

The Life of
(Nacham)
Nathan Levin

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1995

This is the year of 1995. I, Meyer Levin, am the oldest son. I'm 83 years old. My sister, Celia, four years my senior, had passed away in 1970. Next is my brother, Philip, 71 years old. The youngest son is Mark, age 68.

My father Nacham, was born in the Ukraine province of Russia, in the town of Alexandrovskia in 1880. His father was Mayer, for whom I was named and his mother was Hodel. I know practically nothing of his childhood. In 1901, he was drafted into the Russian Czar's army. It was the law. It was during the Russian-Japanese war. He was stationed in the Caucasus in the Carpathian Mountains. Evidently, he had an aptitude for percussion instruments and was placed in the drum corps. Everyone was compelled to serve five years. He was discharged in 1906. In 1908, he married our mother, Chaia Adel. Her Americanized name was Ida. No doubt the marriage was arranged by a "shadchen" (matchmaker). The love came afterwards. Today, the romance comes first, and 50% of the time the divorce comes later and the love never, never comes. From what our mother told my sister, Celia and me, of the longing and sorrow that she suffered during the long years of separation from our father, we just know that they loved each other.

Nacham opened a fish store in Alexandrovskia. It was never a financial success. They had three children. The first was my sister Celia. Two years later, a girl named Ethel. This sweet unfortunate child only lived three years. She died of pneumonia. Her last wish was a sleigh ride with bells jingling from the horses' harnesses. The doctor knew that she was dying but he told my parents to grant her last wish. She did die that

cold winter night in her parents' arms. To this day, I feel their sadness. I was one year old.

The fish store was closed. Our father became an agent for the Singer Sewing Machine Company. That also had a dark side. Traveling by horse and wagon, he would display the machine to the peasant housewife. However, even though the woman wished to own one, he had to close the deal with the husband who was likely to be drinking Vodka in the local saloon. He had to buy the drinks and drink along with them. At that rate, he would sooner become a drunk than a wealthy salesman. One cold winter day, his head spinning from too many drinks, he drove his horse and wagon, sewing machine and himself off a bridge into the river below. Fortunately, nearby farmers came to the rescue. It took a team of oxen to pull the whole mess out of the icy river. That had to be the end of his agency with the Singer Sewing Machine Company.

It was 1912 and there were rumors of an impending war. Our father had already served five years in the Czar's army. It wasn't a picnic for a Jewish boy to bear the vicious anti-Semitism of those times. He wasn't anxious to repeat it.

Nathan and his sister Sarah's husband, Motel Bloch, decided to leave their families and travel to America, send home some money, and in a short while, bring them to America. (Motel's parents, to keep the boy out of the army, had one of his eardrums punctured. It didn't work. The army took him anyway and put him where he would suffer the most ... in the drum corps.) Little did they dream that the separation would last for ten years. Our father deposited us with our mother's parents, Feivel and Persie, who lived in a tiny farm village where there were never more than five or six Jewish families at any one time. It was called a "DORF."

"Zeida" (grandfather) had a small store that served the modest needs of those very poor farmers. Now that there were three more mouths to feed, mom had to become the breadwinner. She had a small sewing machine, the kind you operate with a small wheel with your right hand and feed the fabric with your left hand. It must have been that the foot pedal was not yet invented. At any rate, she did quite well. She must have been a

godsend to the peasant women who needed blouses and skirts. I do know that she worked day and night. I know that whenever I awoke during the night, there she was busily turning that little wheel of the sewing machine.

How the two brothers-in-law survived in a strange land, not knowing the language and having no particular skills, is a heartbreaking story that could fill volumes. They took any job available. One job, my father told me, was the hardest he ever had. It was unloading gravel from a train. They worked with wide shovels that weighed at least thirty pounds when full.

One thing worked in their favor. Eating was cheap. The breweries, while in competition with each other, provided long tables with cold cuts, bread, and cheese, free if you bought a five-cent glass of beer.

They had a few cousins in Philadelphia who must have advised them to try living in Allentown, Pennsylvania where the Jewish community was mostly engaged in the “junk” business of dealing in paper, rags and scrap metal. They each had enough money to buy horses and wagons and began visiting the farmers, who all had barns and were in the habit of storing “junk” to sell to these Jewish men.

By necessity, it was the custom for Jewish families to open their homes for “boarders”. That meant food and lodging. Both men benefited.

With everyone in the U.S. expecting war, junk became a much-needed commodity. Pop and Motel (now Max) denied themselves as much as possible to send as much or as little for us at home in Russia and to save for our leaving for America.

In 1914, World War I began in a life and death struggle with Germany. At the same time, Russia went through a revolution to “overthrow” the oppressive Czarist regime. It was the bloodiest period in world history. The communist People’s Army defeated the Czar’s Cossack armies, who in turn vented their rage on Russian Jews.

These were the “pogroms” where we experienced widespread massacres and hatred of our Christian neighbors.

The money our father, Nacham, so diligently sent to our mother literally went up in flames during the revolution. When Russia became a communist state, America broke off all relations. That meant no more mail or any business between the two nations.

Meanwhile, in America, Nacham and Motel read in the Jewish press about the slaughter, mentioning our own vicinity and they were sure that we had died. We stole across the Latvian-Russian border¹. In the border city of Riga, there was an organization called the H.I.A.S. of America that specifically searched for broken families. My mother applied for their help, although she had little hope of finding her husband. After a separation of ten years and no communication for eight of those years, what were the chances?

But they found our father! A dream come true! He brought us to the magical land called America. He had a beautifully furnished home waiting for us in Allentown.

In real life, there is no such thing as “they lived happily ever after” ... My mother soon perceived that in this town, we would always bear the stigma of being “green horns” or “no nothings” as newcomers. In a large city like Philadelphia, we had a much better chance of being absorbed.

We moved in 1923. Mom, Celia, and I rode with the moving van. Our dear father drove the horse (“Gertie”) and the wagon these sixty miles on a cold and windy March day. It took him at least twelve hours. When he finally drove up, he was frozen stiff. With help, we physically lifted him and got him into our warm house.

¹ I have recorded our miraculous survival in a separate published article entitled “Painful Memories”

Our poor father had to start over again - a strange city, a strange environment, no business, and no job. He moved knowing all that. But, he knew mother was right. He respected and loved her.

Philadelphians did not save their junk. They threw it out on trash day. He had to find something to do. He had a horse and wagon. He would get up at 4:00 a.m. each day and go to the wholesale fruit markets to try to learn what it was like. He started by buying bananas. Initially, he worked close to home and found the people were stubborn, offering him less than his cost. Further away, in another neighborhood, he found the people were more receptive. He bought only the best grade of fruit and found that they were pleased customers. They waited for him and he began to earn a living.

On May 4, 1924, little brother Philip was born. This is the Philip who is the father of Scott, Jonathan, and their sister Cathy. Philip named his son Scott for a fellow naval officer, Lawrence Scott Jullian. They both served as captains of mine sweeper ships in Wonsan Harbor during the Korean War. Philip saw his good friend perish when his ship struck a mine and was blown to bits. He named his next son **Jonathan** for our dear father Nathan (Nacham being his Hebrew name). Recently, we were together with Jonathan, his wife, Susy and their three month old, lovable, healthy son, Roberto Nathan who is named after Susy's father Roberto and our father Nathan (Nacham), his great grandfather.

Our parents, Nathan and Ida lived thirteen happy years after we were reunited in America. In 1935, our mother's loving heart gave up the struggle. Philip was ten at the time and Mark was eight. I, Meyer, was 23. My father loved his little boys. He and his wife Ida were robbed of ten years of the best time of their married life. They only realized thirteen happy years together. Mom was only 49 years old when she died. Pop's years were mostly all downhill after that. He died at the age of 63.

I should mention that the highlight of their life together was the grand wedding they made for my sister Celia to the man she loved, Joseph Litvin, in 1929.