

"COMING TO AMERICA (History of my early life - Max Korson)

I was born to Anna (Shore) and Jacob Korson in Zivitov, Russia (Ukraine) near Kiev in June 1913. I was the middle child, my sister, Frances was the oldest and my sister, Lottie, was the youngest. There was 16 months difference in age between each of us.

The town where we lived had a population of about 1000 people and about 50 Jewish families. It was near a river and had orchards in the area. My grandparents lived in the same town. My earliest remembrances were - at the age of 4, I attended Cheder (Hebrew Instruction)

We lived in a single family house made of wood with no cellar, but a back room to hold household property i.e. a barrel of sourkraut and a barrel of wine and chopped wood for the oven, plus household utensils. The oven was made of clay, and the stove to heat the house was a large hole in the wall called a "Riba". Also, the oven had a few steps going up where we sometimes had some poor person we knew sleep there overnight. We would use the top of the oven to dry out fruits such as pears and apples for winter use. The house had two bedrooms, a dining room and a kitchen and no bathroom facilities. We used an outhouse. Snows in winter were 8 feet deep. In the summer, we went to the river to bathe. We couldn't get out in the winter for days.

The town had a Synagogue, a Beth Medresh and a Mikvah. My life revolved around Jewishness such as going to Cheder every day and to Synagogue every Friday night and Saturday. There was no schooling for us as Jews were not allowed. We did have tutors in Math and Russian. I was about 2 years old when my father left for America to avoid being drafted again into the Russian Army where he had already served for 4 years. After my father left, my mother sold ready-made clothes in the marketplace. These were sewed up at my grandfather's house where he had about 20 sewing machines operated by women in the area. We had a maid to take care of us while my mother was working. Relatives lived near us i.e. aunts and uncles and cousins. My father was one of 11 children, but only 9 survived. My mother's family consisted of 1 sister and 2 brothers. I had a very nice childhood until the Pogroms began.

In the summer, we would go to the river to bathe and pluck the cherries, pears, plums and vegetables in my grandfather's orchard and vegetable garden. My grandfather owned some cows and it was my job to take them to the top of a nearby mountain to graze. One grandfather traveled buying up orchards of fruit. When he returned from a trip, we enjoyed the fruits he would bring back.

One day, (I was about 5 or 6) on Yom Kippur, we had just come home from the Synagogue when a gang of bandits, (Petlura's Band) on horseback and brandishing swords, entered the city and attacked the Jewish houses killing about 15 people including the Rabbi's wife. My mother was sick in bed at the time and my aunt Ethel was in the house. A bandit came into the house, drew his sword, and struck my mother. My aunt ran into the room and he killed her. My younger sister, Lottie was hiding under the bed and the blood from my aunt's wounds ran under the bed. My sister Frances ran outside and I slipped out of the house and ran into the woods. My grandfather rushed to our house to see if we were alright. The bandit killed him on the doorstep. My mother was not badly hurt as she was covered with a heavy quilt and the sword did not cut all the way through.

Soon after the Pogrom, everyone wanted to escape somewhere. We decided to try to go to America to join my father. He had been working and sending money to my mother all along.

Some years before, my grandfather had befriended a Russian farmer who was in trouble. This farmer had done work for the family. He came to see if we were alive. He told us that we must leave immediately and run for safety as there might be another attack even worse than this one. He took us to his farm where he would hide us. My mother took all her money and jewelry and some clothes and we ran for our lives. The farmer had brought his horse and wagon with him and that is how we escaped. When we arrived at the farmhouse, his wife gave us bread and butter and hot milk. We stayed there a few hours when the farmer came running in and said the bandits were searching every farmhouse for Jews. He said we had to leave his house immediately and hide somewhere. We became very panicky and asked if he had anyplace to hide us until the bandits left. He replied that he had no place except in a ravine near his house. There was a gully that should be dry at that time. We ran there but the gully had water in it. We remained in the water (about 2 inches) until he came back telling us it was safe to return to his farmhouse. Meanwhile, he made arrangements with a farmer friend of his to drive us in a horse and wagon to Vinitsa, a city about 30 miles from this farmhouse. My mother had a cousin living there. In the middle of the night, we were piled into the wagon and covered with a canvas to hide us as well as to keep us warm. It took about 3 days to get to our destination. When we arrived at Vinitsa at my mother's cousin's home, we were warmly welcomed. She had not seen any of her family because she was ostracized. She had married a non-Jew named Isaac. He turned out to be the kindest person we ever knew. They lived near the border of Russia and Poland. There was a river Dnester that separated the Russian side from the Polish side. During the night, the Poles would cross the river and capture the city. The next day, the Russians would recapture it. Our cousin Isaac had 2 uniforms. When the Poles were there, he was in the Polish Army and when the Russians were there, he was in the Russian Army. We remained there for a while and then continued on our journey to America.

From Vinitsa, we continued on our journey to Roumania. After riding in a wagon again for a few days, we arrived near the border of Russia and Roumania. We left Russia about the beginning of 1920.

There my mother bribed someone to arrange for us to steal across the border. The only way to do it was by boat, as there was a river between the borders. In the middle of the night, we were put into a small boat and were told when we hear shots being fired, that it was a signal that the coast is clear and it is O. K. to cross. We were frightened as we had heard that a boat like ours was turned over and a woman and her daughter were drowned. The man who rowed the boat robbed the bodies of all jewelry and money. Fortunately, we crossed safely and were taken to a local farmhouse where the people were Jewish. The town was called Zguritsa. The people were very good to us. They fed us and gave us hot milk to drink as it was very cold.

The next morning we were taken into the town and brought to the Synagogue. We slept there and ate there. My mother was told that a woman was looking for help in her home. My sister Frances applied and

she was hired. The woman (who was Jewish) treated her so miserably that she had to leave. We stayed in Zguritsa until after Passover. During this holiday, there was no place to buy Matzoh. My mother went to the Rabbi to ask him what to do. He said that the Torah says it is more urgent to save a life than to eat matzoh. He told us to eat bread and beans. After a period of time, we left Zguritsa and took a train to Kishinev. There we found that my father had sent a letter and some money to us through an agent who was responsible for our plans to America. In Kishinev, which was a large city, we lived for about 6 months waiting for a visa to travel. There we lived in a 1 room apartment and we all slept in one bed as there was no other place to sleep.

From there we traveled by train to the capital of Roumania which is Bucharest, a beautiful city. There we also waited for 6 months to get passports. Finally, we received all our papers and were able to travel. We traveled through most of Europe, from Roumania to Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and parts of Germany until we reached Rotterdam, Holland where we had to wait for the boat to America. After waiting in Rotterdam for 12 days, the ship called S.S. Ryndham was finally ready for our trip to America. It was part of the Holland-America line.

Before boarding the ship, 2 officials (women) examined our heads. They informed my mother that we would not be allowed to board because they found a few lice in my sister Lottie's hair. My mother began to cry and told the women she would wash my sister's hair with kerosene to kill the lice. An agreement was reached. Her hair was shampooed. The next morning her head was examined again and we were allowed to go aboard.

We traveled 3rd class which was the cheapest and slept in bunk beds. The next morning everything was fine, but in the afternoon, after lunch, we hit a bad storm. The boat was rocking from side to side and the waves on each side were higher than the boat. We encountered an iceberg and the Captain had to change course to avoid it. Everyone became seasick. I was the only one who did not get sick. I had a "ball" running around the ship while it was yawing and the waves were dashing against the sides. The second day the weather cleared, but a lot of people were still seasick. We were on board for 11 days. One day we heard someone call us from the deck of second class. We discovered that an aunt and cousin of ours were on the same ship. My cousin threw down to us some bananas which we had never seen or eaten. I took a bite of one and it tasted terrible. Then I was told that I had to peel it before eating it.

We finally arrived at Ellis Island, New York Harbor, America. I was then about 7 years old. We got our belongings together to disembark. The date was April 1921.

On board ship my sister Lottie came down with measles. When we landed, she was taken to the hospital in Ellis Island. We were all upset and worried that we would not be allowed to come to America, and that is just what happened. The doctor notified my mother that we would have to stay in Ellis Island until my sister got well.

Since we arrived late in the afternoon, my father could not visit us until the next day. When he did come, we didn't know him. My mother

said, "children, this is your father". After hugs and kisses and my mother's tears, we gave him the bad news about my sister. My father owned a small grocery store in partners with another man in Brownsville, a part of Brooklyn, N.Y. He would come to visit us about 3 or 4 times a week.

My sister Lottie recovered from the measles however she developed a fever that hung on for weeks. During that time, a woman from Hungary was traveling with her 5 year old son. It was discovered that he had bubonic plague and died. All of Ellis Island, about 1000 people, were quarantined and shipped to Hoffman's Island, another island in New York Harbor. After about 2 weeks, we were allowed to return to Ellis Island.

Every night before going to bed, I would ask my mother who the lady was outside that held the light in her hand...the Statue of Liberty. We spent Passover in Ellis Island. I recall that it was one of the most wonderful and meaningful Seders anyone can imagine. There were long tables and on each side chairs. The food was very tasty. There were many notable people there. Some of them we did not know at the time. Chaim Weizman, (the first president of Israel) and his wife were there and gave a bag of nuts to each child. Yosele Rosenblatt, the most renowned Cantor in America, was there and so was the Mayor of New York as well as many others. I was the only one that enjoyed everything.

At last after 9 weeks, my sister got well and we were allowed to go home. My father came and took us to Brownsville, Brooklyn, N.Y., where he lived in 2 rooms in the rear of the store. It was the middle of April and too late to start school, so I had to wait until September to enroll in school. At the time I was 8 years old and started in the first grade with all the little ones. I could not speak nor understand a word of English and felt very sad. I had a wonderful teacher, (a Miss Simon), who through sign language and Yiddish told me that if I stayed after school for one hour every day, she would help me speak, read and write English, which I did.

In a short time, I caught on and could speak and read a little. Then I really began to learn. I went from class 1A to 1B (1/2 year), then from 1B to 2B (1 year), then from 2B to 3B (1 year), then to 4A (1/2 year) and finally from 4A to 5A (1 year). I skipped 3 years at that time and so did my sisters.

Meanwhile, my father's grocery store was not doing well. Everyone bought on "trust" and very few paid. My mother had a brother in Chelsea, Massachusetts who visited us. He told my parents to get rid of the store and move to Chelsea. He assured us that my father would get a job there and we would be better off. In 1924, we moved to Chelsea and lived with my uncle until my father got a job. A company called Morrison & Schiff (operating Kosher delicatessens) opened a store in Chelsea and my father was made manager of a store. I entered school in 1924 in the 5th grade, then went to the 6th and then the 8th, skipping the 7th grade.

I really put all my energies into getting the best education I could. I went to the Williams School, which was very large, taking up 4 city blocks. I graduated in 1927 in the 9th grade and then entered Chelsea High School where I graduated in 1930.

Prior to my graduation, I worked after school, first in my father's delicatessen store and then in a flower shop delivering flowers for weddings and funerals, (mostly funerals) for \$2.00 a week including all day Saturday. I had saved up some money to go to college, but unfortunately, my father became sick and I had to use my college money to help support the family. Then the depression came and conditions became a lot worse. My father lost his job as manager of the store. The owners closed it because of very bad business. I also didn't have a job and my sisters had part time work for a while. Then I went to work for my cousin who had a shop where he mended and cleaned burlap bags, i.e. potato sacks, onion sacks and sugar sacks and then sold them to farmers and nurseries where they were used to wrap plants. I worked very hard but I didn't mind because I was the sole support of my family making \$15.00 per week for 50 hours. But even that stopped after a while. I was replaced there by another cousin.

I then got a job in a factory where they punch out leather soles for shoes. The process was as follows: The leather was all tanned and the hides would come in bundles. Each piece of leather had to be sprayed with water to soften them. Then the machines, called dinking machines, would knock out a finished leather sole. I worked there for a few months where I made the great sum of \$8.43 for six half days. The boss would not let you work three whole days for fear you would get another job and leave.

He would go to Florida and when he came back, would cut everyone's salary by \$1.00 to pay for his vacation. He had about 200 people working for him. Out of the \$8.43 I had to pay \$1.00 per week for transportation. At that rate, our family could hardly get by. We were lucky that we had a very understanding landlord. We owed him rent for 3 months or more and he never bothered us. He said, whenever we can pay him something, it will be all right.

As time went on, my job at the factory got very bad. I developed a bad cough from the smell of the leather. My cousin called me one day. He said that the job in the factory was not for me because I would get sick and not be able to work at all. They told me that they would loan me \$300.00 to buy a used truck and that I should go out buying junk from different factories. At first I did not care to do this, but out of necessity, I became a buyer of bags, metals, etc.

I found a good used truck for \$275.00 and used the rest for expenses. This was 1937-38 and I did not do well in my business. Then it seems that a miracle happened because business improved and I bought my first new truck.