

A Human Endurance

A True Life Story Endured and Written by
Harry Gershman

The Life in Russia

Our ship, La Savoy, owned by Red Star Line, arrived in Ellis Island. On May 2, 1922, we sailed from the port of Le Havre France. We didn't mind the stormy ocean, we knew that finally we were going to a free country called America, blessed by God with freedom where everyone is treated like a human being, regardless of religion, creed, or color. We were examined when we came to New York, and were told that we could go to any place we had to. We inquired how to get to Hartford, Connecticut, where our dear brother lived. Looking back now, I remember his insistence when he was sixteen years old, he wanted to go to America. He pleaded with our parents who objected strongly, and our dear mother cried bitterly that she would never see him again. Who could foresee then, that he would be the one who would save our lives from Russian tyranny...now we are here, we never believed this a reality. I was twenty-two years old, my dear wife was younger, we were so young and we endured so much. But we are very happy now. A thought came to my mind - in the years ahead, if I am able, I would like to write my autobiography, but now I have more important things on my mind. Here we are in a strange country not knowing the language, and wondering how I would get a job to support us. While my thoughts were quite distant, we were told that our train to Hartford was leaving. We arrived in Hartford where we were met by my dear brother. Like children excited with new toys, so were we when we came into his house which he prepared for us. The phonograph was playing. We could not understand the words, but it was music to our ears. And the bright electric lights, hot and cold water, the food, good and plenty, every minor thing looked so big in our eyes. It was about 3:00 A.M. when we went to bed yet I could not sleep. The horrible nightmare of what we went through, was still on my mind. It was about 6:00 A.M. when I looked out the window, and saw something which put me at ease. A man leaving bread at the door, and another man leaving milk, people going to work, this was a big relief on my mind. Time goes fast...it is fifty-three years hence, I worked hard, so did my dear wife. Thank God we've raised nice children, whom we are proud of. We have nice grandchildren as well as a great grand-daughter. Now I shall try to fulfill my ambition to write our life story which I shall call The Human Endurance.

I was born in Ukraine Russia, a small city called Piatigora, one hundred and fifty kilometers from the capital, Kiev. The Ukrainian people lived outside the city, where they had their fields which produced food for

everyone. The Ukraine was the biggest supplier of food for Russia. In some places they had small schools, but very few children attended, because the Tzarist government was not interested in sending their children to school, rather they sent them to the fields to take care of the cows and horses. The Tzarist government liked the people to be ignorant. I remember at the age of six I was sent to school and was taught to believe in God and to obey my parents, and to love everyone, regardless of his religion or nationality. I was also taught to pray each day. At the age of ten, I had a Russian private teacher, in which to learn Russian and Russian history. I was a good student and was always praised by my teacher for my good work well done. I used to play a great deal, in the summertime - swimming in the lake, and in the winter, sled riding. Winter was very cold. When evening came, I would sit near the stove with a small kerosene lamp and do my homework, and then go to bed. It seemed my lessons stuck in my heard as I remember every word I learned. Life was rather quiet except once in a while when a drunkard might throw a stone into someone's window. Once a week we had a bazaar, and all the peasants from the surrounding towns would come. Each one had something to sell or to buy. They would park their horses and wagons so close to each other, that it was almost impossible to get by. Once in a while one would get bitten by a horse. No one would pay attention to such a minor thing. Buying and selling was done by bargaining and clapping hands with one another. When it happened to be a tough customer, his palm got a good beating before the deal was concluded. Afterwards the buyer and the seller, and their friends bought a few quarts of vodka, and a large dish of food, set it down in the middle of the street. They ate their meal all from the same dish, and drank the vodka from the same bottle. When the day was over and all the peasants left the city, everything was quiet again.

Everyone was busy with his business or profession, trying to make a living for his family. There were eight in my family; my parents, five brothers, and one sister. My oldest brother, Benjamin, tried but was refused admittance to America because of a weak heart. When he returned home he died of appendicitis (or bitter disappointment, as he was very well educated and knew there was no future for him in Russia). My father was in the wholesale grocery business. He bought most of his merchandise from Bela Tzerkow, a city about 60 kilometers from our town and it was a day's journey. We also distributed merchandise from the big cities, such as Odessa and Kiev. My other brother Morris helped my father in the business. My father always provided enough for his family. When I reached 15 years of age, I, too, helped out in the business. I didn't know about big cities and was happy with my young life, not knowing what the future would bring.

It was in the month of July, 1914, the sun was brightly shining, children were playing in the street, their mothers busy with housework. All of a sudden everyone was excited. Women began to cry and the children seeing their mothers crying, also started to cry. A news bulletin had been hung at city hall (Walost) that Russia is at war with Germany and all men from 15 years of age down, who were soldiers before, were supposed to register at the state capitol. The capitol was 60 kilometers from our town. Men were being called for examination and induction. Of course, in a small town like ours, where the men were the sole supporters of

their families, this was a tragedy. My brother Morris was the first in our family going off to war and it was very bad because my father was getting older and it was Morris who managed the business. However, the Tzarist government wasn't concerned with the welfare of the people. Many families were left with no support, hungry and broken, just praying for it to be over quickly. Very often there were bulletins that the war would soon be over and that the enemy would be defeated in no time. They began to draft the boys of 18, 19, and 20 years old. Now it was my turn to go. I was examined and inducted into the Army and within a week I went to the embarkation center for training. I will never forget the day when I said goodbye, especially to my dear mother, who cared so much for me - a young boy 18 years old. I didn't mind going to fight the enemy, but I knew I would be among my own enemies as well. One thing the Tzarist government always strived for and accomplished was to insert a note among different nationalities to keep the people divided with hate for each other. Well, it was a big day for us. We received clothes, boots and were ready to go. Our first stop was the city of Saransk, state of Penz. We were met on the field by a general and while we were standing at attention, he said, "Let the Jewish soldiers step out forward." We did and there were quite a few of us. He said, "Jews, I will bury you all alive." At that moment I thought we were already prisoners of war before we even had a chance to learn how to be soldiers, but I soon realized that this was our Jewish enemy for [whom] we had to fight. We were led to a big field for training. The most important thing in our training was to know the titles of the Tzar and his family and relatives. That was more important than for us to know how to be good fighters. If one of us wasn't good on the training field, we were forgiven, yet if one didn't know the title of any of the Tzar's family, he would have to stand for two hours with 36 pounds of stones on his back without moving. This was a cruel punishment. Most of the fellows who came with me from the Ukraine could not read or write. I was fortunate in this respect because I knew how to read and write so I marked everything down in a little book and studied it. Every day was the same as the one before. They made us run for miles and miles or else they made us get up in the middle of the night and run until we fell from exhaustion. Whoever didn't get ready to the count of five in full battle dress, was beaten with a stick or strap. Of course this was an impossible task. I thought of what to do when they woke us up this way. I would put on my coat without my pants or jacket and I was ready. When we were on training during the day and were given a few minutes rest, we were not allowed to drink the fresh water that was nearby, but only water from a dirty creek. There was so much mud that in order to reach the water, we had to stretch out on the ground and fill up our dirty hats. There were the hats of soldiers who had already completed their mission (death). We went on shooting practice and I was very good at that, but not with the bayonet. When you are brought up to love, it is difficult to kill. The bullet goes by itself but the bayonet was different because I had to do it myself. But this was war and there was no choice. We were in training for about 8 weeks and then we were ready to go - fight for a country where there is no freedom, a country which lives on aggression and hate.

Our first stop was in a large city, Rsew, State of Twersk. We were there for a week because some soldiers had fever. Finally we were on our way to the front. It was very cold and at each station was a large tea kettle where we got hot water for tea. That was the only thing the Russian soldiers had enough of. We embarked about five miles from the front. It was about midnight. The fighting was in full swing. The ground under us trembled and the sky was entirely lit up. We were in the trenches, full of freezing water, snow and blood. It is not possible to describe what one feels at that time. There can be no feeling for life. It seems that the mind is at a standstill. I have seen soldiers next to me killed. The young boy next to me was only 17 years old. There was a truce for a few hours so each side could clean up the dead and wounded. One day we were ordered to put on our gas masks. There was something wrong with my mask and I was gassed.

I awoke in a hospital in Moscow and was very sick. If it weren't for the Russian nurses, called sisters, who took such good care of me, I would have died. They were more like mothers. Even when they were off duty they would sit and comfort the patients. They took x-rays of my chest and the doctors told me I could go home for three months. I wondered why they would let me go home. I asked the doctor and he said that my lungs were so bad that I would only live for three more months. I was then a little over 19 years old. After what I had seen on the battlefield life didn't mean much anymore. After weeks in the hospital I was given my papers and started for home.

I took the train to the Ukraine, to Kiev. The train stopped at a station 30 miles from Kiev. I had to change trains. A group of drunk soldiers started to push me out for no reason at all. I begged them not to because I was very sick, but luckily I grabbed ahold of the door railing and held on with all my young life. I knew if I jumped I would surely die. For 30 miles I held on and prayed to God to save me. My hands felt numb. Finally, the train arrived at the station in Kiev. I could not believe that I am still alive. There I was in the beautiful city of Kiev. I recalled that a few years ago I went to see a doctor there, and I could not find a place to stay overnight, I had to get a special permit from the police. I also remember when they brought me from the front to Moscow hospital dying. I asked if my father could come. They told me it was not allowed because he was Jewish. After two weeks they sent me home. I didn't tell anyone what the doctor had said to me. I was sick, under our family doctor's care. Time went fast, the three months were up and I was feeling much better, trying to forget everything. I went back to the city of Rsew, when I arrived there I was placed in a hospital again, because my lungs were bothering me. They took some kind of round glasses steamed over a candle and put it on my chest - it seemed to help a little. I was then discharged from the hospital and transferred to "nestroievoi" (not actual duty). I was assigned to do errands for my captain, and clean up the barracks. My captain and his wife were among the nicest people I ever met. Once he sent me to bring a package to his family who were home in Spasdemensk, State of Kaluga in Russia. His family were very nice people. Every day I went to clean the captain's house. His wife was beautiful, and took an interest in my health as though she were my sister. She insisted that I call her by her first name, Vera Popravskia. When I did not feel good, the captain

allowed me to stay in his home, instead of the barracks. It made me feel good to see that the Tzar with his gang could not accomplish to put hate in every one of his high ranking officers. I will never forget that man nor his family.

One day we were ordered to be in the barrack, no one was to leave. A very important general was coming for inspection, therefore we had to be on the alert. It was lunch time, I noticed that our captain came into our barracks stepping out of his wagon (droza). I hollered “vstati smirno” (attention). The captain in the next barrack heard it and came in running. His face was white as a sheet. He gave his report to the general and they went into the office. We were finishing lunch when I heard the sergeant calling my name - I got scared thinking I had done something wrong. I asked him what the trouble was and he told me that I was wanted in the office. I was shaking with fright. I entered the office and stood at attention and waited. The general called me over and said, “Son” and then said, “Molodets (which means good boy), I will send you to school to become an officer in the Russian army.” My whole body began to shake as I knew it was impossible for me to be an officer in the Tzarist-Russian army. He then asked me my name. I replied “Harry Gershman.” He then asked me my nationality. “Evrai” (Jewish) I answered, and at that moment the general grew more and more pale and after a few seconds which seemed like a lifetime, he said “Jalko, Jalko - (too bad, too bad), go away.” I walked out and thought it must have been a dream, but the sergeant told me that this general was related to the Tzar. I was not sorry it was not such an honor to be a Russian Officer, I could never persecute someone because of his religion being different from my own. Well, my life went on as I continued to watch empty barracks at night and lighting kerosene lamps, bringing in wood for the stoves, etc. One day I noticed something was going on, but no one knew quite what it was. I thought maybe the war was over. It seemed that not one of the officers was able to talk, even our sergeant kept his big mouth shut. The colonel walked in, he was the same one who would order a soldier to stand in one place for an hour with 36 pounds of stones on his back for no reason at all. Now standing before us is the same man - speechless and pale. Finally in a very low voice he said, (Brothers) “Ha, Ha, yesterday we were called dogs, today we are brothers.” He continued, “I have some news to tell you. Our beloved Tzar Nicolai has abdicated from the throne and maybe his brother will be his successor!” He was choked with emotion and then walked out. It is almost impossible to describe what happened after he left. The same soldiers who only a few moments ago were afraid to turn around without permission, were now jumping and carrying on like mad. With all their hate for the Tzar and his gang, they tore down his pictures from the walls and made a fire and burned them. No one at the time dared to stop them. Of course I knew this would be stopped. As a Jew I knew less than them the meaning of freedom. I remembered as a young boy the pogroms in the city of Keshenow and all over Russia, which the whole world knew what they had done to us Jews. I was glad that maybe now liberty would come to all the Russians including us.

I got a pass to go to the city and was astonished to see so many soldiers drunk, walking on the sidewalks, I could hardly believe my eyes! It was only a few days ago there was a law that soldiers and dogs

were not allowed to walk on the public sidewalks. It took a few weeks before everything quieted down. Everyone remembered the colonel saying that the Tzar's brother may take his place. My good captain told me that there was a lot of trouble ahead.

Five weeks later a group of us were sent to the city of Smolensk. We were there five weeks doing nothing and were then sent to Moscow. I could have lived all my life in Russia and would never had a chance to go there because I, as a Jew, was not allowed there. We were stationed in a big empty barrack, we got our meals and an officer called the roll call every morning. We were then free to go anyplace. I didn't go anywhere. I didn't know what to do with myself. I used to sit in the park. Today this area is called Red Square. Sometimes I would ride on the trolley car all over Moscow. I didn't have to pay any fares. It was really interesting to see this city with the 1,600 churches and beautiful monuments. I found myself without any money because allowance per month was 60 kopaiky (thirty cents). So I would go to the railroad station and help passengers carry their baggage for which I got very good tips. In the evening I had to be back in the barrack. After a while we all got tired of hanging around. We wanted to go home. We were afraid to leave without papers and there was no one to talk to about that. Even the officers didn't know what to do and so we waited. The food was good and no questions were asked.

One morning I didn't feel too well, I asked the officer in charge what to do. He gave me a paper to go to the hospital, I went to the hospital and the doctor examined me. At that time about 200 soldiers started coming into his office, demanding that they be given release papers to go home. He tried to explain that he did not have any authority to do this, but his explanation was in vain. They would not listen, they threatened to kill him. He told them again that his release papers would not be valid and they would be arrested on their way home. He advised them to go elsewhere where they might get their papers. I was placed in the hospital. I was having difficulty breathing. I was lying in bed and could not help thinking about this city, Moscow with its special police (Tzandarms) the mere mention of their name used to give everyone the shivers, and now no one paid attention even if they were around. I wondered what it must be like in the Ukraine where I came from. The majority of the people could not read nor write and these people especially would not understand the meaning of freedom.

After bring in the hospital for six weeks I was discharged and was sent to receive my papers authorizing me to go home. Finally I arrived home. To my surprise everything was quiet. I started to feel better and tried to forget all the horrors of war.

In a small town like ours we didn't know much about our futures. I was introduced to a very nice girl, and later we decided to become engaged. On a Saturday evening her parents made us a big engagement party. There were many friends and relatives. We were very happy. Sunday, I was invited to their house for dinner and like all young people we planned our future. I promised my dear bride-to-be, Minnie Zubrow, that I would provide everything humanly possible for her. She was a nice, intelligent girl who came from a very nice family.

Yes, we built castles in the air, forgetting that the Russians especially in the Ukraine could be as easily persuaded to do wrong as right. It was Monday morning and all the peasants came into the city for the bazaar. It was like every other Monday, until suddenly a group of peasants armed with guns, clubs, and hand grenades, started chasing us into our synagogue. Everyone's possessions were taken away from us. We packed together like sardines in a can. Then they started to kill. I can still hear the screams from the outside. Some of them were shot but not killed. They threw them inside with us. They actually begged for another bullet to finish them. One man was my best friend with whom I had grown up. Next came the bombs trying to kill all of us at once. One bomb exploded near me and made a large hole in the floor - I did not get a scratch. I suppose I had to live to go through all of this holocaust of hell which followed. Finally a friendly group of peasants tried and they dispersed this gang and let us out. At that time we thought it was only a gang who had come from the war, and tried to raid a small town. What we did not know was that this was arranged by the reactionaries to divert the peoples' attention for their own purpose. The leaders of the gangs were Petlura, Denikin, Koltchak, and more who we never heard of. One morning Petlura and his gang came in and started to rob and kill. They killed men, women, and children in their mothers arms. Their screams could be heard in heaven but no one answered. The younger people who had a chance [to] escape somewhere to hide did so. I was in bed with typhoid fever. Many people died because there was no doctor, or medicine. The only thing that could be done for the high fever was to be rolled in bed sheets which had been soaked in cold water. I could not be moved but I insisted that my bride should run away and hide. Two henchmen of Petlura's gang came into the house. While my future mother-in-law was standing over me putting cold, wet towels on my head, one of them raised his gun to kill me, but was stopped by the other and was told not to waste a bullet on a dying man. This went on day after day. Some of them only robbed. We just watched everything being taken away. It seems I had to live and go through times even worse.

One day, General Zelini came in with his henchmen. We were in the house and as we lived on a side street we did not know what was going on. At that time a bunch of henchmen ran into the house ready to kill and demanded we give them boots. We were already barefooted because a week before the Petlura gang robbed everything we had. My dear mother begged them not to harm me. He hit her with the butt of his rifle. She fell down and I ran away. Oh, how I wished I could have been a bird and flown away or even a rat that could crawl into the ground and hide. Mothers were forced to watch as their children were killed. We heard that a general named Denikin was coming with an army to the Ukraine to establish order. We all prayed and waited for him to come. Meanwhile Bolshevicks passed our city by the thousands. They only asked for food and left. Finally General Denikin for whom we patiently waited had arrived only for us to find their brutality indescribable. They killed babies in their mother's arms, buried people alive, burned houses. Very few could escape and I didn't even want to. I had no desire for life then. If the big countries really wanted to stop the bloodshed of innocent people they would have helped Kerensky, who was then in power. If that had been the case I am sure

that Russia would today be democratic instead of communistic and the second world war would never have been. I am not a prophet but I think the Russians have lost their chance to live as free people for many generations.

As I mentioned before, there were the Denikin gang killing and robbing and I didn't care what happened to me anymore. Then two Denikin henchmen grabbed me and took me to dig my own grave. I knew in a few moments it would be over. I heard someone calling my name. Just as the murderers were ready to fire, there came running over city druggist and he was yelling "wait, wait" and he pleaded for them not to kill me. He gave them a sum of money to let me go. He was a very nice Polish man who did business with my father and had known me since I was a little boy. What happened afterward I don't know because I fainted. When I awoke I was in a bed in his house. He told me the whole story, gave me something to revive me and put me to bed. It was 9:00 P.M. when the murderers left the city and then the druggist took me home. When I knocked on the door I heard my family crying because they thought I was dead.

For a while it was rather quiet. Each day another gang would come in to rob and kill and then leave. We got used to it and there was nothing we could do about it. By this time we were robbed of everything we had. We had some money in another city called Bela Tzerkow. We used to do business there. It was quiet there because it was not far from Kiev and the Bolshevicks were there. As it was too far for me to ride a distance of 60 kilometers by horse and wagon and there was no railroad from us to that city, we sent a Russian peasant, a nice respectable man, to bring us the money. Unfortunately, with our luck, on the way back with the money one of the horses died and that slowed the peasant down. Being afraid to carry so much money with him, he gave it to another peasant to bring it to me as fast as he could, but this other man couldn't be trusted even when there was law and order. When I went to his house and asked for the money he told me he would keep it and if I didn't go away he would kill me. I never cried so much in my life. We were robbed of everything. This money was our only hope. It was winter time. I walked across a frozen lake crying and looking for a place to drown myself. At that moment my future wife came along and pleaded with me not to do this dreadful thing. When we became engaged we never thought that we would have to go through so much. I could not stand to see her crying. I loved her too much and I didn't want her to suffer so much. We came into the house, all broken up and penniless. I had one shoe and one slipper on my feet, a pair of pants made from a potato sack, and a shirt that a Russian woman gave me from her dead husband. These were the only belongings I had. Clouds began to darken even more. We heard that General Petlura and his gang were only 15 miles from our city. They were in Tetiev, a town thirty kilometers from our city. They killed so many people and among them were my sister-in-law and her children, relatives, uncles, aunts, nephews and nieces. I asked my future wife to marry me so if anything happened to either of us, the other would at least have memories. It was a month before Easter. We got married. She wore an old dress and I was in my one shoe and slipper. After the wedding ceremony, which took ten minutes, we had something to eat and then I sat and watched while my bride

slept. Then my wife watched while I slept. We had heard that Petlura was coming our way. One night while I slept my wife came running into the house screaming that our city was on fire. I awakened her family and my family and we all started to run from the city. We were lucky because ten minutes later the whole city was surrounded and those who weren't able to escape were killed or burned by the Petlura gang. When we were several miles away we could still see the city in flames.

We finally made it to a city called Zashkaw which was 30 kilometers from our city. We were there a few days and it was quiet. One afternoon I saw people running. I asked what had happened. They told me that Petlura was on his way to us. I told my dear wife to stay close to me as we all ran away from there so we would not lose each other. We ran so fast and we came to a dirty creek and there was no other place to go. We walked up to our necks in water and we held on to one another so as not to fall and drown and to my horror I realized my wife wasn't with me. Only strangers were there whom I had never seen before. There were a lot of blood suckers in the water. We stayed there until night time. I suggested we had better get out of the water because if we fell asleep we would drown. We came out shivering cold and started on our way to Uman. As we came to a sugar refinery on our way we thought we might be able to dry our clothing. I thought I would find my wife. I heard babies crying, commotion and confusion. I walked into a crowded area and saw children and frightened mothers crying and not knowing what to do. They could not keep running in the night. I didn't find any of my family so I rested awhile and was on my way again. On the road I met my parents. I will never forget seeing my sick mother running. I suppose the will to live sometimes makes you forget how sick or weak you are. They told me they hadn't seen my wife. By morning we had arrived at the city of Sacolivka. I went from house to house and thank God I found her with her family. She told me that when she had turned around and didn't see me she thought I was ahead of her. We started to walk to Uman. It was 40 miles. My wife's sister, Rose was 5 years old and cried to us to leave her on the road as she couldn't walk anymore. No one had the strength to carry her. A Russian peasant drove by and heard the child crying so hard that he stopped. For a change it looked as though we were to have a bit of luck. He took my mother-in-law and the 5 year old girl and a two year old boy to Uman. He was afraid to take us all because of the bandits. If they caught him we would all be killed. Now we could walk faster. We arrived in Uman and it was delightful to see people waiting for us at the entrance to the city. They brought us food and gave us a place to stay. This was a large city and the Bolsheviks were firmly established. A very nice family took us to their home and gave us rooms and food. We were penniless and I couldn't get a job so this family tried to help me out. They bought tobacco for me to make cigarettes and sell them on the street and I began to make enough money to buy our own food. The Bolsheviks stopped me from selling cigarettes because that was considered a business and they would not allow that. We found some work digging gardens and we were very happy making enough money to pay for our food and shoes. We had to register at Uman to get some kind of passports as we had left everything when

we ran from our home. As each state was occupied by different regimes, we received identification cards showing we belonged in Uman.

After several months, we heard that all was quiet in our home town of Piater. My wife and I decided to go back and see if we could salvage anything from our home. We came to our city and found everything was destroyed and burned. There were only remnants from human bodies. At night we didn't have a place to sleep so we climbed into an empty barn. The following morning a Russian woman gave us a little cereal to cook. It was difficult for us to even try to eat sitting near the burned house and seeing what we were surrounded by. A Bolshevick soldier came over and told me that the Bolshevick commissar wanted to see me. I was not scared because I had a passport which was given to me by the Bolshevick authority that stated we belonged to Uman. When I walked in and handed him my passport he took it away and ordered me to be locked up. I asked him why. He didn't answer. (Later we found out that he was a Denikin spy, trying to cover himself up as a commissar of the Bolshevick government.) My dear wife came over, cried and begged him to let me go but he would not listen. He said he was sending me back to my former state capital, Tarashta. I asked that my wife go with me. I could not leave her all alone in a burned city. He would not even listen. I had one hope. I knew that when I arrived in the state capital and showed them my papers they would let me go, but how could I leave my poor wife all alone. A wagon drawn by two horses pulled up; six Bolshevicks with their bayonets pointed at me, threw me in the wagon and drove away. I can picture even now how my wife fell to the ground crying. About 9:00 P.M. they drove up to a large building which was the prison (turma). They put me inside among murderers who killed my people. I felt that my mind would not be able to take it much longer and when on the third day they took us out to clean the street I asked permission to go in the office. I went in and asked why I was imprisoned. They told me that I was sent there as a deserter from the Red Army. I asked where my papers were and they said they didn't have any papers. Desertion was punishable by death. I asked that I have permission to write a letter to the authority and told them the whole story as it happened. I waited two more days in the prison and finally on the third day the commissar called me. He told me that as a deserter, I should be shot, but there was a question about the commissar that sent me there, and so instead they would be lenient with me. The next day I would go for a physical examination with the rest of the soldiers who were being sent to the Polish front to fight. Upon examination the doctors suggested that I be sent to the hospital because my nerves were shattered. The commissars said no and there was quite an argument I shall never forget. I didn't want to go to the hospital. At that time I made up my mind that I would take a chance with my life. I must find my wife. I told them that I felt alright and I wanted to go to the Polish front to fight. They gave me a 24 hour pass. I went to see some friends whom I knew. They couldn't do anything for me but they gave me food and I stayed overnight. The next morning I went back to the commander. I could not leave the city without a passport. At 5:00 we were loaded into freight cars on our way to the front. The whole night I was thinking of how I would escape. At dawn the train stopped at a station. We were allowed to leave the train for a few

minutes. While I was out I found out that it was about 18 miles to a city called Zwenigradka. I went back to the train because the guards were watching us. When the train started and gained momentum, I opened the door and jumped out. At this time of the year the corn in the fields was high. I was able to run for a while and then rest between the rows of corn. Soon I heard the train stop and shots being fired over my head. I could see the guards about 10 feet away from me and one guard said that if he found me he would shoot me right then. Thank God they gave up the search. I lay motionless until the train was quite far from me. I jumped up and started to run. It may seem unbelievable but I ran 6 miles in 18 minutes. When I felt out of danger I stopped near a well and just drank and drank and drank. I started again to make the next 12 miles. I knew I must make it and I did. Now I had 30 more miles to go. I walked and walked on and on until I made it. I arrived at my house and my wife was still there. She thought the authorities would give back my papers and I would return. Her father brought her back here. I went back to the Bolshevick authority and told them I lost my papers and they issued me new ones. I could not tell them the truth. My wife and I could not believe our eyes that we were back with each other. What were we to do now. We had no money and no work. There was a charity kitchen but we couldn't bring ourselves to go there.

It was fall again. Soon winter would be upon us. The Bolshevicks were calling boys 19 and 21 years old to fight and I was among these. What did I have to fight for? I could not leave my dear wife again. We decided to go to Bela Tzerkow which was 90 kilometers from Kiev. There the Bolshevicks didn't call boys 19 and 21. It took about three days to get there. We had relatives there and they gave us shelter but could give us no food. They, too, were refugees who had come here before us. The prices of food were very high. Two thousand rubles for a loaf of bread or one pound of salt. People with whom my father had done business with had moved out to other parts of Russia. I got some odd jobs and earned enough for half a loaf of bread or a few potatoes. We could not afford to buy salt. My wife cooked a soup with one potato and water. All we had to eat all day was potato soup and a small piece of bread and I was really ashamed of myself for my big appetite and couldn't get enough to eat. I found a job for a few days in a flour mill which ran on water. The pump broke down so my job was to pull water with a pail from the well with a long rope, pour the water in huge barrels for 16 hours a day. That little water soup must have given me the energy to do it, but in a few days the pump was fixed and I was left without a job. In payment for this job I was given 100 pounds of flour. Was I glad! We decided to take the flour to Kiev. For about half of the trip we rode on a train (without tickets) and when the Bolshevicks chased us off we walked along with hundreds like us. The first trip we made enough profit to buy food for ourselves and so we continued to do this. Many times we rode the top of the trains and once in a while someone would get killed by falling off, but this was our means to living and so we continued. Now we could afford for my wife to buy a sweater and for me a pair of shoes (if you can call them that). One day, after walking most of the 90 kilometers to Kiev with the bags of flour on our shoulder, we sold the flour and we were so tired we could barely walk. My wife said she wanted to buy shirts which we were in need of. We came

upon a Russian woman who had a few shirts to sell and when I was about to pay her, I discovered the money had been stolen from my pocket. We couldn't believe this could happen to us. Unbelievable, but nevertheless true. We were so discouraged and disheartened we couldn't even cry. Now we had to walk back most of the 90 miles. It took us two days to get back. What could we do now? The water pump at the mill was in good order and so there was no work there for me, but at this mill they trusted us with 100 pounds of flour and once again we started for Kiev. After several trips we paid for the 100 pounds of flour.

Meanwhile, my passport which I received in Uman was marked January 1, and I could not get a renewal because the Bolsheviks were calling my age group now. A thought came to my mind of what I must do and I did not even tell my wife.

The following morning I went to the administration office and told the commissar that I just came from my home Piatigara and I had escaped from the Petlura gang who burned our city and so I had no papers with me. I appeared older than my age. He asked how could he believe I was telling the truth and perhaps I was just the right age they were calling to the army. I had to think fast. I grabbed his gun and said "Please, if you don't believe me, shoot me." I guess I convinced him because he gave me a passport from January 1 to March 1. When I got home I simply told my wife I had my passport extended. I didn't frighten her with the rest of the details. We continued going to Kiev with our two bags of flour making barely enough money to exist with. Time went on and we were rapidly approaching March when my passport would expire. I took a pen and where it said March 1 on my passport, I inserted a 3 in front of the 1, thus it read March 31. I had overlooked one very important detail. My ink was a different color.

One day on our trip to Kiev to which we had walked half way and been on the train, we sold our flour and were ready to make the return trip when suddenly we heard shots. Everyone started to run. We ran into a doorway. They would not let us in. The Bolsheviks surrounded the streets stopping every man to look at passports. Those who did not have passports or passports not in order, were arrested. Those who tried to run away were shot. I thought it was curtains for me. I kissed my wife good-bye and told her the whole story of my passport. I told her to go to the other side of the train and watch. I told her also to wait for 10 minutes and if I didn't come back, then to forget about me. I doubted I would come out alive this time. Scared, worried and pale, I saw her go by the guard and then I started to go. A soldier grabbed me by the arm and said "Wait a minute, where do you think you are going? Go back and show your passport to the officer." I thought quickly. I said, "Look, soldier, the officer just looked at my passport." Then I waved it in front of his face. I said, "Here, look for yourself if you don't believe me. The officer is very busy to be bothered again." He took my passport, turned it upside down and then I realized he could not read. Of course he was ashamed to admit that, and so I knew I was safe, at least for the time being. Wow! What a close call that was.

We went back to Bela Tzerkow and I didn't know what to do because I couldn't take any more chances without my passport. It was winter and there we were with no warm clothing and my torn shoes. My wife

insisted that she go to Kiev alone just once. She took 30 pounds of flour and was on her way. The following evening I heard a knock at the door. I could not understand this because in the Ukraine no one knocked. When I opened the door I thought I would die for there was my dear wife who could not open the door because the skin of her hands were completely torn off down to the bones. She told me it was very cold and that she couldn't get on the train so she rode on the buffer strips and held on tightly so as not to fall. When the train stopped and she wanted to get off, her hands were frozen to the still. After this experience we decided to go back to Uman. We were cold, hungry and in torn shoes. My parents told me the bad news. The Bolsheviks were looking for me. What should I do now? Should I give up or should I keep up my belief in human endurance? Was there any hope? The goodness and courage of my dear wife gave me the hope to go on. Maybe something would happen. (As I look back I see that hope and prayer is the best thing in the world.) A soldier came in looking for me. I ran out through a side door and started my journey. I kept walking all day. One thing was for sure, I would not go with the Bolshevik army to fight. It was still fresh in my mind fighting for the Tzar's gang so that they could instigate the Russian people to kill and rob us. That was done for only one reason, because I am a Jew. If I had to die I would die with a protest and my heart to the world, to hUmanty. I would not die fighting for my enemy and so with this in mind I walked 30 miles until I came to a city called Ternivka which belonged to another state not far from Uman where the Bolsheviks were strong. I didn't know anyone there and I thought the way I looked with my torn shoes, people would be afraid to let me in their houses. I walked over to a house, opened the door and asked if I could sleep over. They were very nice but very poor. These people, like I, left everything in a small town and ran away. He was a Reverend and got a job teaching. I was very hungry but these people had little to share and not much for their children. When they urged me to eat with them I told them I had already eaten outside. I managed to send word to my wife where I was. She used to go to the railroad station and sell candy and she sent me some food. I never received any of it. I was really desperate. To quiet my hunger I would take a few leaves from a tree and make a cigar. That was my meal. Once I got very sick and these people did not know whom to notify. If I told them I ran away from the Bolsheviks they would be afraid to keep me in their house. I told them I didn't know where my family was. A doctor came in to see me every day. He said the worst thing was that I was undernourished. He asked me about my family. I told him that while running from our city I became separated from my family and that I was robbed and also my passport was stolen. Neighbors heard about me being ill and brought me soup, chicken, meat and things that I hadn't eaten for a long time. Thanks to them I got well. They asked me if I could write Russian. I said that of course I could. They told me to go to the office of the Bolshevik government and I might get a job there. At first this scared me but then I realized where could I be safer than right in their office. At the time there was such a mix-up that one state didn't know what the other state was doing.

When I came in, the commissar asked me where my papers were. I gave him the usual story and at that time I looked older than my years and he was sure they were not calling my age group to the army. He gave me work in his office. Some orders he gave me I didn't like. Like going into someone's home and taking things without the owner's permission. I will never forget when I got an order to pick up some furniture for the office. I walked into a well-to-do home and told the lady that the commissar sent me to get a table and four chairs for his office and since it was a rich house they could spare that without any inconvenience. The lady refused to let me take it. I said that I would have to report her. She thought for a while and then she gave me a table and four chairs. Another time I heard in the office that [at] a certain store there is a lot of sugar and I knew what was meant by that remark. The next morning I went to that store to warn them. I asked for 2 lbs. of sugar, and told that I had no money to pay for it. He took it back and said no money, no sugar. I said I didn't need any sugar. I said I worked for the workingman's Bolshevick government. They call it Rabochi Vlasti and I heard them talk in the office that you have a lot of sugar, that's why I asked for sugar - just to tell you. The man got pale, I told him to forget that I was ever in his store. He asked me to take the 2 lbs. of sugar and told me he was only joking when he refused to give me the sugar. I said I didn't need sugar. When I left I felt relieved that I had warned him. I went on working in the office with little pay, but feeling safe. One day my commissar told me he was getting transferred to another city and this office would be closed. Of course he said I could go with him and work for him there. Yet, I couldn't move around too much knowing that they were looking for me. How long could I go on like this? Most of my food consisted of a dark piece of bread dipped in water and two leaves from a tree for a cigar.

I was really desperate. I thought maybe I should give myself another name and then join the Bolshevick army. I didn't even notify my wife and asked myself how much life was worth. I felt sorry that my dear wife had to endure so much. The vows I made to her on our engagement evening were ringing in my ears. I had promised to give her everything humanly possible and now look what had happened to our lives. True, we were not the only ones, but this did not ease our pain. I decided to wait a little longer and see what would happen. The Bolshevick office was closed and so I was left without a job. True, it didn't pay very much, but I was safe from anyone who might be looking for me. I had a place to sleep without charge. My wife once in a while would send me a bundle of food with a man who used to go to Uman often. I had nothing to do now but pray, hope, and wait. I don't know exactly what I was hoping for.

One evening I went to the synagogue to pray as I used to do every chance I had. Suddenly some Bolshevick soldiers came in and started asking for passports. There I was. What could I do now? I noticed a large box with prayer books. I climbed inside, covered myself with the books and waited. I don't know how long I was in that box but when I finally dared to come out it was dark and the synagogue was locked. I made my way out through a window.

I was so engrossed with my own thoughts that I didn't feel someone tapping me on my shoulder. Then I heard someone saying, "Wake up!" I turned around and saw my cousin smiling at me. I was surprised to see him. I knew he had come from Uman. I immediately asked him if he had seen my wife. He said not only had he seen her but she was right there with her family at a hotel and he was sent to find me. My heart skipped a beat. What was happening? He told me that my brother in America had sent a special delegate to Rumania to bring the whole family to America. I must have been dreaming. No, at last my dreams had come true. If all the oceans of the world were turned into ink and all the steel used only for pens and every human were to write, there wouldn't be enough ink, pens or human hands to describe my feelings that very moment when I saw my dear wife, and our families at the hotel and then told me that my brother in America had sent for us. I had been on the end of despair and now at last I was full of hope and the will to live again. We started our way to the Rumanian border which was Peschanka, the nearest place to cross over to Bessarabia, then part of Rumania. It was wintertime and midnight. A man came over and took us all to the river to cross. There were many people and some with small children. We walked down a steep hill, or rather rolled down because it was very slippery. We fell, got up, and fell again. Finally when we were almost on the other side approaching our freedom, the guard noticed us and started shooting. Luckily no one was hurt except for a few bruises from falling. They started asking us questions but we could not understand Rumanian. They thought we didn't want to tell them. I will never forget the way they were beating my younger brother and we couldn't say a word. The following day about three in the afternoon, they took us to a place which was the widest part of the Dnester River and ordered us to go back. When we started to walk back they gave a few shots in the air so the Russian soldiers could catch us. We were lucky they let us go as many were shot. We were back in Russia where we were arrested and told we would be sent somewhere. I thought I was again back in the hands of the devil. Now there was no possibility of escaping. With us there were a few people who had with them large sums of money and jewelry. They gave it to the guards to let us go.

We came to a small town and from there to a place called Kaminka. We were there about a week. One night a man came to us with instructions to be ready. He told us that he is the agent to bring us to Rumania and he would lead us to the border. One night he came and took us to the nearest place of the Dnester River and in 15 minutes we were on the other side in Bessarabia, Keshenew. Everyone was arrested and taken to Keshenew to jail and after a few days with the intervention and most of all with the American dollar, they were let free. I was afraid to take any more chances so when I saw them getting arrested I jumped on a wagon with drunken soldiers. They were singing and carrying on so I pretended to be drunk and began to sing. Of course I didn't understand them and they didn't understand me. We arrived in Keshenew. I jumped off the wagon and went to the refugee place. I'm sure those soldiers didn't know what happened.

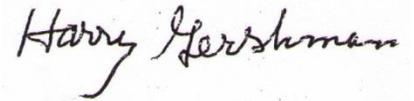
It was in 1921 that the doors of this blessed America were open. Everyone could come in without a quota, but our troubles didn't end yet. The delegate whom my brother in America sent along to help us didn't

give us any money to live on. We had to sleep in a refugee camp and we had no money for food. Our delegate told us there was no money for us. By the time we heard from my brother in America about three weeks later, he told us that he had cabled our delegate \$1,500 for our tickets for the boat and that there should be no delay he telegraphed \$3,000 extra. When we came the second time to our delegate he told us to get ready. He would send us to Bucharest, the capitol and from there we would be on our way. We arrived in a large beautiful city. The king's palace was in the middle of the city. No one bothered us. We could go anyplace we wanted like free people. We were after our delegate to get our visas from the American consulate but he kept delaying. One day he told us that my parents and my younger brother would sail to America in a few days, but the rest of us must wait until we got permission as the door of America had been closed. It is now by quota entrance, we asked why he hadn't sent us before. We told him we knew our brother had sent him money. He made no reply. The following week my parents and my brother Charlie sailed. Our delegate without telling us or giving us money, left us stranded in Bucharest and left. We had to wait till our brother from America sent us money. We waited one year, kept going to the American consulate inquiring about our visa from Washington. It was our bad fortune that the consulate had a very bad secretary who enjoyed human misery. Thanks to the HIAS who helped us, God knows if we could have ever gotten our papers. One morning we got news from the HIAS that our visas arrived, and we should go to the consulate to get them. I remember we were there early. When [our turn came], she gave me our papers but my brother Morris's papers she said did not come in. I started to beg her to look again, I could speak a little Rumanian and I then started to cry. I saw the consul was waiting for my papers, but I held down and pleaded with her. I took a big chance because when she got mad, you could wait for a long time, but she looked at me and somehow she got up from her chair and looked over and over again and finally brought out my brother's papers, our faces lit up. Now I knew we were on our way. We came to Le Havre, France, where we had to wait several days for our ship to take us away from all the misery. When my nephew broke out with a rash on his head, I advised my brother to take him to the head doctor's office from the ship to examine him, but the doctor only spoke French. Therefore, he took little Harry and went to his office and examined him and what he said we could not understand. I pointed to him to mark on a piece of paper what he said. When we came back to the hotel, we had it translated. The doctor said we had nothing to worry about, the boy would be allowed to go on the ship and during the 9 or 10 days voyage on the ocean, the rash would disappear.

We were very happy to hear this. Today was the day. We were finally going to the ship. One by one we were let in for examination, the papers for me with my wife were approved. Then my brother and his wife and their little boy, Harry walked in with their papers. Five minutes later they all came out crying. They then told us that their son was rejected because he had a rash on his hand. I asked my brother if he had the doctor's papers and he said he did. I took their papers with the boy's papers and took the boy in. I saw the main doctor who had examined the boy. However, they would not let us through. I pushed in, showed him the paper with

his approval and the papers from the other doctor's rejection. He crossed it off and approved it. We were very happy when we came out and told them that it was okay. This happiness was indescribable. Thank God we were now on our way to freedom. Now all these years are behind us, but we cannot blot out the memories. As time goes by, human nature makes us forget good deeds, but we will never forget our dear brother Morris who was so good to our parents. And to our dear brother Bennie - he must have been chosen by God to do for his parents, sister, brothers and their families by saving us and bringing us to America. Why two such nice brothers departed from us so quickly - they died in agony, it is hard for us to understand. But this is life....

Harry Gershman
(1897-1986)

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Harry Gershman". The signature is written in dark ink on a light-colored background.