

Our Dear Mother

"A Woman of Valor"

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There was talk of an impending war. My father had already served five years in the Czar's army during the Russian-Japanese conflict. He had no intention to serve a country that hated Jews and a land where government policy was to periodically raid Jewish settlements, burning their stores, running innocent citizens down on horseback and hacking them with their swords. The Cossacks were good at that.

It was 1912, in a small "dorf" or village in the Ukraine. My father brought my mother, my sister Celia, age six, and me, a one year old, to temporarily live with Mom's parents. Pop and his brother-in-law, Uncle Max, decided to leave their families and go to America, earn enough money and, in a few years, bring us to the USA. Little did they know, we would be separated for ten years.

In Osota, our house was made of mud walls and had a straw roof where rats also lived. One room was "Zaide's" or Grandfather's tiny general store. All of us lived, ate and slept in the other room. I could write pages about all other aspects of our lives in Russia in those times. However, this story is about our dear mother. From now on, without Pop, Mom had to help support the family. She began by sewing skirts and blouses for the peasant women. It seemed to me that she sewed day and night. Whenever I woke up, I could see her bent over her little sewing machine, turning the wheel furiously with her right hand while feeding the fabric with her left hand. There was no foot pedal then.

There came a time, in the middle of the night, when young thugs from the village broke down our front door and beat our grandfather without mercy, demanding money. We knew it was time to get out of Osota where we lived all of our lives. There were only six Jewish families and all decided to leave and move to a larger town called Alexandrovka, ten miles away.

It was Mom's ordeal to earn a living for our entire family. She opened a tiny space in the marketplace. It was no more than a row of shelves built into an outside wall that she could lock up with shutters for the night. To obtain merchandise, she had to travel to larger cities. She designed a sack with pockets to hang in front and back of her, under her outer clothing. She would fill these with sugar, rice, salt, or other staples. Weighing about fifty pounds more, she would hop freight trains to return home. If she bought fabric, she would wrap it around her body under her outer garments. This is the way she smuggled in her inventory. Communism, in its great wisdom, forbade capitalism. They called it speculating. The penalty was death when caught. She had more courage than many men. They sat home and starved.

During the Russian Revolution, we were invaded by retreating Cossack armies. They took their anger out on the Jews. They blamed us for Russia's downfall and murdered Jewish families as they passed through. Our town suffered five pogroms or raids on Jewish areas. Our neighbors gladly told the murderers where the Jews lived and the mayhem was repeated over and over again. One time, because our little home faced the rear of a main street, Jewish families crowded in. They hoped they would be overlooked. They weren't. Mom ran to the Jewish cemetery with my sister Celia and me. If we were about to die, let it be on holy ground. It seemed that others had the same idea. There we were, this frigid winter afternoon, shivering with fear and cold. Soon bands of these wild-eyed murderers were upon us, shooting, raping young women, demanding "denghy" or money. Mom, in her wisdom, kept small amounts in different pockets. They grabbed some coins from one and ran to rob the others. This way, she saved us many times. Toward evening there seemed to be less shooting. We made our way home, resting in a farmer's pigsty. The peasant women ran from the farmhouse and gave Celia and me a slice of bread, never saying a word. Many people were slaughtered that day. The dead were everywhere.

In another pogrom, these ruthless marauders burst into our house and robbed us of all our belongings. Our mother was so infuriated. I don't know how she raised the courage, but she charged after one of them and Celia and I followed after her. He turned a corner and fired at

Mom. The bullet chipped the brick where her head would have been had Celia and I not pulled her back.

Soon we were all down with Typhus. I got sick during the winter and remembered very little until spring. During that epidemic, our grandparents died. I saw, as if in a dream, Mom crawling, on her hands and knees, to the door where our good neighbors left bits of food for us.

Uncle Shloyme made plans for all of us to leave Alexandrovka. We would try to get close to the Latvian border and perhaps Riga, the capital city. There we could make contact with relatives in America. It took us six weeks to cross Russia. Sometimes we rode freight cars, other times we waited for days and slept on the floors at railroad stations. There weren't any train schedules.

We finally arrived in a town called Sebezh. The good Jews in a synagogue steered us to the only available shelter, an abandoned factory without windows and heat. There was almost as much snow inside as outside. It seemed like Siberia to us. I don't know why we didn't die that particular winter.

Somehow Mom learned what ingredients were needed to make soap. Empty shoe polish cans served as molds for cakes of soap, which she sold in the marketplace. Uncle Shloyme loaded freight cars and brought home frozen potatoes. They were sickening sweet. All food was hung from the rafters so that the rats, which were all over us during the night, were unable to steal it. One week, we had nothing left but a sack of onions. We ate them as if they were apples. I was about ten years old and began showing signs of starvation. My stomach and feet swelled and I was unable to walk anymore. The only thing I could eat was sugar sprinkled on black bread. Mom sat patiently by me and nursed me back to health. Sugar was very scarce and this was luxury.

Towards spring, our mother made contact with agents who, for a large sum of money, would steal us across the border into Latvia. The risk was very great. If caught by the border guards, it meant instant death. The weather was very cold. In the black of night and in complete silence, we

crossed fields, forests and waded across streams. Our clothing was frozen to our bodies. We were warned not to fall asleep for fear of freezing. One night, our hearts stood still when we heard border guards talking as they passed close to us. I noticed my mother's leg was bleeding. She was hurt climbing farm fences in the dark. By morning we knew we were safe at last. The sun was shining. The air was warm. We were in Riga, Latvia.

Soon our father contacted us with the help of the H.I.A.S. of America, an organization formed to reunite separated Jewish families. The long awaited reunion was at Ellis Island. Pop brought us to a wonderful home in Allentown, Pennsylvania. The year was 1922. Not long after our arrival in our new homeland, Mom gave us a gift of our two little brothers Philip and Mark. She did enjoy thirteen happy years in America. Her dear, brave heart had suffered through too much. She died in 1935 at only forty-nine.

Our mother was truly a woman of valor.