

Childhood Memories: Strolling with Siblings to Traveling Light

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My earliest recollection is, as a child of four, being held on my father's shoulder and looking through a piece of smoked glass at the sun. It was a complete eclipse of the sun and everyone was sure it forebode an evil event. The year was 1914. World War I started that year.

I was born in 1910 in a tiny village called Stavische, in the Province of Kiev. It was nestled in a valley, surrounded by gentle rolling hills and forests where the peasants lived. Picture the "shtetel" of Fiddler on the Roof and you see Stavische. It was a self-imposed ghetto but it was a pleasant life - at least as I remember it from my childhood. I remember sitting on the doorstep on spring and summer evenings and listening to the singing of the peasants. On Sabbath afternoons I took long walks with my older sisters and brothers into the forest. I can still feel the damp earth and smell the pine cones. But winters were harsh. At times we could not open our door because the snow almost covered the house.

There were no paved streets or sidewalks in Stavische, only a wide cobblestone road that ran through the middle of the village. So many things stand out in my mind about the road. Tuesday was Market Day! The peasants drove in their cattle and cart after cart laden with produce came down that sa'shay, as we called it.

With the advent of World War I, Stavische became a bustling little town. That's when we saw our first automobile and our first plane. When one would appear, everyone ran out to see this new wonder. We were never near any battle front but occasionally Russian troops would pass through. Sometimes troops were billeted in town for a few days. My mother would take me with her to bring food to the soldiers. They looked so sad and so raggedy. Toward the end of the war, German soldiers arrived. They were very good to us. They were not demanding and paid for everything they took. They were especially good to the children. Years later, on our way to the United States, we spent six months in Hamburg and then, too, the German people treated us with every kindness and respect.

On May 1, 1917, all the school children gathered in the woods for a picnic to celebrate the overthrow of the Tzar, Nicholas II. At first we were jubilant. Now we would be able to own land, live anywhere in Russia we wanted and travel anywhere in Russia without a permit. (Ed. Note: this refers to the Jews of Russia who had few personal freedoms.) But hard times were ahead. The peasants could not cope with this new found freedom. They ransacked the palaces of the over-lords and we could see them dragging fine upholstered furniture through the muddy streets. One man managed to haul a huge mirror home but his house was too small to hold it so he put it in the barn. His cow saw her image and the farmer wound up with a shattered mirror and a bleeding cow! I can still see the rain and the mud and streams of people coming down the road, pulling bedding, drapes, household utensils and anything they could lay their hands on. I was too young, of course, to understand the collapse of the Czarist government and the forming of the Soviet regime. There was one leader after another trying to take over control of the country. The Bolsheviks seemed closest to gaining power but even they could not stop the peasants from looting the manor houses.

Once this started, it was an easy step toward befalling the Jews. They were beaten and robbed. Their houses were set on fire. We would hear of a band of marauders coming our way and would shut ourselves up tight in our houses, hoping to be spared. One day someone in the house looked out and saw an old man dragging himself toward us, with blood caked on him from top to bottom. He was brought in and tended to but died a few days later. Then there was the time when we had to leave altogether. No one knew where we were

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going and what we would find but if we stayed we would certainly be massacred. On the way we saw a young pregnant woman lying in a ditch - dead, flies were gathered around the eyes, mouth, and nostrils. It was a painful sight.

Things would quiet down and we'd come back and start all over again. But only for a time because this went on for several years. The last time we left our home I became detached from the family and kept on walking with the rest of the people. It's a wonder to me now that I was not frightened. When my father noticed that I was gone he sent my brother Herschel, who was then about twenty years old, to look for me. He found me in a city called Belaja Tzerkov, with a group who had left Stavisch earlier. The Jewish people of that town arranged for food and housing for everyone. I can remember only the Sabbath candles and my brother and I sitting down with a family at a beautifully set Sabbath table. The rest of our family claimed us a day later. Where we stayed in Belaja Tzerkov from then on, I don't know. But I never was Stavisch again. We heard that the village had been set on fire.

After a time, my father decided to go back to see if he could salvage anything from his property. He had owned two houses, one in which we lived and one that he leased to a neighbor. There was also his warehouse which no doubt had made a beautiful fire with all the wheat inside. He made his living buying grain from peasants and selling it to flour mills. Many of these peasants were loyal to us and hideous out in their attics when the need arose, sometimes at great risk to themselves.

Shortly after my father left, a man and his wife came to us and told us that two Americans had arrived in Romania and sent this couple to find several families whom they wanted to bring back to America. We found out later that my two brothers, Morris and Ben who had left Russia many years before got in touch with other young men, under similar circumstances, and decided to bring their parents out of Russia. Since all forms of communication into Russia at that time had stopped, they picked two out of this group to leave immediately and find the families.

Hershel was sent to Stavische to contact Father. He never got there. On the way he came across a band of marauders who were attacking a group of Jews. He tried to stop one of them from shooting a young woman and he himself was shot instead. My father heard about this tragedy from someone who did make it to Stavische. After sitting Shiva he came back to Belja Tzerkov. The Romania couple were anxious to get started so we began to make preparations to leave. No one was allowed into Russia nor out of Russia at that time.

We were to travel as light as possible. My mother baked her jewelry into several loaves of black bread. Our money was sewn into my school uniform, which I was to wear until we got out of the country. My uniform was of brown sateen. It had a band around the neck, a wider band around the waist and some of the money was also sewn into the hem. I was instructed that if anyone stopped us and asked me where we were going, I was to say that we were going to the next town. Several families left. Each family hired an open wagon with a driver. We sat on straw and I was actually enjoying it. We were stopped a number of times and questioned and searched but nothing of value was found or taken and we were allowed to go on our way. We were afraid that someone might want one of our breads but they were so stale and unappetizing that no one wanted them. After several days, we finally arrived at the Nester River, the border between Russia and Romania. We were divided into two groups. The sturdier in the group were to leave with the male guide when the night was darkest. The rest of us, the older people, the sick and the children, would leave with his wife at the crack of dawn. My sister Miriam and her husband Aaron left with the first group. My mother and father, my sister Goldie and I left with the second group.

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It was bitter cold as we walked down the precipice to the river, which was not too wide but filled with chunks of ice. The woman made two or three trips rowing us across, a few at a time. Then began the climb up the other side. By that time it was daylight. My brother-in-law, Aaron was there to meet us and guide us to the house that had taken in the advance party temporarily. I was numb from the cold. I sat down on a rock and begged to be left to freeze to death. I could not take another step. Aaron picked me up and carried me the rest of the way. The male guide disappeared before his group reached the destination, a small town called Soroco. Even so, they managed to reach town and some kind hearted people took them in, fed them, and allowed them to rest. It was not long before the "authorities" arrived and they were put under arrest. (The party suspected that they had stumbled into the home of a detective.) Perhaps arrest is not the proper word in this instance. Detention describes the situation better. They were to appear in court the next day for disposition.

Our guide had left us when she saw the border patrol coming towards us. But the guard did not stay with us long. Our pace was too slow and it was unbearably cold. Many years have now passed but still I shiver when I think of trudging along on top of that bare mountain with no trees to shield the sharp, cold wind that went through me like a knife. When we reached the house where the others were staying, we too were treated with the utmost kindness.

I have to dug deep into my mind to recall the trial. I see a small square room with many people crowded into it. It was bare except for a small cubicle where the judge sat. Whoever got there first was lined up against the "oven wall". The judge made someone give up his place to make room for the trembling ten year old. I must have looked pitiful indeed because when asked that I be allowed to go to Kishnev and stay with cousins instead of the detention camp, he agreed without hesitation. This was after the judge had decided to allow the older people (my parents included) to remain in Romania while the others were to be detained in another city. This included the "cousins" I was to stay with, and of course, my parents. We lived fairly comfortably in Kishnev while Father visited the detention house, sought out officials, paid many bribes and finally, after several months, we again started our journey across Europe to the "Goldena Medina", Land of Opportunity, America.

Our destination was Hamburg, Germany. To get there, we had many borders to cross and papers to show. Papa had taken care of the papers but to get tickets for trains was another matter. There was an incident with a train that plagued me for many years after. The sound of trains going by gave me an eerie feeling that I could not understand until one night when I had just fallen asleep I dreamed that I was sitting on bundles on a depot platform. It was in the middle of the night, lights were glaring down and people were crowding into baggage cars. I woke with a start and heard the tail end of a train passing a few blocks away from my house. That was the end of my eerie feeling. It also brought back memories of our trek through Europe.

There was another time when we made a stop. It was in Prague where we saw the old synagogue. I was awed by its age and beauty. Then there was the time when we crossed the border into Germany. It was pitch black and we were on foot. There was barbed wire across our path. Soldiers with big guns stopped us to examine our visas and we were on our way again. We finally arrived in Hamburg early in 1921. All of us were vaccinated. In those days there were no preventative shots except for smallpox. We were quite comfortable there while we waited to hear from my brothers. At least I have pleasant memories of playing outside, learning German and speaking to our neighbors. There were soldiers stationed near us. They gave me candy and taught me how to read German. I still have a book in German that one of them gave to me as a farewell gift.

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