

# How We Became an American Family

*a memoir*

M E Y E R   L E V I N

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# Painful Memories

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I do not want to give the impression that I am a writer. One doesn't suddenly become a writer at my age. I am almost sixty-eight years old. I suspect that it's part of growing old when the memories of when I was eight are sharper and clearer than memories of just last week.

So, what is this all about?

It's because of Sylvia, my darling wife, who, after listening to my stories countless times, of the pogroms after the Russian Revolution and my hometown, Osota, in the Ukraine, said, "You've had a very interesting early life, so write it down."

Why go to all of this trouble?

Thousands of children lived through those frightful years when Jews were being murdered for the unforgivable crime of being born Jewish. Thousands of accounts have been written since. Doesn't the Holocaust of the Hitler era overshadow, a thousand-fold, the Russian pogroms? Also, one might question the accuracy and depth of a boy's memory when he was only eight and attempts to tell his life's story sixty years later at the age of sixty-eight. It would seem ridiculous. But then,

why do my friends want to hear more whenever I tell them the experiences I have lived through in those terrible years after World War I?

I was born on the third day of Chanukah in 1911 in a small town in the Ukraine called Alexandria. I celebrate my birthday on November 7<sup>th</sup>. My sister Celia was four and my sister Ethel was two. This little girl died at the age of three. I have often heard the story of her last day on earth from my parents. She was dying of pneumonia, and her one heart's desire was a sleigh ride through the snow, listening to the bells jingling on the horses' harnesses. On her last night, the doctor told my father to give her her last wish. My father hired a sleigh, and my mother bundled Ethel up against the winter cold. She did die during the ride. Only now, as a parent, can I understand the immense heartache those young parents suffered, even to their graves.

My father had a fish store, which was a failure. What to do? He moved the family to my maternal grandparents, Favel and Pessie Piati-gorsky, in Osota. It was a small village where, at no time, were more than five Jewish families permitted. *Zeida* (grandfather) had a very small general store. The principal items were axle grease, kerosene, vinegar, sugar, salt, and flour which we had to put through a sieve to remove the mice droppings that were always present.

Here, then, in Osota, did my father, Nachum Levinsky, deposit my mother Chaya-Adel, Celia, and me. We were allowed to live there because my mother had been born there. When it came to my father, that was another story. Czarist Russia couldn't tolerate another Jew (my father) to be added to the population of Jews in Osota. Their wicked hearts could not conceive, or take into consideration, that they would be separating a husband from his wife, a father from his children. Jews did not warrant such consideration. A law is a law! Pop was allowed to live in Kaminka, about fifteen miles away. To see us, he would visit us in our little village in the dead of the night. If Jews of my generation, especially with our experience and background, are fearful of the non-Jewish world, I would say we have good reason. I am very happy that my children do not have these hang-ups. It is a privilege to live in this wonderful country of ours.

What was my father to do? He became an agent for the Singer Sewing Machine Company. He would drive a horse and wagon with a sample sewing machine from town to town, demonstrating it to the peasant women. Although the housewife would like to own one, she had very little to say about it. Pop had to see her husband, the *muzhik*. Where was he? In the saloon, of course! As any traveling salesman knows, you have to buy drinks, or it's no sale. You can't pretend. You have to drink with them. Poor Pop! The way things were going, he would become a drunkard sooner than a rich man.

Events have a way of reaching a climax. One winter day, his head spinning from too much vodka, Pop drove his horse, wagon, sewing machine, and himself off a bridge into a frozen river below. Peasants came with oxen and rope and pulled them out. He was near frozen, but he survived. That was the end of that business too. What to do next?

My father and my uncle Mottel Block, his brother-in-law, who was married to his sister, Sarah, and was much in the same circumstances, decided to go to America. They would leave their families for a while, send money home, and then bring them over. Also, there was talk of an impending war. My father already served the Czar for five years, from 1901 to 1906. He was the company drummer and stationed in the Caucasus Mountains during the Russo-Japanese War. Jews serving the Czar were more likely to be beaten to death by their officers and "buddies" than to die on the battlefield. To avoid this torture, some Jews had their trigger fingers cut off. Some hacked off toes so they could not march. Some sneaked off to America. A very small percentage made it. Let's not even speculate about those that were caught. Uncle Mottel was drafted even though he purposely had one of his eardrums punctured. To add to the torment, he was put into the bugle corps, which was murder on his ears.

Finally, in 1912, the two brothers-in-law went off to America. The war began in 1914. How they struggled in America and managed to send money home is an epic in itself. Pop sent a thousand dollars, bit by bit. It was worth two thousand rubles in Russian money. Later in 1918, during the Russian Revolution, the banks and the money went up in flames. That was that!

Meanwhile, my mother was trying to earn a living in Osota. She sewed blouses and skirts for the peasant women. It seemed to me that she sewed day and night. As a matter of fact, she did just that. Between longing for her husband and working so hard, she became thinner and thinner. It reached a point that a doctor ordered her to stop and go to a rest area somewhere, or she would definitely become consumptive. This she did.

My sister Celia, my mother's sister, Aunt Fradel, my mother, and I went to the rest area. I remember that as children, we had a marvelous time. We had a cabin to ourselves, and the forest smelled so good. Even though it was summer, it was very cool. We were issued hammocks to relax and take naps. However, we were not allowed to tie the hammocks to the trees. The camp supervisor came through the woods, and especially if you were asleep, would cut the ropes, and we would fall on our heads. To this very day, I cannot understand what was expected of us as no other means was provided to tie them down. I suspect that it was because we were Jews—showing us that even as paying guests, we were not worth any consideration and had no right to complain. Nevertheless, my mother did recover.

We children learned to love our Zeida and Bubbe (grandparents) very much those few years in Osota. Zeida Favel and Bubbe Pessie were fifteen years old when they married. He was just five feet tall. He was pious to the extreme and a student of the Talmud to the fullest extent. No one dared argue the Talmud with Favel. He was respected and feared by his peers and even by the peasants, the customers of his general store. He was a tough, uncompromising little man. On Friday evening, the beginning of the Sabbath, the store sign would come off the hooks above the door, and Saturday evening, our yard would be crowded with peasant customers looking for the first star of the evening to appear. The peasants would hang up the store sign for him. They did respect Zeida and his religion without malice. They also knew that he was completely honest to a fault. Mom and Bubbe could not change his orthodoxy and stubborn nature, even if our livelihood was at stake.

Of course, as a child of four, I couldn't have made these observations, but I heard enough and quite often about these traits of this little unbending man.

Osota was a village of mud huts and straw roofs. The huts must not have been very high because I could reach some of the straw, which I did with a lit match. I still remember the licking I got. Fortunately, a bucket of water from the nearby well put the fire out.

Across the road from where we lived, they were building a school. It was the first brick structure in Osota. It was a most eventful year for everybody. The construction workers and supervisors were from another city. They obtained a lot of their daily food provisions from my grandfather's store. They ran a credit account with him, which was to be settled when the school was completed. After nearly a year, the amount owed was staggering. Almost eleven hundred rubles were due when they came to settle up. It was Saturday, and they were leaving the following day. You guessed it! Zeida Favel would not handle the money on the Sabbath. He was *davening* (praying) and wouldn't even talk. My mom and grandma pleaded with him to allow them to open the account book and receive the payment. He answered with his fierce dark eyes. The answer was, "NO!" And "No" meant "No!" It was the Sabbath. Can you imagine their frustration? The men were gentlemen. They left the approximate amount with Kripko, a nearby peasant neighbor. That was Zeida.

Everyone was sure that he was a *Lamed-Vovnik*, one of the thirty-six just men responsible for preserving the world according to Jewish lore. There was only a handful of them.

He nevertheless had a warm and human side to his character. This I do remember clearly. He would take two cigarettes from the store, take me by the hand, and we would hide in the woods nearby. He would light one for me and one for himself, and we would puff away. His eyes and face were one big smile. When Mom and Bubbe found out what he was doing, he got hell for it, just as any other man would, *tsadik* (wise man) or no *tsadik*. I was no more than four years old at the time.

One night will forever live in my memory. There was a terrible banging on the door, and with a crash, the door caved in. Three or four young hoodlums, faces covered with kerchiefs, were in the house. “*Davai denghi, Zhidovskaia Chara!*” (Give us your money, you ugly-faced Jew!) We trembled as we watched them beating Zeida with clubs. He was only five feet tall. Even a much stronger man would not have been a match for them. He found them the money, and they left. In the morning, undaunted, Zeida went outside, shook his little fist at our neighbor’s house, and shouted, “*Kripko, bisovah crov!*” (“Kripko, you with the blood of the devil”). “I know it was your sons who beat me and robbed me last night!” When Mom and Bubbe heard him out there shouting at the top of his voice, fearless as a giant, they boldly dragged him into the house. They were terrified that he so openly identified them. Surely, they would kill us all. If not tonight, then tomorrow night.

We knew what had to be done next. After so many generations in Osota, we must leave. All of the other Jewish families, all related, also decided to get out. Plans were made for everyone to go and live in Alexandrovka, about ten miles away. Wagons were loaded with all we owned, and the exodus began. I enjoyed the ride, the first I could remember, in a horse and wagon. I was amazed to see the trees flying past us, for it seemed to me, in my childish delight and illusion, that I was standing still and the trees were moving. I must have been five at the time.

In Alexandrovka, my mother became the breadwinner. This town had a market square. She rented a *shafa*, a hole-in-the-wall store. It was a closet with shelves and doors that locked up for the night. No more, no less, she was a businesswoman, that’s for sure. She would have played the stock market in America with the best of them. Mom had an uncanny way of knowing what items would be “real hot,” and she would jump on a train to a bigger city and buy up those items. She was never wrong. But it wasn’t that simple. It was during the Bolshevik Revolution, and it was called “speculating.” Everywhere else in the world, this was always the normal way to conduct business. In Russia, at that time, it was punishable by death. No trials were necessary.

How then did they manage? It took guts, lots of guts. If Mom bought cloth or gauze ribbons, she would wind this fabric around her body, under her clothing. The added weight caused her to have a harder time jumping into freight cars which, at that time, made up the majority of the rolling stock of the Russian railroad. If she left to bring back sugar or salt, she would sew burlap bags under her clothing that would fit over her head and hang down in front and back. These would be full on the way back and heavy, very heavy. She did what most men dared not do. No wonder she died at forty-nine, a valiant woman who wore out her heart ahead of time. She made a profit when others sat and starved. They called her "*Chaya-Adel, de kleegeb*," meaning "Chaya-Adel, the clever one."

Among the many curses that revolution brings are starvation, death, political unrest, disruption in transportation, fears, suspicions of freedom, pogroms on Jews, and the curse of inflation. Every few weeks, new money was printed by the ton, and each time with another zero added. A loaf of bread was five rubles, then fifty rubles. Next thing, it was five hundred rubles. Everyone was a "millionaire," and everyone became poorer and poorer.

One bright and beautiful summer day in the market square, there was a commotion. Suddenly, the Cossacks, on horseback, were upon us, swords shining in the sun. They swooped down on the crowd, beating people on the head and shoulders with the flat sides of their swords. Havoc and trouble had arrived. Everyone scattered in all directions. Mom told Celia to grab the money and run for her life. Money was stuffed into a large straw bag with two handles. When we finally came home safely, Mom discovered that the money did not arrive with us. My sister Celia, in all of the excitement, threw the bag away. Mom estimated that she lost a million rubles that day. That was an introduction of what was to come, the pogroms.

The Cossack armies, under the leadership of such generals as Kolchak, Makhno, Deniken, and Petlyura, were on the run. The Bolshevik armies were closing in on them across all of Russia. Although the Cossacks were supplied and financed by the Western powers, the Allies of World War I—England, France, Japan, the United States, and, after the

armistice, Germany as well—were suffering one defeat after another. Designed to crush communism, they failed. Frustrated, they blamed (you know who) the Jews. Their “battle cry” was “*Bai Jidi, spasai Russia*” (“Kill the Jews, save Russia!”). They succeeded in killing the Jews.

One fine day, quite unexpectedly, they came marching in. It was a sight to behold; mounted Cossacks with large fur hats, bandoliers, with hundreds of bullets crossing their chests, and swords at their sides. Long mustaches adorned their fierce, ugly faces. With long coats, almost touching the ground, they rode in by the hundreds. Mom, Celia, and I were visiting my mother’s sister, Aunt Yenta, and her husband, my Uncle Shloime. She knew the soldiers meant trouble. She grabbed us by the hand and began to hurry home. I saw the Cossacks mounting a machine gun at the intersection. I wanted to stop and examine the operation, but I got such a yank that it lifted me off the ground. Their war cry, “Kill the Jews,” was hailed by our Ukrainian neighbors, and they became very helpful by pointing out where the Jews lived. It was a mild introduction of what was yet to come. That night, they broke in doors, took anything of value, smashed everything else, bashed in heads, broke some bones, and left the next day. They let us off easy.

In a few weeks, another band came through. This was going to be different. We heard thunder in the distance that turned out to be artillery shelling the town. Shells hit buildings and knocked gaping holes in brick walls. Balls of fire exploded in the streets, and suddenly, there they were. How many hiding places were there that would really save us? We got up into the attic. In our haste, we didn’t even grab a piece of bread or any water. We sat there in complete darkness, shivering and teeth chattering. I got severe stomach cramps that would cause me to double up with pain. These pains came like clockwork with each subsequent pogrom. We heard curses, shouts, cries of pain, rifle and pistol fire, and women screaming all through the day and night. My mom remembered a prayer in Hebrew and made us repeat it without stopping a thousand times. It helped. We hung onto those words like our life depended on them.

Fortunately, the Bolshevik army was right on their heels, and the Cossacks pulled out. People were lying on the street crying for help.

They were bleeding from saber cuts that hacked them to pieces. The Bolsheviks marched in. The Jews crawled out of their hiding places. They were our “saviors.” Many Jewish boys were in their army. My Uncle Shayka, age seventeen, was with them. We children examined his submachine gun and his uniform. We collected the hundreds of empty, beautiful brass shells that were all over the streets. We played with them and treasured them like kids with marbles.

There were many funerals the next day. The dead were carried to the cemetery in sheets, not coffins. Every Jewish man, woman, and child, in Alexandrovka was in this heart-breaking funeral procession. You don't forget things like that, even at the age of nine.

It was already cold when the next pogrom occurred. The thundering of artillery was the first alarm. The men, particularly, were the first sought-after victims. They hid as best they could. They would pile trash, rags, or other refuse on top of themselves, lying there in hopes of being overlooked. Our little house, in the back of our landlord's bigger home, was not so noticeable. People crowded in on us, hoping they would be overlooked. Our house only had two rooms. A big china closet was placed against the door of one room so that it covered it completely. The other room was at the mercy of whoever found our little hut. As it started to crowd up, my mother made a decision. If we were to be killed, let it take place “*auf dem Heiligen ort*” (“at the Jewish cemetery”). She took the children by the hand and ran about a half of a mile across fields, past peasant homes to this cemetery. It seemed that we were not the only ones. Others had the same thought. We sat there on this cold day, and there they were. Roaming bands of Cossacks came at us, with their wild eyes, crazy with the desire to kill and rob and kill and kill. Mom was wise. She kept small amounts of money in various pockets. They would always start with, “*Davai denghi!*” (“Let's have your money!”) She would hand over the money from one pocket, saving us with this strategy as they were always in a hurry to rob other Jews.

Finally, one lone bandit ran toward us. Nearby, a very pretty Jewish girl was sitting amongst the graves, along with little Muni, my boyfriend. Why he was there, all alone, we'll never know. This monster dragged the young woman out of sight. As young as I was, I knew what

the commotion in the bushes meant. When they appeared again, he told her to lie face down, took aim, and fired. Her body jumped, and her pretty head looked like a crushed watermelon. Then, without so much as a grunt, he shot the little boy. We were next. He told us to get up. My mother held Celia's hand on her left, and I was on the right. He raised his rifle at my sister first. The thought in my mind was whether my winter coat was thick enough to stop a bullet.

Miracles do happen! Another soldier came running toward us, shouting, "*Poidom, treba ostipayo!*" ("Let's go. We're pulling out!") His face seemed kind. He was our angel of mercy. Later on, we speculated that he looked Jewish. I doubt that—but we were saved.

It was now late in the day, and we started for home. I remember we rested at a farmer's pigsty. A peasant woman ran out of the house and, without saying a word, gave Celia and me large slices of bread and ran back into the house. We entered our town. The wooden door of an outhouse was torn off. A young man was lying dead across a fence, and another was slumped on the ground, dead. Two more were killed in a narrow street near our house. Later on, my cousin Mendel, who was about twenty years old, told us how the Jewish boys were told to run one at a time down this narrow street. They were being used for target practice. When it was his turn, he didn't run straight. He zigzagged as fast as he could. Their shots were missing him. He reached the end of the block, turned a corner, and disappeared. He was saved.

Those that remained in our little house were slaughtered. They didn't let the children look—but we could hear. The people in the small room blocked by the china closet were saved. The murderers did not know there was another room there. The others—men, women, and children—were shot or beaten to death. About six or seven people perished. One girl, a bride-to-be, was still sitting in a chair. Her head was in her lap, hanging by the skin of her throat. She had been beheaded. I did not see, but I heard people crying, screaming, and wailing. That's how I knew. It was told and retold, time and time again.

How did my grandfather live through all of this? Like a lion. He had that kind of courage. I remember one day, Cossacks were in every room in the house, stealing anything they could get their hands on. I

was with Zeida. At these times, he would wear his big tallis over his head, face the eastern wall, and pray *tehillim*. These were prayers said in times of great danger. One of the “animals” who burst into the room, wild-faced from robbing and killing, took one look at this strange man and stopped in his tracks. My grandfather slowly turned toward him and looked him straight in the face with his own fierce black eyes, never saying a word. The murderer thought he had seen a ghost. Slowly, he backed out of the room. Zeida had no fear of them, only contempt.

My mom had the same kind of courage. One time, after a Cossack took the clothing in the house, she became so infuriated that she ran after him, and Celia and I ran after her. The fellow turned a corner, and we children grabbed her real hard, pulling at her coat and crying. As a parting farewell, the robber fired a shot and chipped the brick just where her head would have been in another split second. The rest of that winter, we wore all the clothing we owned, layer upon layer. Celia had as many as four dresses on her all the time.

One of the worst tragedies befell our family.

Zeida’s younger brother, Moishe, was considered a rich man. He had a department store in Alexandrovka. He was and dressed like a secular Jew, a man of the world.

One night, the Cossacks invaded his home. The family was hiding in the attic. One of his sons was home from college for the Christmas holiday. He was behind a door. Even though he was armed with a pistol, he never had a chance. They shot him. They pulled the whole family from the attic, all but my little cousin, Celia, my age—Moishe’s daughter. They shot the women. They took mom’s Uncle Moishe outside for some reason. His son, Leonya, age twelve, ran after them. He saw them shoot his father near the well in the yard. As they were leaving, they fired at him. They blew off his right arm above the elbow. He wandered the night, half-insane with pain and fever, until the only doctor in town, a Gentile, found him and amputated his arm. Little Leonya was interested in astronomy and even had a telescope, a gift from his father. He’s now in Russia and is a famous astronomer. Strangely enough, we remember that he used to practice writing left-handed before this happened.

My mother took these children to live with us, and I well remember his pitiful cries that his fingers ached, although he had none. His sister Celia, blond and beautiful, was raped and murdered when she was sixteen. I do not know the circumstances of her tragic death.

It stopped after a while. Communists were in control now. There were no more pogroms, but another catastrophe came—typhus. I took sick in the winter, I'm sure. I remember having a fierce headache. When next I opened my eyes, it was spring. Trees outside my window had little green leaves. Birds were singing, and the sky was blue. We all had the sickness. Zeida and Bubbe died. Neighbors left little bits of food at our doorstep, and Mom would crawl out of bed on hands and knees to open the door. Sick as she was, she kept us alive. We all lost our hair, and we looked strange. In time, our hair grew back.

In the summer of 1921, our relatives began to talk about going to America. Meetings were held. Plans were made. Uncle Shloime obtained a map and planned, town by town, city by city, the escape route to the Baltic states. Preparations meant clothing to be taken and food prepared for the voyage. Mom baked loaves of bread. The loaves were sliced and dried into a hard crust. Meat was marinated to withstand rotting. Teapots were made with another false bottom by a local Jewish tinsmith for storing gold coins. They were wrapped in cloth to prevent rattling. A few bags of salt and sugar were taken along. Each man, woman, and child had a bundle to carry.

Burdened as we were, we had to pile into freight cars together with thousands of people when the train arrived. My Uncle Shloime had a superhuman job, throwing the children in first and then helping the women. My Aunt Fradel, Mom's sister, wasn't very athletic and gave my uncle a great deal of trouble. She got plenty of cursing from him. He threatened to leave her behind if she didn't make a greater effort to lift herself onto the boxcar. After all, there were eleven of us to worry about.

There were no scheduled runs by the railroad in those post-revolutionary days. Hundreds, even thousands of people camped on the hard, cold floors of the railroad station for days and, when a freight car approached, people flocked like flies around honey. Not all got inside the

boxcars. Just as many settled on the roofs, clung to the sides, or in between cars. Many fell asleep during the night and lost their hold. They fell and perished under the wheels.

Once inside, it was so crowded that no one could lie down. We sat on our bundles and had no alternative but to urinate on them. It was impossible to get to the door. Some of the runs were as long as twenty-four hours. We had to cross all of Russia from the Ukraine to the borders of the Baltic states. It took us six weeks.

In a few days, there were maggots in our bread and marinated meat. Uncle Shloime was a very resourceful man. Here's how he solved the problem. He said, "*Kinderlach*, I'll show you what to do. If you tap the crusts of the bread on a hard surface, you can see the worms fall out. See? Now you can eat it. You can eat the meat too. Just wipe the worms off, and it will taste real good." We had complete faith in his advice. He always solved such problems for us.

After our food was gone, Uncle Shloime and Mom would purchase whatever was available at different railroad stations. Peasant women were offering black bread, onions, cheese, etc., for sale. We soon found out that the bread was composed of a large mixture of sand. It was impossible to chew. Bringing our teeth together would drive us insane. Again, Uncle Shloime came to the rescue. "*Kinderlach*, I'll show you how to eat this bread. You don't bring your teeth together. Just turn the bread over and over with your tongue. When it becomes soft, swallow it." It worked.

In later years, I read about the great famine of Russia that winter. Stalin sold most of the wheat crop to get much-needed hard cash. He needed arms for the Bolshevik army. Forty million people died that year. Children perished from bleeding intestines due to the mud from the riverbanks that was mixed with the black bread. It's almost unbelievable for people in other lands, where food is abundant, to understand that those things went on.

We finally came to a town called Sebezh. It was during the Jewish holiday, but it was like Siberia to us. It was bitter cold. We went to the only *shul* (Jewish school) in that small town and told them our situation. They let us stay in this synagogue for a few days, and then they



*"Our hero!*

*Uncle planned our escape from the Ukraine to the Baltic states, clear across Russia.*

*We were seven children in both families."*

Meyer's uncle, Shloime Piatigorsky, in

Russian army uniform, 1915

hundreds and threw them into this very hot tin can, and we shouted with joy as the lice would actually explode from the heat. It was a good game, but a losing battle against lice. Uncle Shloime never had a course in child psychology, but I rate him with the best. We were cold, hungry, and sick. Nevertheless, he'd sit us all around in a circle and teach us to sing beautiful Chassidic songs, and we were so happy. It took our minds off our miseries. We'll always love that man.

Uncle Shloime somehow got a job loading freight cars and was permitted to bring home sacks of frozen potatoes. They were sickening sweet and couldn't be eaten unless they were salted and peppered a great deal. All of us watched with horror as our little bag of salt got smaller

found us a place. It was an abandoned factory building. The glass from the windows was long gone. Already, the snow was inside, and it was as high as the windowsills. There was a large brick oven where they used to make soap. We scrounged for wood, which was next to impossible to find, and the feeble fire was hardly enough even to allow us to undress or remove our winter clothing.

We were never free of lice in Russia, even in the best of times. You cannot imagine how infested we were at this point. Again, Uncle Shloime had the solution. He kept up our morale by making a game out of it. He found a lid from a can of shoeshine polish. He placed it on the fire. He said that this is what he did when he was in the Russian army. We picked off the lice by the

and smaller. Everything was scarce, even salt. Amazingly, fish was plentiful in that town. It was near a lake. We would watch Russian soldiers bathe in this frozen lake. This was all the more reason to fear men who could do a thing like that. Soon, the steady diet of fish began to have an adverse effect on me, as well as some of the other children. The smell became repulsive. I could not open my mouth to eat the fish, even if my life depended on it, which it did.

In due course, symptoms of starvation began to appear. My legs and my feet began to swell. My stomach, as well as Shloime's son, little cousin David's, began to swell. We became weak and didn't move anymore. My mom bought some dried peas in the marketplace, which were ground into flour. They made flat cakes and baked them in an oven. The crust was halfway palatable, but the inside was a wet, green, sticky mess that, again, I could not eat. I knew the smell of bed bugs, and this was the smell of bed bugs, as far as I was concerned. I was sure to die.

This time, Mom came to the rescue. Our supply of sugar was only a small bag, perhaps two pounds. It was hung by a string from the ceiling so that the rats couldn't get at it. It was this sugar that she would sprinkle on bread that I was then able to eat. That and her love pulled me through. I began to feel better.

Somehow, Mom found out the ingredients to make soap. This she did in the oven. Mom found an assortment of sardine tins that others ate from and poured this liquid into them. When it hardened, she took them to the marketplace and sold them. It wasn't perfumed soap, but it sold. She was ingenious. Once she brought home a skinny, rusty herring that cost a fortune, and we had a party. We children used to take turns smelling the empty sardine cans and swoon with pleasure. We didn't remember ever eating such delicacies. Once, we found some chicken bones and took turns smelling the aroma that still seemed recognizable. There came a day when there was nothing left for us to eat but a bag of onions. Morning, noon, and night, it was onions. We ate them as you would an apple. We got rosy cheeks from that diet.

Life was hard in Sebez. I spoke of the rats. All food was suspended by ropes from the ceiling. At night, we went to sleep with sticks in our hands. The rats swarmed over us in our sleep, and every night



Adele Block and Meyer, 1913

was a battle. Little Adele, Uncle Mottel's daughter, was always fainting, and Mom would revive her. She had to pry open her clenched teeth with a knife or spoon so that she wouldn't swallow her tongue. I don't know how my mother knew that. Mom was determined to bring Adele to her father in America. She traveled along with us as my sister.

Just at *Pesach* time (Passover), Mom managed to contact agents who could steer us across the border to the Baltic states. Half of the money was paid in Russia. The

other half was to be paid in Latvia to another agent. How was one to be sure that it was the right person and not the police? A piece of blue velvet cloth was cut in half in a zigzag fashion. The agent in Latvia was to have one half of it. If and when we got there, we would produce the other half. If the cut matched, his identity as our agent would be proven, and he would be paid.

We started out one evening, one or two at a time. We met in the outskirts of the town where a guide was hiding in the woods. If we were caught, we would surely find ourselves in the prison that was across the street from the factory building in which we lived. We remembered well how these prisoners were at all of the barred windows, minus glass, pleading with the passersby to help them take the messages they threw out into the street. We also knew that if you did that, you would surely wind up inside with them. We took a terrible chance trying to leave. The Soviet Union did not allow emigration to America. Five of us were leaving; Mom, Tante Fradel, Adele, Celia, and me. Shloime and his wife Yenta, and their children, cousins Lou, Nathan, Ethel, and David, remained behind. They had no one in America. Later on, they got permission to go to Palestine.

We trudged through the woods in complete silence. We had to wade across a creek, and our clothes froze instantly. Our guide left us for a while. Border patrols were close by. We were warned to stay awake and keep our arms and legs moving. If anyone had fallen asleep, they would have frozen to death. It was a night of terror! By morning, we were in Latvia, where we were led to an empty house to await the proper agent. We found a small piece of matzo, and we took turns biting into it in little bits. Nothing tasted this good in months.

Finally, we arrived in Riga. It was a new world for me—automobiles, honking of horns, drivers sticking out their left arms while making turns. All these sights of candy stores, clothing stores, and large buildings nearly drove me crazy. Even the weather changed. The sun was warm. We were free of overcoats. The misery of our previous life vanished.

The HIAS of America (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) found our father! This was the father I never knew and dreamed about, always asking my mother if he was good-looking. She assured Celia and me that no one in the world was more handsome than he. Soon, the visas and ship tickets arrived. We boarded the *Lithuania* in the port of Libau. We were on our way to Pop and America.

Fourteen days on the stormy Atlantic was, for most people, way down in third class, nothing short of hell. The vomiting, the stench, the wailing, the wish to die right there and then never ceased. For me, it was a paradise full of food. I added to everyone's misery the way I ate. There were tables laden with white bread, butter, jelly, eggs, cocoa, meats, and fish. Because everyone else was seasick, I had it all to myself! I was the most hated kid on board.

Ellis Island was the last horror. My mom took me into the women's bathhouse. All those naked female bodies shocked and horrified me. I was nearly out of my mind. I was ten years old and short for my age. I reached no higher than their middle. I was in a sea of buttocks and bellies. I felt degraded.

Horror number two: Being the only male child, I was separated from my family and put into a large cage with some Hungarian Jews who spoke a strange Yiddish. They seemed so preoccupied with their

own problems that they paid no attention to my screaming and crying for my mother. I was sure that I'd never see her again.

Then came the physical examination, and there seemed to be a question about the redness of my eyes. It was no small wonder. The way I cried, my eyes must have looked like red onions. If the doctors thought it was an infection, I faced deportation back to Russia alone and to certain oblivion. I would not survive without my mother. The crying became hysterical. Just then, I saw them all in another line— Mom, Celia, my aunt, and my cousin. I took off screaming toward them. The way I held onto my mother, the whole U.S. Army couldn't pry me away. They let me go—they understood.

Finally, we were on the ferry and still no father. We were stunned and saddened. Just as we were about to pull out, two men were running toward us. One was taller and dark-complexioned. The other was shorter and blue-eyed. No one had to tell me which one was my father even though almost ten years had gone by. He didn't know this boy of



*"We're on our way to America and see our father."*

Left to right: Cousin Adele, Meyer, Chaya-Adel and Celia in their passport photograph for emigration to America, 1922

almost eleven, and I never saw him except in my imagination. We were united at last.