIGGER ONE WAS FOR THE MEN. IN THEM DAYS THEY DIDN'T PRAY TOGETHER, IT HAD TO BE SEPARATE. THE WOMEN USED TO PRAY AND CRY, YOU CAN HEAR EM- IT WOULD BREAK YOUR HEART. EVERYONE HAD SO MUCH TO UNLOAD. EVERYONE HAD A PACK OF TROUBLE, AND WHERE COULD THEY UNLOAD BETTER THAN TO COME AND PRAY AND CRY, AND SO? YOU FELT LIKE YOU WERE... OVER HERE, IT'S PRACTICALLY NOTHING WHEN YOU GO TO SHUL. BUT OVER THERE YOU HAD SOMETHING TO BEG FOR, FROM THE BOTTOM OF YOUR HEART, AND THEY REALLY BELIEVED, IT WASN'T JUST... THEY BELIEVED AND ASKED MANY TIMES WHY, WHY WAS THE JEWS ALWAYS PERSECUTED AND DISCRIMINATED AGAINST? MY MOTHER, MAY SHE REST IN PEACE, TOLD ME THAT IT WAS BECAUSE THEY SINNED YOU KNOW, THOUSANDS OF YEARS AGO THEY SINNED IN OLD ISRAEL WHEN IT WAS EXISTING. THIS IS THE REASON WE HAVE TO... SO WHAT YOU GOING DO? YOU ACCEPT. YOU GO ALONG WITH IT.

THERE WAS A SCHOOL FROM THE GOVERNMENT, YOU KNOW, PUBLIC SCHOOL, BUT JEWISH CHILDREN WERE NOT ALLOWED. IF I WAS TO GO TO THAT SCHOOL, MY FATHER WOULD HAVE TO PAY FOUR RUBLES A MONTH. THAT WAS MORE THAN WE MADE SOMETIMES. SO I NEVER WENT TO SCHOOL. BUT TWO BLOCKS AWAY WAS A BOY MY AGE AND HE WAS GOING TO SCHOOL. I WANTED TO LEARN, I WANTED TO LEARN SO BAD, BUT NO CHANCE AT ALL. SO WHEN THAT BOY WAS COMING HOME FROM SCHOOL

YOU KNEW EXACTLY WHEN HE WAS COMING HOME FROM SCHOOL, I USED TO BE AT HIS HOUSE. HE SAT DOWN AND WAS MAKING HIS LESSONS, I WAS RIGHT THERE WATCHING EVERY MOVE HE MADE. I WROTE ON THE WALLS AND ON THE GROUND, WITH CHALK. WHEREVER I COULD FIND A SPACE, I WROTE BECAUSE PAPER WAS SO SCARCE. A TABLET LIKE YOU USED TO BUY HERE FOR A NICKEL, YOU COULD HAVE BOUGHT IT THERE FOR TWO CENTS. BUT YOU NEVER HAD THE TWO CENTS TO BUY IT WITH, YOU SEE. BUT ONCE I GOT A HOLD OF TWO PENNIES AND BOUGHT A TABLET IT WASN'T A HALF AN INCH ON THE COVERS, INSIDE AND OUT, THAT I DIDN'T WRITE ALL OVER. WHEN I GOT THROUGH WITH IT, FULL, I SOLD IT BACK TO THE SAME STORE KEEPER FOR A COUPLE PIECES OF CANDY AND HE USED IT FOR WRAPPING PAPER.

YOU CAN IMAGINE HOW IT WAS IN THEM DAYS. THE JEWISH PEOPLE WAS A LITTLE BETTER OFF. THEY GOT TOGETHER AND HIRED A MELAMED, YOU HEARD ABOUT IT? A MELAMED, ONE THAT TEACHES. THEY'D PAY HIM MAYBE FIFTEEN DOLLARS FOR SIX MONTHS TEACHING. THEY NEEDED A PLACE, AND THERE WAS NO PLACE, SO THEY USED THAT SMALLER ROOM WHERE THE WOMEN WAS PRAYING FOR A CHEDER. ME AND THAT SISTER, TZIPPY, WAS THAT AGE IN THEM DAYS, BUT YOU KNOW, THEY WOULDN'T LET US IN. BECAUSE MY FATHER COULDN'T PAY TOWARDS THE TEACHER. CAN YOU IMAGINE THAT? BUT THAT'S THE WAY IT WAS. SO ONE TIME HERE ABOUT TWO OR THREE YEARS BACK, WHEN RABBI FRIEDMAN WAS IN MOBILE, WE USED TO COME TOGETHER ON SATURDAY EVENING. WE WAS TEACHING PEREK, SAYINGS OF THE FATHERS. IN ONE PLACE IT SAYS THAT IF A GROUP OF JEWISH PEOPLE LIVES TOGETHER IN ONE PLACE, AND THERE IS A JEWISH CHILD, THEY ARE ALL RESPONSIBLE FOR THAT CHILD'S EDUCATION. SO I SIT AND LISTEN, AND WHEN IT WAS OVER WITH, I SAID, "RABBI FRIEDMAN, I WANT TO ASK YOU SOMETHING. IS THAT PEREK THE SAME 60 YEARS AGO IN EUROPE?" "SURE, IT'S THE SAME PEREK." SO I TOLD HIM THE STORY. IT WAS YIDDIN, YOU KNOW,

JEWISH PEOPLE WITH LONG BEARDS AND TALLIS, BUT WHEN IT COME TO HELPING MY FATHER, NO WAY IN THE WORLD, AND WE WAS SO ANXIOUS TO LEARN. THEY WOULDN'T LET US IN, IN THAT CHEDER, BECAUSE MY FATHER COULDN'T PAY TOWARDS THE MELAMED. WE DIDN'T LEARN, AND UP UNTIL TODAY SHE DON'T KNOW NOTHING. SHE IS TWO YEARS OLDER. SO THAT'S THE WAY IT WAS LEFT.

ON THE FIRST OF JANUARY 1914, MY FATHER SEND ME A TICKET. HE WAS ALREADY IN BAY MINETTE. THEY READ IN THE YIDDISHE PAPER THAT SOME LAND COMPANY WAS ADVERTISING LAND IN BAY MINETTE AND THEY SAID EVERYTHING GROWS AND IT IS SO NICE, YOU KNOW THEY CAN PUT IT OVER SO NICE, THAT YOU THINK IT IS JUST SO. THEY GOT TOGETHER ABOUT 20 FAMILIES AND THEY DECIDED THEY WOULD COME TO BAY MINETTE AND BUILD A JEWISH COLONY. UNCLE PRESS AND AUNT PRESS WAS ALREADY IN BAY MINETTE TOO. HE WAS A GOOD TAILOR. HE COULD MAKE YOU A SUIT LOOKED LIKE YOU GROWED UP IN IT. SO HE HAD NO TROUBLE. SOON AS PEOPLE GOT TO KNOW HIM, HE HAD PLENTY WORK AND HE MADE A NICE LIVING. MY FATHER AND THE OLDER BROTHER, THEY START TO FARMING. MY FATHER REMEMBER THAT IN EUROPE WOOD WAS SO SCARCE, ONE WHO HAD A TREE WAS A RICH MAN.

THEY START TO CLEANING UP 10 ACRES OF LAND. THEY WOULD ROLL THE LOGS, 12 TO 15 FEET LOGS, FROM THE PINE TREES. THEY'D ROLL AND MAKE A STACK. HE THOUGHT HE COULD KEEP EM AND MAKE SOME USE OUT OF THEM, BUT PINE HAS A TENDENCY TO ROT. IF YOU CUT IT UP AND LET IT LAY, IN NO TIME THERE WILL BE A LOT OF WORMS UNDER THAT BARK EATIN ON IT. THEY WORKED LIKE A SLAVE, BOTH OF THEM, PILING UP THEM LOGS AND IN A YEAR OR SO, IT ALL ROTTED AND THEY DIDN'T HAVE NOTHING.

ANYWAY, I COME HERE. HE SENDS A TICKET TO ME. I WAS SO EXCITED GOING TO AMERICA. I TOLD THE OLD MAN, THE FATHER OF THAT ARCHITECT THAT I WAS WORKING WITH THAT I WAS LEAVING, AND YOU KNOW THAT OLD MAN CRIED. HE

HATED TO SEE ME LEAVE. HE TOOK A LIKIN BECAUSE I WAS SO GOOD HELPING HIM AT WHATEVER HE WANTED TO DO. THERE WAS NOTHING MY MOTHER COULD DO ABOUT IT. SHE HATED TO SEE ME GO, BUT IN THE MEANTIME, SHE HATED TO SEE ME NOT GO. I WAS ALREADY APPROACHING 18 YEARS. I WOULD HAVE TO GO IN THE ARMY.

IT WAS JANUARY 1, 1914. IT WAS A BITTER COLD OUTSIDE. FROST AND SNOW WAS ALL YOU COULD SEE. WE ARRANGED WITH A MAN TO TAKE ME TO THE LINE, BETWEEN AUSTRIA AND RUSSIA. THERE WAS A IRON POLE ABOUT 15 FEET HIGH ABOUT EVERY MILE. BETWEEN TWO POLES WAS A SOLDIER WITH A RIFLE ON HIS BACK WALKING UP AND DOWN. HE COME TO THE POST, TURN AROUND AND GO BACK. ON THE OTHER SIDE ANOTHER SOLDIER, ALWAYS WATCHING SO NOBODY COULD EVER CROSS. BUT IT WAS ARRANGED FOR A FEW RUBLES FOR ME TO CROSS. THE MAN WHO DROVE ME GOT HIS AND THE SOLDIER GOT HIS AHEAD OF TIME SO THAT HE WAS ON THE OTHER SIDE WHEN IT WAS TIME FOR ME TO CROSS, HE DIDN'T SEE ME. THAT FELLOW BROUGHT ME TO THE LINE AND HE SAID, "YOU SEE THAT LIGHT OVER THERE IN THE WINDOW?" I SEE THE LIGHT. HE SAYS, "WALK STRAIGHT OVER THERE TO THAT LIGHT. THAT MAN KNOWS THAT YOU'RE COMING." SO I STARTED WALKING TO THAT LIGHT. YOU KNOW THE SNOW COVERS EVERYTHING. IT'S LEVEL, BUT THERE WAS A DEEP DITCH, MAYBE EIGHT FEET DEEP. AS I WALKED, I SUNK DOWN IN THE SNOW IN THAT DITCH WITH THE PACK ON MY BACK. IT WAS SO COLD AND FREEZIN. I FOUND MYSELF IN A PREDICAMENT. I COULDN'T GET OUT BECAUSE THE SNOW WAS SO LOOSE. I HAD TO PAT IT DOWN AND BUILD LIKE STEPS UNTIL I CAN REACH THE TOP. I WAS WET AND FREEZING COLD. WHEN I GOT TO THE LIGHT, I KNOCKED ON THE DOOR OF A LITTLE SHACK MADE OUT OF CLAY. I KNOCKED ON THE DOOR AND A MAN OPENED IT AND LET ME IN. A FAMILY LIVED IN A HOUSE THAT WOULDN'T BE NO BIGGER THAN THAT ROOM. HE LET ME IN A LITTLE STORAGE ROOM WITH NO HEAT OR LIGHT OR NOTHING, AND I'M COLD

AND WET. HE SAYS YOU HAVE TO BE IN HERE UNTIL MORNING, UNTIL HE CAN DELIVER ME TO THE DEPOT. I WAS GOING TO CATCH A TRAIN AND I NEVER SEEN A TRAIN IN MY LIFE. SO I HAD TO STAY THERE ALL NIGHT, SHIVERING LIKE A LEAF. AND THAT NIGHT STRETCHED OUT LIKE A MONTH, NOT LIKE A NIGHT. FINALLY IT START TO GETTING DAYLIGHT AND I SEEN HIM GET OUT AND HOOK UP THE HORSES TO THE SLIDE. YOU KNOW IN THE WINTER TIME YOU DON'T USE NO WAGON, BUT A SLIDE. HE PUT A BUNCH OF HAY ON THAT SLIDE AND TOLD ME TO CRAWL IN UNDER THAT HAY. ALL THAT HAD TO BE HIDDEN, YOU ARE NOT ALLOWED, YOU CAN'T, OH, IT'S JUST HORRIBLE. ANYHOW, I GOT UNDER THAT HAY AND MADE ME A HOLE TO PEEP OUT. AND HE WAS DRIVING THE HORSES AND I SEEN TWO GENDARMES, TWO POLICE OFFICERS THAT HAD GUNS WITH SHARP PICKS WAY UP THERE ON HIS SHOULDER. I GOT COLD AS A CUMCUMBER, SCARED TO DEATH. HE COME TO MEET THEM, AND TALK TO THEM SOMETHING I COULDN'T HEAR WHAT THEY SAID. ON BOTH SIDES THEY STUCK IN THE HAY, BUT IT DIDN'T REACH ME, AND THEY TOLD HIM TO GO ON. I BEGIN TO BREATHE AGAIN. HE GOT ME TO TOWN. YOU KNOW I NEVER SEEN A BUNCH OF PEOPLE TOGETHER LIKE THAT IN A TOWN. THE TOWN WAS NAMED BARASCH. (THE VILLAGE I LIVED IN WAS BIG LIKE MOBILE, BUT A HOUSE HERE AND A HOUSE THERE, NOT THICK POPULATED. EVERY FAMILY HAD A GARDEN SPOT NEXT TO THE HOUSE. THAT'S WHAT THEY MAKE A LIVING FROM) SO, HE BROUGHT ME TO THE DEPOT WHERE I HAD TO BUY A TICKET. I SEEN PEOPLE GOING TOWARD THE PLACE TO BUY A TICKET. SO I TOLD HIM I WANT A TICKET TO THE NEXT TOWN, BREMEN, GERMANY, THAT'S A PORT CITY. SO WHEN I GOT THE TICKET, I GOT ON THE TRAIN. YOU CAN IMAGINE, A YOUNG BOY, NEVER SEEN A TRAIN, NEVER SEEN A BUNCH OF PEOPLE TOGETHER LIKE THAT, I HAD TO DO ALL THAT. SO I GOT ON THE TRAIN AND SAT DOWN ON ONE OF THE BENCHES. A YOUNG BOY, A PRETTY GOOD FAKER I IMAGINE, SAT DOWN NEXT TO ME AND STARTED TALKING SO NICE AND FRIENDLY. I WAS

TICKLED TO DEATH TO HAVE SOMEBODY TO SAY SOMETHING TO. HE ASKED ME WHERE I'M GOING, I SAY TO BREMEN. HE SAID, "LET ME SEE YOUR TICKET", SO I TOOK OUT MY TICKET AND SHOW HIM. THE TICKET WAS PRINTED IN POLISH, EVEN THOUGH IT WAS AUSTRIA, AND I COULD READ POLISH. HE TOOK MY TICKET AND WHEN HE GIVE IT BACK, HE SWAPPED IT AND GIVE ME HIS TICKET, WHICH WAS JUST TO THE NEXT LITTLE STATION, NOT ALL THE WAY TO BREMEN. I LOOKED AROUND AND I SEEN THE TICKET IS NOT MINE, SO I TOLD HIM, "YOU MADE A MISTAKE. THAT'S YOUR TICKET, NOT MINE". HE START TO MAKING LIKE NO BUSINESS, BUT I LOOKED UP AND I SEE A GENDARME, LIKE A POLICE, WITH A BIG HAT STICKING WAY UP AND A GUN ON HIS SHOULDER. THAT FELLA GOT SCARED. HE THOUGHT I WAS GOING TO CALL THE POLICE AND HE GIVE ME MY TICKET BACK. IF HE HAD BEAT ME OUT OF THE TICKET, I'D BE LOST. I DIDN'T HAVE NO MONEY, JUST ENOUGH TO GET THERE. IT LOOKED LIKE IT WAS A MIRACLE. I GOT MY TICKET BACK AND I MADE IT TO BREMEN.

THERE WAS A MAN THAT WAS LOOKING AFTER US PASSENGERS ON THE BOAT. HE TOOK US INTO THE BUILDING AND WE HAD TO WAIT A WEEK BEFORE THE SHIP LEFT. THEY GIVE YOU FOOD AND LODGING AND ON FRIDAY NIGHT, I WENT TO A SHUL, AN ORTHODOX SHUL WHERE THEY DAVEN VERY NICELY. SATURDAY MORNING I WENT TO THE SHUL. A WEEK PASSED ON, AND WE GOT ON A BOAT. THE BOAT'S NAME WAS KELN AND IT WAS A FREIGHT BOAT, NOT A PASSENGER BOAT. I TRIED TO MEASURE IT OFF WITH STEPS. IT WAS VERY LONG AND I COULDN'T MAKE IT. THERE WERE TOO MANY THINGS IN THE WAY. IT TOOK US 21 DAYS, TO GET FROM BREMEN TO PHILADELPHIA, THAT WAS THE FIRST STOP. MY TICKET WAS TO NEW ORLEANS. THEY STOPPED IN PHILADELPHIA TO UNLOAD SOME THINGS AND LOAD UP COAL FOR THE SHIP. I SEEN THE BLACK PEOPLE LOADING UP COAL AND I NEVER SEEN A BLACK PERSON BEFORE, SO I THOUGHT THE DUST FROM THE COAL COVERED THEM AND THEY'RE BLACK. I DIDN'T KNOW THERE WAS A BLACK NATION IN THE WORLD.

YOSSEL & MARIAM PRESS

(1865?-1895?) (1865?-1926)

LIVED IN THE VILLAGE OF VISHNEVETS, IN THE WESTERN UKRAINE.

EIGHT CHILDREN, BORN 1880-1895.

FOUR SONS: YSRUL (ISRAEL), YITZIK (ISADORE), SHAYE (SAM), AND VOV.

FOUR DAUGHTERS: SASHA, HIYENTA, SHAVA, AND ESTHER-FRAIDE.

YOSSEL DIED WHEN HIS CHILDREN WERE YOUNG.

WHEN ISADORE WAS NINE YEARS OLD, HE WAS GIVEN TO A TAILOR, TO LEARN THE TRADE. ACCORDING TO CUSTOM, THE BOY WASHED FLOORS AND RAN ERRANDS FOR THE TAILOR, WHO TAUGHT VERY GRADUALLY, TO GET THE MOST SERVICE OUT OF THE BOY. ISADORE BECAME A VERY SKILLED TAILOR. SO DID YSRUL.

IN 1904, YSRUL AND SHAYE WERE DRAFTED INTO THE RUSSIAN ARMY, TO FIGHT IN THE RUSSO-JAPANESE WAR. SHAYE WAS WOUNDED IN THE WAR; ONE EARLOBE WAS SHOT OFF. BUT THE BROTHERS BOTH RETURNED TO VISHNEVETS.

ABOUT 1907, ISADORE WAS ABLE TO EARN HIS WAY TO AMERICA. FROM NEW YORK, HE BEGAN TO SEND FOR OTHER RELATIVES, ONE BY ONE. YSRUL AND SHAYE CAME TO NEW YORK, BUT VOV APPARENTLY STAYED IN THE UKRAINE.

AFTER WORLD WAR I, ENTRY INTO THE UNITED STATES WAS MORE DIFFICULT, AND THE PRESS SISTERS WENT TO ARGENTINA INSTEAD.

SHLOMO & CELIA PLOTKA

(?1850-1900?) (1850-88)

LIVED IN THE VILLAGE OF KOLUDNA, POLAND (UKRAINE), 3 MILES FROM AUSTRIA.
SEVEN CHILDREN BORN 1870-85

MENACHEM-MENDEL (1871-193)

ROCHEL (187 -190), REBECCA (1835-1958)

SHLOMO (SOLOMON) WAS A TAILOR, WITH A LONG BEARD DOWN TO HIS WAIST. HE WAS A LEADER IN THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF ONE OR TWO DOZEN FAMILIES WITHIN KOLUDNA. APPARENTLY A KIND OF PROPHET.

JEWES WERE NOT ALLOWED TO OWN PROPERTY, NOR ATTEND SCHOOL. FURTHERMORE, THE TAILOR'S CHILDREN WERE DISDAINED, EVEN BY THE JEWISH BUSINESSMEN'S CHILDREN.

SHLOMO FELT THAT HIS GRANDCHILDREN MIGHT LIVE IN AMERICA, WHICH HE CALLED A TREYFIMA LAND, A LAND WITHOUT RELIGION. HE HEARD THAT THE RITUALS COULD NOT BE PERFORMED THERE, FOR EXAMPLE FOR AN ORDAINED SHOCHET TO KILL AND PREPARE ALL THE FRESH MEAT, TO BE EATEN ACCORDING TO THE STRICT KOSHER DIETARY LAWS. IT IS TRADITION TO NAME A SON AFTER HIS DECEASED GRANDFATHER, AND IN 1908, AFTER SHLOMO'S DEATH, IN AMERICA HIS DAUGHTER REBECCA PRESS NAMED HER FIRST SON SHLOMO; THE CHILD DIED SUDDENLY IN INFANCY. ONLY LATER DID SHE LEARN THAT OLD SHLOMO HAD SPECIFIED THAT NO CHILD IN THE TREYFIMA LAND BE NAMED AFTER HIM. THROUGH POVERTY AND OPPRESSION, THE CHILDREN'S TIES TO EUROPE WERE BEING SEVERED, AND THE NEXT GENERATION WOULD BE BORN IN AMERICA.

FROYEM & DACHE PEARLMUTTER

(?1850-1880?)

LIVED IN THE VILLAGE OF LUTSK.

FOUR CHILDREN BORN 1865-75

JAKE, AND ANOTHER SON

MIRIAM (1872-1945)

BOTH PARENTS DIED WHEN THEIR CHILDREN WERE YOUNG. ONE SON WAS KILLED IN A POGROM IN 1917.

JAKE WAS MUSICALLY VERY TALENTED. HE GREW UP TO HAVE SIX CHILDREN, SEVERAL OF THEM MUSICIANS IN NEW YORK AND BALTIMORE.

ORPHANED MIRIAM WAS RAISED BY A COUSIN IN KREMENETZ, 20 MILES FROM KOLODNA. THERE SHE MET MENACHEM-MENDEL PLOTKA.

(A MOTHER IS NOT SHE WHO BROUGHT A CHILD INTO THE WORLD, BUT SHE WHO MADE A PERSON OF THEM.)

MIRIAM PEARLMUTTER PLOTKA CF. MARIAM PRESS

MENACHEM-MENDEL & MIRIAM PLOTKA

(1871-1934) (1872-1944)

MARRIED IN KOLUDNA, 1888

EIGHT CHILDREN BORN IN EUROPE 1889-1908

ISADORE (1889-1928), DACHE (1891- ?), CELIA (1893),

MORRIS (1895-1978), PHILLIP (1897-1939?), ABRAHAM (1903),

RACHEL (1906), HARRY (1908-17)

MOVED THEIR FAMILY GRADUALLY TO ALABAMA (1908-21, AND LIVED WITH THEM THERE UNTIL THEIR DEATHS.

IN POLAND, SCHOOL COST 3 RUBLES PER MONTH PER STUDENT, MUCH MORE THAN MOST JEWS COULD AFFORD, AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION WAS FORBIDDEN. MENACHEM-MENDEL RENTED A 2-STORY HOUSE AT 30 RUBLES A YEAR AND LIVED WITH HIS FAMILY DOWNSTAIRS. PRIVATELY, SEVERAL JEWISH BUSINESSMEN PAID HIM 15 RUBLES A YEAR FOR THE USE OF THE UPSTAIRS ROOMS, WHERE AN INSTRUCTOR TAUGHT HEBREW AND THE ETHICS OF THE FATHERS TO CHILDREN. MENACHEM-MENDEL WAS MUCH POORER THAN THE BUSINESSMEN, AND COULD NOT AFFORD TO PAY FOR HIS CHILDREN TO JOIN THE CLASS. SO DESPITE THE ETHIC THAT EACH COMMUNITY IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE EDUCATION OF EVERY SINGLE JEWISH CHILD LIVING THERE, ISADORE, MORRIS, AND PHILLIP PLOTKA WERE NOT ALLOWED EVEN TO LISTEN IN ON THE CLASS TAUGHT IN THEIR OWN HOUSE.

CELIA (TZIPPI) REMEMBERS: THE FUN OF 15-YEAR-OLDS DANCING IN THE VILLAGE.

"I LIKED SO MUCH TO SEE CHILDREN DANCING. WHAT OTHER ENJOYMENT MATCHES IT? DANCING, SINGING, WONDERFUL! TO MIX AND HAVE A GOOD TIME. HAPPINESS! OF COURSE, AT WEDDINGS, THE WHOLE FAMILY DANCES, EVEN LITTLE CHILDREN."

AS TOLD BY MORRIS PLOTKA:

I LIVED IN KOLUDNA, BORN THERE IN 1895. AS IF IN A DREAM, I REMEMBER

MY GRANDPA SHLOMO PLOTKA. HE HAD LONG WHISKERS, DOWN TO HIS WAIST. I THINK HE WAS A TAILOR.

MY FATHER MENACHEM-MENDEL DID MANY THINGS IN KOLUDNA. TAILOR. WE WOULD BUY THE CROP OF AN APPLE ORCHARD IN BLOSSOM, WATCH THE TREES ALL SUMMER SO BIRDS DON'T KNOCK OFF THE APPLES. I WAS ALREADY A WATCHMAN AT AGE 7. OF COURSE JEWS WEREN'T ALLOWED TO OWN AN ORCHARD, BUT THE APPLES WERE OURS, WE PICKED, CANNED, SAUCED, AND SOLD THEM. IN THE WINTER A BIG APPLE WOULD SELL FOR ONE KOPEK.

WE LIVED IN POLAND UNDER RUSSIA, AN AREA WE CALLED THE UKRAINE. THE GOYEM THERE USED WHITE LINEN CLOTH FOR DIAPERS, DRESSES, SHIRTS. MY BROTHERS AND I SOMETIMES WORKED AT PROCESSING THE LINEN PLANT. IT IS A GRASSY STALK WHICH IS SOAKED, BENT, PEELED, AND THE WHITE FIBRES REMOVED AND CLEANED.

I DIDN'T GO TO SCHOOL, BECAUSE IT COST THREE RUBLES PER MONTH FOR EACH STUDENT. WE COULDN'T AFFORD THREE KOPECKS. I WOULD WATCH A GOY FRIEND STUDY, AND SO I LEARNED TO WRITE POLISH AND RUSSIAN.

SOMEHOW THE THINGS LEARNED YOUNG ARE NEVER FORGOTTEN. TODAY AT 75, I WROTE DOWN FROM MEMORY A POEM I LEARNED WHEN I WAS 8.

I NEVER SAW THE INSIDE OF A SCHOOL UNTIL HERE IN AMERICA; WHEN FANNIE WAS THREE-AND-A-HALF, I ENTERED HER IN SCHOOL. SHE WOULD HAVE THE EDUCATION THAT I WAS DENIED.

CLOSE OF CHAPTER I

MENACHEM-MENDEL SUPPORTED HIS FAMILY IN A VARIETY OF WAYS. OFTEN HE WOULD "BUY" A YEAR'S CROP OF APPLES IN AN ORCHARD IN THE SPRING WHEN THEY WERE JUST BLOSSIMING FLOWERS. HIS SONS WOULD TEND THE TREES AND GUARD THE FRUIT AS IT RIPENED, CHASING AWAY BIRDS AND THIEVES. FINALLY THEY WOULD PICK THE APPLES, SELL, STORE, OR PROCESS THEM INTO APPLE BUTTER

APPLESAUCE, ETC. DURING THE WINTER ONE BIG APPLE WOULD SELL FOR A KOPEK; IN SEASON, ONE MAN COULD BARELY CARRY 5 KOPEKS WORTH OF FRUIT. OF COURSE, NO JEW COULD OWN THE LAND OF THE ORCHARD.

MORRIS PLOTKA RECOUNTED TO US: RUNNING AROUND HIS FATHER'S HOUSE AT AGE 5 WITH HIS SISTER CELIA (TZIPPI); BEING A WATCHMAN FOR THE APPLES; MAKING LINEN BY HAND FROM THE RAW PLANT, AND SELLING WHITE LINEN CLOTH TO THE GOYIM; BEING REFUSED ENTRANCE TO THE JEWISH ETHICS CLASS IN HIS HOME.

CELIA (TZIPPI) RECALLS HER FATHER AS A VERY RELIGIOUS MAN, A LEADER IN THE JEWISH COMMUNITY, AND ALWAYS HEALTHY. HE EXEMPLIFIED THE SAYING THAT "A PERSON WITH A BELIEF IN GOD IS LIKE HE HAS AN ANGEL AROUND HIM." MENACHEM-MENDEL PLOTKA WANTED TO OWN A FARM AND WORK IT WITH HIS CHILDREN. AMERICA WAS THE LAND OF OPPORTUNITY. HE WOULD BRING HIS FAMILY THERE TO START A NEW LIFE.

CHAPTER II: FROM POLAND TO AMERICA, 1905-1921

OUR EUROPEAN FAMILIES APPARENTLY SPENT ALL THEIR LIVES IN A SMALL REGION (PERHAPS 50 MILES DIAMETER) IN RUSSIAN POLAND: KOLODNA, VISHNEVETZ LUTSK, KREMENETZ. IN SPITE OF POVERTY AND OPPRESSION, THEIR FIRM JEWISH IDENTITY WAS KEPT THROUGH TRADITIONAL RITUAL.

WHY DID ISADORE PRESS DECIDE TO LEAVE POLAND FOR AMERICA? WHY DID HIS BROTHER-IN-LAW MENACHEM-MENDEL PLOTKA AND OTHER RELATIVES JOIN THEM? FROM SOME WHO FOLLOWED, WE KNOW AT LEAST WHAT HE DID, AND PERHAPS WHY.

ISADORE PRESS WAS DRAFTED INTO THE RUSSIAN ARMY IN 1905, AND TAKEN AWAY FROM HIS FAMILY. ONE DAY HE WAS SENT BY AN OFFICER TO MAIL A LETTER, AND NEVER RETURNED. HE REJOINED HIS WIFE IN KOLUDNA, AND TOGETHER THEY CROSSED THE BORDER INTO AUSTRIA. ISADORE WORKED AS A TAILOR IN LEMBERG, AUSTRIA; RACHEL WAS BORN THERE IN 1905.

BY 1907 THEY HAD ENOUGH MONEY TO TRAVEL TO AMERICA. REBECCA, THINKING SHE WOULD NEVER SEE HER PARENTS AGAIN, CROSSED THE BORDER BACK TO POLAND, WITH RACHEL. SHE PROUDLY SHOWED THEM HER BEAUTIFUL DAUGHTER.

ABE PLOTKA WAS THEN 4, AND REMEMBERS SEEING HIS COUSIN THEN, A PRETTY 2-YEAR-OLD IN A BLUE DRESS AND WHITE COLLAR.

THAT NIGHT, REBECCA SAID GOODBYE TO HER FAMILY, AND WITH RACHEL, AGAIN CROSSED THE BORDER INTO AUSTRIA.

ISADORE, REBECCA, AND RACHEL WENT BY TRAIN TO VIENNA AND HOLLAND, AND BY BOAT TO NEW YORK IN 1907.

THEY SENT FOR BROTHERS AND NEPHEWS, WHO CAME TO NEW YORK. DURING THE WORLD WAR, THE AUSTRIANS AND RUSSIANS FOUGHT BATTLES IN AND AROUND KOLUDNA. THE FAMILY LOST CONTACT UNTIL 1920.

ISADORE, AN EXCELLENT TAILOR, BECAME A FOREMAN IN A NEW YORK GARMENT COMPANY. HE SENT BOAT FARE FOR HIS BROTHERS, YSRUL AND SHAYE, AND GOT JOBS FOR THEM. HE BROUGHT OVER SEVERAL OTHER RELATIVES, PERHAPS COUSINS; IN FACT, TOO MANY NAMED PRESS, SO SOME HAD TO BE HIRED UNDER ASSUMED NAMES, SUCH AS GARFINKLE.

TO NEW YORK:

ISADORE, REBECCA, RACHEL PRESS 1907

YSRUL, SHAYE PRESS

MENACHEM-MENDEL PLOTKA 1908 LEAVING WIFE AND CHILDREN AGES 1,
3, 5, 13

ISADORE PLOTKA 1910

THE 1910S IN NEW YORK WAS A TIME OF LABOR UNIONS, STRIKES AND SWEATSHOP FIRES.

THERE WAS FRICTION BETWEEN ISADORE (WHO, A FOREMAN, HAD TO CROSS PICKET LINES), AND HIS YOUNGER RELATIVES, UNION ENTHUSIASTS.

MENACHEM-MENDEL WANTED TO OWN SOME LAND AND BEGIN FARMING, AND EARNING MONEY SO HE COULD SEND FOR HIS WIFE AND CHILDREN WHO WERE STILL IN KOLUDNA.

ABOUT 1913 A "COLONY" OF 10 JEWISH FAMILIES WAS ORGANIZED TO BUY LAND IN BAY MINETTE, ALABAMA, AND FARM THERE. (SO MANY JEWS WERE MIGRATING TO NEW YORK AND WOULDN'T GO ALONE, AWAY FROM A MINION AND A SHOICHET.) ISADORE, REBECCA, RACHEL, JOE, HARRY, AND NEWBORN DAVE, WENT. SO DID MENACHEM-MENDEL AND HIS SON.

MORRIS PLOTKA JOINED THEM THERE IN 1914. THE WORLD WAR BEGAN. NOT UNTIL 1921 WOULD MIRIAM, CELIA (TZIPPI), PHIL, RAE AND ABE BE ABLE TO JOIN THEM.

SOME OF THE RELATIVES LEAVING POLAND HAD PASSPORTS; OTHERS, DRAFT-AGE

YOUNG MEN, HAD TO ESCAPE ACROSS THE AUSTRIAN BORDER, AS MORRIS PLOTKA DESCRIBES:

ESCAPE: PARAPHRASING THE VERBAL ACCOUNT OF MORRIS PLOTKA.

I LIVED IN KOLUDNA WITH MY MOTHER, BROTHERS, AND SISTERS. THE RUSSIAN ARMY WOULD DRAFT ME SOON, AND IN THOSE DAYS A MAN MIGHT BE KEPT IN IT THE REST OF HIS LIFE. INSTEAD I WOULD JOIN MY RELATIVES IN AMERICA. THE BORDER TO AUSTRIA WAS THREE MILES FROM TOWN. I PAID SOMEONE TO SHOW THE ESCAPE ROUTE. 'YOU SEE A LIGHT IN THAT CABIN ON THE OTHER SIDE. GO DIRECTLY TO IT.'

I BRIBED ONE OF THE RUSSIAN BORDER GUARDS A FEW RUBLES TO LOOK THE OTHER WAY. IT WAS JANUARY 1914. I RAN TOWARDS THAT LIGHT, THROUGH THE SNOW. SUDDENLY I FELL, INTO A DITCH SO DEEP, I COULDN'T REACH THE TOP. IT WAS VERY COLD. I HAD TO BUILD STEPS OF SNOW, AND MANAGED AT LAST TO CRAWL OUT AND RUN INTO AUSTRIA.

ALL I HAD WAS MY TICKET. THE TRAIN STATION WAS GIGANTIC; I HAD NEVER BEEN IN SUCH A PLACE BEFORE. I WAS NAIVE. I GOT ON THE RIGHT TRAIN, TO HOLLAND. A BOY MY AGE, SEEING I WAS FROM A VILLAGE, SAT BESIDE ME AND LOOKED AT MY TICKET. HE TWISTED MINE WITH HIS, AND GAVE ME BACK THE WRONG ONE; I WOULD HAVE TO GET OFF AT THE NEXT STOP, AND BE STRANDED, WITH NO PASSPORT, NO TICKET, NO MONEY. LUCKILY, I LOOKED UP AT AN AUSTRIAN SOLDIER WHO STOOD IN THE TRAIN CAR, AS IF I WOULD REPORT THE BOY TO HIM. IT WAS A BIG SOLDIER, WITH A SPIKED HELMET. THE BOY GOT SCARED AND GAVE MY TICKET BACK TO ME. HE GOT OFF AT THE NEXT STOP; I ARRIVED IN HOLLAND AND TOOK THE BOAT TO AMERICA.

ALABAMA:

THE COLONY OF 10 JEWISH FAMILIES MOVED TO A COLLEGE BUILDING ON HAND

AVENUE, 6 MILES NORTH OF BAY MINETTE, ALABAMA. THEY CLEARED LAND AND FARMED, BUT LOST MONEY, DUE TO THE ILL WILL OF THE BUSINESS MIDDLEMEN. IN 1914 THE PRESSES MOVED INTO A HOUSE ON THE 25-ACRE LOT THEY OWNED. (SEE SKETCH)

BY 1915 MOST OF THE FAMILIES HAD FAILED AND RETURNED TO NEW YORK. THE EXCEPTIONS WERE ISADORE PRESS, WHOSE TAILOR SHOP WAS ACROSS THE STREET FROM THE COUNTY COURTHOUSE; MR. TOBIN, WHO SOLD SHOES AND TRADED IN (BEAVER) FURS; AND THE PLOTKAS WHO MOVED TO A 150-ACRE DAIRY FARM IN MOBILE, 30 MILES AWAY.

MORRIS PLOTKA

UNCLE AND TANTE PRESS (ISADORE AND REBECCA) WENT TO AMERICA IN 1907. THEY SENT FOR MY FATHER (REBECCA'S BROTHER, MENACHEM-MENDEL) IN 1908. THEY SENT FOR MY BROTHER ISADORE IN 1910, AND FOR ME IN 1914, WHEN I WAS ALMOST OLD ENOUGH FOR THE ARMY.

I WAS GLAD TO COME TO AMERICA. IT MEANT GREAT OPPORTUNITIES. IN NEW YORK MY DAD READ AN ADVERTISEMENT OF A YIDDISHE COLONY BEING FORMED IN ALABAMA. HE COULD ACTUALLY OWN THE LAND HE FARMED, (COULDN'T IN RUSSIA). I CAME DIRECTLY TO BAY MINETTE, WHERE THE COLONY OF 10 JEWISH FAMILIES LIVED IN AN OLD COLLEGE BUILDING. WE JOKED THAT "WE WENT TO COLLEGE". WE WORKED HARD. MY BROTHER AND I WOULD CHOP ALL NIGHT BY MOONLIGHT, TWO CORDS OF WOOD, STOVE-SIZE. WE HAD TO FELL THE TREES OURSELVES, AND THIS CLEARED LAND FOR FARMING TOO. A CORD IS 16' LONG AND 4' HIGH, AND WE EARNED \$1.50 PER CORD. WHEN THE COLONY GREW CUCUMBERS, THE VINES WOULD GROW SEVERAL FEET OFF THE GROUND. WE PACKED ONLY THE BEST ONES, PERFECTLY STRAIGHT AND LONG; ANY THAT HAD WHITE SPOTS FROM TOUCHING THE GROUND, WE THREW TO THE EDGE OF THE FIELD; IT MADE A KIND OF FENCE. WE PACKED THE CUCUMBERS AND TOOK THEM TO THE BAY MINETTE TRAIN STATION WHERE THEY

WERE SENT TO CHICAGO. THE LOCAL BANKERS WORKED THE FINANCES, AND SAID THE PRICE WAS TOO LOW; THERE WAS NO PROFIT, WE OWED THEM MONEY FOR THE SHIPPING CHARGES! THERE WAS NO PROFIT IN THE FARMING.

FAMILIES STARTED MOVING BACK TO NEW YORK. UNCLE PRESS BOUGHT 25 ACRES AND MOVED HIS FAMILY CLOSER TO TOWN. HE WORKED AS A TAILOR IN BAY MINETTE, AND REBECCA MANAGED THE FARM. WHEN THE "COLLEGE" CLOSED UP, DAD AND MY BROTHER AND I BUILT A SHACK ON PART OF UNCLE'S LAND, AND WE WORKED WITH THEM.

DURING THE WORLD WAR WE LOST CONTACT WITH THE REST OF THE FAMILY IN EUROPE. IT WASN'T UNTIL 1921 THAT MY MOTHER AND CELIA (TZIPPI), PHIL, ABE AND RAE JOINED US IN AMERICA.

AS TOLD BY CELIA AND ABE

DURING THE YEARS OF SEPARATION, FROM 1908, WHEN MENACHEM-MENDEL PLOTKA LEFT TO COME TO AMERICA, UNTIL 1921, WHEN MIRIAM PERLMUTTER PLOTKA AND THE YOUNGER CHILDREN CAME TO AMERICA, THE FAMILY LIVED AND WORKED, AND DID WHATEVER WAS NECESSARY FOR SURVIVAL.

ABE AND RAE WENT TO SCHOOL AND LEARNED RUSSIAN AND UKRAINIAN. WHEN THE FIRST WORLD WAR BROKE OUT, THEY HAD TO LEARN POLISH BECAUSE POLAND WAS FORMED AGAIN.

THE WORLD WAR

IN 1914 THE RUSSIAN BORDER GUARDS WEST OF KOLODNA WITHDREW TO THE EAST. AN AUSTRIAN PATROL CAME THROUGH KOLODNA; AN OFFICER ON HORSEBACK WARNED THAT THERE WOULD BE BATTLES, BUT THE CIVILIANS WOULD NOT BE HURT. AFTER THEY LEFT, RUSSIAN REINFORCEMENTS RETURNED, AND SAID THE SAME. THE SOLDIERS TAUGHT THE VILLAGERS TO FALL ON THE GROUND WHEN SHOOTING STARTED, TO DUCK THE BULLETS.

CELIA PLOTKA REMEMBERS, AS A TEENAGER, VISITING AT A FRIEND'S HOUSE WHEN THE SHOOTING STARTED. SHE HAD TO BE WITH HER FAMILY, AND RAN HOME THROUGH THE FIGHTING. BULLETS WHIZZED ALL AROUND HER, BUT MIRACULOUSLY SHE WAS NEVER HIT.

THE FAMILY LOST CONTACT WITH THE RELATIVES IN AMERICA. RUSSIANS AND AUSTRIANS CROSSED AND RECROSSED THE BORDER AREA DURING THE WAR, AND THE CIVILIANS WERE NOT MUCH INVOLVED. ONCE KOLODNA WAS EVACUATED IN ANTICIPATION OF A LARGE BATTLE. MIRIAM PLOTKA AND HER CHILDREN WALKED ALL THE WAY TO VISHNEVETZ, WITH ABE CARRYING A SACK OF BREAD ON HIS BACK. THEY STAYED WITH THE PRESS FAMILY. WHILE THEY WERE GONE, EVERYTHING THEY HAD WAS STOLEN.

CELIA HELPED SUPPORT THE FAMILY BY SEWING, AND ABE WORKED AT A MILL WHERE THEY GROUND FLOUR (HE WAS 16 YEARS OLD). EVERYTHING WAS MEASURED IN PAYMENT OF ANY WORK DONE BY PECKS, BUSHELS OR SACKS OF GRAIN OR SOME OTHER PRODUCE, AND THIS WAS FOR THE MOST PART HOW HE WAS PAID. ABE HAD PREVIOUSLY WORKED FOR A RICH MAN HARVESTING GRAIN AT THE AGE OF 15, USING A SICKLE. HE WAS PAID 15¢ A DAY.

ABE SAID PHILLIP HAD SOME KIND OF LITTLE STORE AT THAT TIME, BUT DOES NOT REMEMBER JUST WHAT KIND OF STORE, BUT HE HELPED SUPPORT THE FAMILY ALSO.

ABE AND RAE WENT TO A WELL TO GET WATER IN A BUCKET AND THE GROUND WOULD BE SO SLIPPERY, THEY WOULD FALL DOWN WITH THE WATER AND HAVE TO GO ALL THE WAY BACK AND GET ANOTHER BUCKET, UNTIL THEY SUCCEEDED IN GETTING ONE HOME. CLOTHES WERE WASHED IN THE RIVER AND BEATEN TO GET THE DIRT OUT. WHEN THEY WERE HUNG UP TO DRY, IT WAS SO COLD, THEY FROZE AND LOOKED LIKE SCARE CROWS.

IT WAS VERY COLD DURING THE WINTER AND SNOWED ALL THE TIME, MAKING PATTERNS ON THE WINDOWS. THE WIND BLEW THE SNOW THROUGH THE CRACKS IN THE HOUSE.

IN 1917, MIRIAM'S BROTHER DIED IN AN ANTI-JEWISH POGROM. SHE HID HER FAMILY FROM THE RUSSIANS IN A DAMP CELLAR, AND THE YOUNGEST SON, HARRY, (9 YEARS OLD?) DIED OF PNEUMONIA.

IN 1920 THEY HAD TICKETS TO AMERICA, BUT WERE STOPPED BY SMALLPOX QUARANTINE. WHEN MIRIAM WAS TO LEAVE, THE AUTHORITIES WANTED TO KEEP ABE AND PHILLIP BECAUSE THEY HAD BECOME OF AGE FOR THE ARMY, SO PHIL HAD TO BRIBE SOMEONE TO LET THEM GO. HOWEVER, THEY DID NOT HAVE TO SNEAK ACROSS THE BORDER LIKE MORRIS BECAUSE THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS HAD ALLOWED POLAND TO BE FORMED AGAIN (1917 RUSSIAN REVOLUTION).

AT THE TIME THE POLISH RETURNED TO KOLODNA, ABE AND PHIL HAD GOTTEN SOME OF THE RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA BOOKS, WHICH THE POLISH FOUND. THEY PUT PHIL IN JAIL.

FINALLY IN 1921 THEY TOOK A TRAIN TO WARSAW FROM KOLODNA (KOLODNA WAS IN THE STATE OF WALINSKY GUBERNIA IN POLAND). FROM WARSAW THEY TOOK A TRAIN TO BELGIUM AND BOARDED A SHIP NAMED CROWLAND. IT TOOK TWO WEEKS, AND EVERYBODY GOT SICK ON THE BOAT. MIRIAM PLOTKA, CELIA, PHIL, ABE AND RAE ARRIVED AT ELLIS ISLAND AND TOOK A TRAIN TO MOBILE AND WERE REUNITED WITH MENACHEM-MENDEL AND HIS SONS IN ALABAMA. (MENACHEM-MENDEL HAD TO DEPOSIT \$200 FOR EACH MEMBER OF THE FAMILY TO GUARANTEE THEIR SUPPORT WHEN THEY WERE TO COME TO THIS COUNTRY).

CELIA (TSIPPI) TELLS A STORY ABOUT A YOUNG MAN WHO CAME TO THEIR DOOR IN KOLUDNA, SAYING HIS SISTER WAS MARRIED TO HER BROTHER IN AMERICA. THE FAMILY DID NOT BELIEVE HIM. THEY THOUGHT IT WAS A HOAX OF SOME KIND FOR SOME ULTERIOR MOTIVE, AND TOLD HIM TO GO AWAY. IN THE MEANTIME, MORRIS PLOTKA DID MARRY A GIRL NAMED ZELDA BENDER (LATER CALLED JENNY) WHO CAME FROM THE CITY OF LEXONITZ, POLAND, WHICH IS NOT TOO FAR AWAY FROM KOLODNA. THE BOY COULD HAVE BEEN HER BROTHER. AN UNCLE WHOSE LAST NAME WAS MILLMAN, WHO LIVED IN NEW YORK, BROUGHT HER OVER TO THIS COUNTRY. THE MARRIAGE WAS ARRANGED BY TANTE PRESS AND MENACHEM-MENDEL, AS TANTE THOUGHT IT WAS TIME THAT MORRIS GET MARRIED. A PICTURE OF JENNY WAS SENT DOWN FOR HIM TO SEE. (IT IS THE PICTURE MOLLYE PLOTKA SMOLKIN HAD REPRODUCED IN COLOR AND WHICH ALL THE CHILDREN AND GRANDCHILDREN HAVE TODAY.)