

The Kotlowitz Story

This story was told in Yiddish by Gussie (Gittle) Kotlowitz Pomerantz and translated into English by her niece, Pauline Delson.

"The story (as far as my memory allows) starts about the early 1850's in a small town, (it was a town, not a village because it boasted a synagogue and a yeshiva) called Orlovo, on the River Nemen, a suburb of Vilna but far enough away so that I never go there In [in] Russia.

The town was separated by a stream that fed the Nemen, and both sides of the stream were inhabited by Jews. The peasants, goyim, lived at the edges of the town and were given land by the Russian government. Only the Jews were not allowed to own any land. So the Jews were the artisans, the shoemakers, the dressmakers, the tailors, the toolmakers, the blacksmiths etc. and they serviced the peasants. There were never any pogroms in our town as far as my memory serves, although we heard of terrible ones happening in other places. There was one incident when I was about six years old. Our neighbor had dealings with a peasant with a horse. The peasant claimed it was lame and came to demand restitution. The neighbor evidently refused, and he was attacked. My father came to help him and received a hole in his head for his efforts.

Social life in Orlovo stemmed from the shul or young people gathered in the woods near the river in the summer, or on the frozen stream where we slid on the ice with our shoes in the winter.

There lived in this town a man, Isaac and his wife Chaika. They had children, I don't know how many, one was Nachum Yudel and a daughter Tsippie Riva. The young daughter was pretty, quiet and bright. However, between her first and second year she had an accident in which she lost and [an] eye. The socket was never fitted for a false eye and she spent her entire life with the lid closed. The parents felt that she would never be accepted as a bride to a deserving person.

Isaac was a shuster (shoemaker) and his wife Chaika was called the shusterine (wife of the shoemaker.)

During "shetetle" (village) life it was common practice for boys and young men from the surrounding towns to come to study in the yeshiva. It was a mitzva (commandment and a good deed) to invite these young men to eat one day of the week with a family in the town. This practice was called "Essen Taig". And so it came to pass that this young, studious man came to the home of the shoemaker for his weekly meal. He was shy and very aware of his inferior position in [in] these homes.

Isaac told him that if he married Tsippie Riva, he would never have to go to strange homes to eat. As a dowry he would feed him, build him a house and he would be comfortable. This young man was Moishe (called the Pollack) because he came from a town in Poland. Moishe was very amenable [amenable] to the idea.

The house that Isaac built was nearby. It was one large room with a high ceiling, with a bed between two windows heaped high with pillows facing a couch that opened to sleep two (the forerunner of the Castro Convertible.) There was a table and benches. There was another room that was like a root cellar. Even butter would not melt there....and all the food was kept there.

There was a well in the town from where all the drinking was brought. All bathing and washing of clothes was done in the Nemen River. In the winter you just washed. In the warm weather you bathed. There was an out house...but it was just a ditch where you squatted. There was no toilet.

Moishe continued his studies and became a rabbi...that is a teacher of young people...from the ABC to "Gemorrah". He usually had about eight pupils who came to his house and they used the table and benches as a school house. His living was poor and was supplemented by his wife Tsippie Riva who sold her knitted and crocheted items. As the children grew the boys studied and the older girls were sent as maids to do housework fo [for] others to supplement the income.

Tsippie Riva and Moishe had eleven children. Some died. The following are ones I can tell you about:

First there was Velvel whom they called Wolf. [He] he grew and married Rachel. (They had a first child Hannah who was born at the same time as Tsippie and Moishe had a daughter Gittle.) At this time the Russian government was gathering all available young men for the army - married or not. Wolf started to talk about emigrating to America. He had a son Isaac and another son Mitchell shortly after. Second child was Beryl. Beryl married a girl from the neighboring town of Lida and went there to live. He was a brush maker. He had no children and thought that the talk of America was foolishness. He was very satisfied with this existence and lived there until Hitler killed him and his wife. Third child was Chaika (Ida). Moishe had a brother who was a Rabbi in Whitechapel London. He asked that Chaika be sent to him. There was a young Russian man who had escaped from the army and was living in Whitechapel and he thought it would be a good match. So Chaika was shipped off to London where she met and married Abe Kowalsky (a carpenter). They lived in London for several years and then migrated and settled in Montreal Canada. They had five children; Chana Leya (Annette), Velvel (Willie), Raisel (Rose), Tsippie, and Motel (Max). [See note below]

Fourth child was a girl called Hinde Sura (Sarah), she was tall and lovely. She left Orlovo and went to Canada where she met and married. She came to New York with her husband . She became pregnant and hemorrhaged in childbirth. Both she and her son were buried together. Fifth child was a girl Chana Beyla (Anna Belle) she was a pleasant youngster. I can't recall much except that where Hinde was tall and fair, Chana was short and olive skinned with light eyes. Chana Beyla couldn't wait to leave Orlovo...she hated being a "maid"...she hated the town. When Wolf sent money for passage in 1908 she came to live with him. I don't know her ship. She lived with him a short while. She got a job in a shirt waist factory and moved to more congenial quarters. Chana Beyla had an aunt in New York, her father's sister Chernia (Jennie). Tante Chernia married the brother of Nathan's father, and it was at this wedding that Chana Beyla met Nathan. They courted (mostly they met at the Tante Chernia's house) and decided to marry. Sixth child (to live) was Julius. Julius came to America. He was taken into the U.S. army and became Americanized immediately. He met Ettie and fell in love and married her after the war.

They had two children, Tsippie and Alvin. Seventh child was Gittle (Gussie) Eight child was Schmulke (Sam)

Wolf had been sending passage money for his wife and four children, but Rachel was reluctant to leave because the youngest son, Shimon, had trachoma, an inflammation of the eyes, and was not accepted as a candidate for America. Moishe insisted that she leave this child with him and his wife and children and join her husband in New York. So she left Orlovo the same time as Julius, with their three children, Hannah, Isaac, and Mitchel. Shimon was left behind.

Tsippie Riva died at age 52 of cancer and Gittle was left to care for Moishe, the youngest brother, Schmulka and Shimon.

Schmulka and Shimon were exactly the same age and were good friends. After Tsippie died, Moishe wanted to go to America, and all the children in America saved the passage money for the remaining ones...but the First World War broke out and all communications were cut off. Things were bad in Orlovo. They were desperately hungry. The Germans would allow no schooling but in the German schools. Gittle was a rebel. She refused to learn German but the boys did learn. Moishe taught Gittle to read and write as he did with all his girls. After much anguish, the war was over and they received money from America to leave.

They (all four) went to Warsaw to get the necessary papers. Schmulka got his papers and two weeks later, with much prodding from Moishe, who said "to save a life is more important than to commit a little crime" got papers for Shimon with Shimon's name. Then they left for Danzig where the ships came in. They were all put into barracks to await the arrival of a ship.

One ship came. Shimon was not accepted so they all went back to the barracks. When the second ship rejected Shimon, Gittle insisted that Moishe and Schmulka sail. (That parting was so painful. Just recalling it after so many years brought a lump to Gittles throat and tears to her eyes as she told this story.)

Shimon was 17 years old and Gittle was 18. He was desolate. He wanted to commit suicide, but Gittle said that they would find a way. She telegraphed Wolf for more money for first class travel. She went to HIAS which was the Hebrew Immigration Service and pleaded for the name of the doctor who would be examining on the next ship, the "Antigonica." She went on a hunger strike and sit down strike at the HIAS office and finally the clerk gave her this information. The doctor was vacationing in a town hours away from Danzig by train.

Gittle and Shimon travelled to this doctor's home. Shimon spoke a fluent German. After searching, they finally found the doctor. He was a Jewish doctor. He tried to talk Gittle into leaving for America and leaving Shimon. With his command of the language, the doctor said, he could find him a good job and he would have a good life in Germany.

Gittle was adamant...and they devised a scheme. When Shimon stepped up in line for his exam the doctor would drop his papers on the floor. Shimon would pick them up and move on. For the next two weeks Gittle used drops that the doctor prescribed and kept him out of the sunlight.. and so they got on the ship. The next problem was being accepted on Ellis Island by the examining doctors. Luckily, on the last day out, a man died on the ship (causes unknown) and

the entire ship was quarantined for ten days on a small island (Hoffman Island) without an examining team. And so now the entire family was in America.

Gittle married Irving and had two children, Tsippie and Leonard.

Schmulka married an American girl! named Sarah and had two children, Lila and Melvin. His wife died after five years of marriage from breast cancer. He married her widowed sister Anna who had one child, Lillian. Schmulke died in his 56th year of a heart attack.

Julius died in his [~~late 50's~~, handwritten 69th year] of [~~cancer~~ crossed out, handwritten uremic poisoning].

Anna died in her 75th year of a stroke.

Schmulka died in his early 50s of a heart attack.

Wolf died in his mid 70s, I think of diabetes.

Ida, who was a diabetic, died at age 76 from choking.

Hinde died in childbirth in her late 20s.

NOTE: It is documented that Chaika (Ida) aka Fanny Kotlovich and Abey Kowalsky were married on 09 June 1908 at Beth Hamedrash Hagadel synagogue in Leeds, England. It is also documented that their first child Annette (Chana Leya) was born in Leeds, England on 27 June 1909.