

Russian-American Episodes¹

Growing Up in the Old and New Worlds, and in Between



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When I was six months old my parents moved from Riga, where I was born, to Moscow. The first thing I recollect in Moscow is the coronation of Alexander the Third, when I was about three years old. My old nurse, Praskovia, took me with her to watch the parade on the great “Plo-sched” (plaza) in front of the Kremlin. We were comfortably seated on soap boxes in front of a store or dwelling. When the grand procession came along Praskovia stood up and put me on her shoulder so that I had a wonderful view before me. I remember the open carriage, drawn by many white horses beautifully bedecked, in which sat the Czar and Czarina, gorgeously attired. The Czar’s white uniform was trimmed in gold braid, while numerous medals shone on his breast; on his head was a tall military hat with a long plume, and as he bowed right and left in answer to the cheers and shoutings of the populace the plume waved constantly and was a great delight to my childish eyes. There were many guards on horseback surrounding the carriage. After several other carriages passed there arose a mighty cheer and when I asked my nurse what it was about she said: “look, there is Prince Nicholas.” How impressive the handsome youth looked on his snow white steed as he sat erect smiling and bowing while deafening cheers rent the air. When years later I read with horror of the assassination of Czar Nicholas this scene stood out clearly in my mind.

When I was four years old we lived in a house situated on the shores of “Chisti Prood,” a large lake solidly frozen over in the winter. There I had my first glimpse of real winter sports in Russia. Such joy and abandon and genuine enjoyment is rarely seen nowadays. The young people looked as if they had no other thought in their heads but the actual enjoyment of the present. What fun it was to watch the animated scene. Beautiful ladies dressed in rich furs – fur coat, fur hats, and even fur boots, with muffs to match – sat in high sleds while handsome youths on skates, also in furs – short fur coats, trousers tucked into high boots, round fur caps on their heads – pushed these sleds up and down the ice rapidly, forming a procession that looked something like a roller chair parade on the Atlantic City boardwalk. What a thrill it must have been to participate in such sports!

Another incident, which occurred that winter, is clearly graven on my mind. My brother, Mischa, who was a lively youngster and always up to some mischief, ran into the house one cold day crying loudly and pointing to his tongue which was bleeding profusely. Mother rushed for water and bandages and soon stopped the bleeding. Then she began to question the boy as to what had happened. Mischa explained that as he was passing a hydrant he wondered how it would feel like to put his tongue to the cold iron; he followed the impulse and immediately rued the act. He discovered that his tongue stuck fast to the hydrant and try as he could he could not get it loose; in desperation he gave one hard pull and leaving part of his skin on the iron he wrenched his tongue loose and found it sore and bleeding. He ran home badly frightened and vowed he would never do so foolish a stunt again.

Then again I remember my little Russian playmate Vania who lived in the house next to ours on Chisti Prood, and a peculiar experience that I had in that house. My parents, who were strictly Orthodox, would not allow us to eat in other people's houses for fear the food would not be "kosher." So deeply was this fear impressed in me that when little Vania begged me one day to have dinner with him I shook and trembled at the thought of what my parents would say. The boy begged so hard that his mother had to send the servant to my house to ask my parents' permission without which I would not dare to stay. For some reason my parents could not say no (perhaps the danger of angering their Gentile neighbors was too great). Hard as it may be to believe, I still recall in horror the terrible feeling that assailed me as I put the first spoonful of the "treifa" (unkosher) soup or "tachi" to my lips. For the first time in my life I was committing an unpardonable sin, and at the thought the tears sprang to my eyes and I almost choked. Noticing Vania's troubled eyes fixed on me, I conquered my abhorrence and finished the meal somehow. So hard is it to throw off habits of tradition and religion acquired in the early years of our lives.

I was five, when my father, who was a fur trader for a large importing firm, was transferred to Orenburg, northern Russia, and there we lived for three years. There were six children in the family at the time: the oldest was Anuta, then three brothers – Jascha, Volodia, Mischa, then I, Liza and my little brother Sergei.

Orenburg is situated on the Ural River, surrounded by the Ural Mountains. Across the river were deep forests at the edge of which opened up the deserts. The temperature there was very extreme, something like Northern Canada, the winters extremely cold, snow lying on the ground solidly frozen for three months. In the summer the heat was so terrific that we used to cook eggs in the sand. Naturally most of the young people used to spend the greatest part of the day on the river or in the forests. My three oldest brothers had a boat of their own and played hooky from school most of the time, the attractions of swimming, boating, fishing, being too strong to withstand. Anuta used to take me down to the river in the morning and leave me there in care of a nurse girl while she returned to help mother. What fun to splash in the water and play in the sand without being hampered by clothes! We would have a lunch after a swim and then take naps under the trees. A truly primitive life.

Sometimes we would have family picnics in the forests, and those were gala days. A boatload of food, cooking utensils and blankets would be packed by the servants and the boys would row us across, making several trips. We would camp at the edge of the desert, and I can never forget the contrast of the cool forest and the hot stretch of sand. The Samovar would be started at the same time as the camp fire so that the water for tea would be ready (iced drinks were unknown to

us.) Such food, and such appetites! There would be dancing, singing, swimming, games, etc. And then the trip home at dusk, when the air was cool and fragrant. A tired but happy lot of youngsters, with never-to-be forgotten joys behind us and still as may ahead of us on the morn. These care-free, happy, lazy days are the most pleasant memories of my childhood.

I want to record one outstanding incident at this time, which was afterwards retold so many times that it became a family joke. Volodia and Mischa came home one hot evening looking wild and dishevelled, their faces flaming red, and their eyes inflamed and almost bursting out of their sockets. Mother took one look at them, and realizing something was wrong sent them to bed. They started to wave their arms and cry: "There are spiders, roaches and bugs on the walls, there are wild animals, and they are after us", etc., etc. We were so badly frightened at this behavior that all we could do is to stare at them in horror. Mother and the nurse finally got them to bed and sent for the doctor. After doses of castor oil and quinine they went to sleep and next morning we learned the cause of their delirium. They were rowing near the shore when they discovered some pods of poppy seeds; they picked a goodly number and put them in the boat. After they had been out in the extremely hot sun for several hours they became hungry and decided to eat the poppy seeds. They must have eaten a good many and as a result became very thirsty; they leaned over the boat and drank heartily. And so they ate and drank until the opium started to take effect and made them delirious. To this day we marvel how they found their way home and escaped death.

Our neighbors were mostly all Tartars - the men tall, swarthy, dressed in native costumes with large turbans on their heads; they also wore large fur headpieces in the hottest weather; their boots were made of fine kid and they always wore leather slippers over them as they could not enter their homes or places of worship Unless they discarded their slippers at the entrance. There were carpets on the floors of even the poorest homes, for they had no chairs or tables but ate on the floors, sitting cross-legged. The women wore long veils covering their faces as they could not go about uncovered after the age of thirteen.

Our landlord, a wealthy Tartar, Was very charitable. There were many occasions when streams of people were being fed in our yard. Whole sheep were roasted outdoors and large kettles of soup were constantly boiling. (not at all like the bread lines of the present day.) During the Fast. periods, which lasted a month – fasting all day and eating at night – many people came for miles and were fed generously. Their favorite drink was "Koumiss", mare's milk.

On one particular occasion, the marriage of the daughter of the house, these feasts lasted for more than two weeks, and though the crowds were particularly large no one left empty handed. This wedding stands out clearly in my memory, as it was very impressive. We were all invited to the feast in the house. Large rooms richly furnished and carpeted with the most gorgeous Persian or Oriental rugs; beautiful linen cloths spread over the rugs; rich foods and vines in abundance; guests attired in colorful and costly raiment sitting cross-legged and feasting for hours. At the conclusion of the meal each guest was handed a basket of dainties to take home which one dared not refuse. There were music and dancing. The bride heavily veiled and gorgeously dressed in silk, embroidered gown, her long hair hanging in long braids ornamented with jewels and gold coins, moved among the guests meekly followed by the groom. I was about six years old at the time but this scene is before my eyes as if it were but yesterday.

We children used to love to go to the market place on days when the caravans used to arrive from Turkestan and the far East – the camels laden with heavy packs containing rich silks, embroideries, carpets, and the most delicious fruits, nuts, and candles. I can still feel the thrill of it all, and wish I could go there some day to live those scenes over again.

I do not remember the exact year when I entered school in Orenburg. I must have been not more than five years old. However, I recall the fact that all the girls dressed alike – dark brown woolen dresses, white collars and cuffs, and white aprons. The seats in the classrooms were long benches which were stationery and graduated like seats in a theatre gallery. The brightest pupils sat on the front benches, the dullest way on top. I strove hard to keep my place in front. Our education was very thorough and I believe I learned more in the first years of schooling in Russia than an average child learns here in five years. At the age of seven I was studying history, geography, arithmetic, languages, etc.

Right here I recall one heart-breaking experience, which, however, proved to be lasting lesson in honesty. History was the hardest subject for me then, as I had to memorize pages and pages of dry facts and dates. I always feared the moment when I would be called on to recite. Sure enough – the fatal hour arrived; the lesson was on "Peter the Great"; when my name was called I dropped the open book on the floor beside me and stood up shakily; as I recited I looked down several times and the teacher, noticing that something was wrong, walked over and found the cause of my apparent inattention. I was severely reprimanded and sent to the top – a disgrace for one who was usually at the head of the class. How bitterly I cried: The lesson of "honesty is the best policy" was deeply impressed on me then.

My youngest brother was born in Orenburg. About a year later my father decided to go to America. Life as becoming unbearable for the Jews in Russia, and though it took much courage to break up our happy home, to go to a new land, learn new ways and languages, there was the promise of a free life and the opportunity to educate the children in America. Mother was to dispose of our property and household effects and wait until father would send for us. Finally we received the necessary papers and gathering up our belongings we left Orenburg with many sighs of regret.

On this trip I remember most clearly the ride up the Volga River on our way to Moscow. The Volga River in Russia is somewhat similar to our picturesque Hudson, but its chief beauty lies in the snow white chalk mountains on each side of the river banks. As the boat glided smoothly on the still, clear water, the sounds on the banks could be heard distinctly, and it was soothing to listen to the voices of the women as they sang while washing their linens in the river; also men's and children's voices blended pleasantly with the songs of the birds. This trip lasted three or four days – a glorious adventure to be delightfully remembered.

I cannot recollect how we reached Moscow – no doubt by train from Nijni Novgorod. I know that we landed at my uncle's house and were warmly received by the family, which consisted of my aunt, uncle and six boy cousins. It was fun to play with my cousins in their large nursery full of wonderful toys; I remember most distinctly the velocipedes, which were quite a novelty then. My aunt, mother, and the cook were busy all day, not only feeding such a hungry mob (sixteen of us), but also baking cakes and zweibacks for us to take on our ocean trip, not realizing that it would be weeks and weeks before we finally embarked for America. We stayed in Moscow for

about a week and then left for my birthplace – grandfather’s home in Kurland.

Everything was so different there. My grandparents, as well as everybody in that town spoke only Yiddish or German, which we did not understand, as our mother tongue was Russian. Little Isaak, then not quite two years old, tried hard to make himself understood, but after many futile attempts turned to grandmother and said: “Grandma you are a big fool.” My grandfather was then about eighty five years old; he was ill and feeble and it made him very happy when I sat near him holding his hand and chattering away in Russian. Grandmother was a dear, sweet, patient soul constantly giving us goodies, happy to see so many healthy, jolly youngsters at her well-laden table. We grew very much attached to these dear, kind grandparents in the few weeks we spent with them. They knew that they would never see us again and made the most of our visit. Grandfather died while we were on the steamer on our way to America, grandmother a few months later.

After we left Kurland we were joined by two of our cousins who came to America with us. This made the number in our part ten, and what with our numerous trunks, or hampers, bales and bundles, we must have looked like a regiment of soldiers. Poor mother had her hands full looking after so many children and so much baggage (all the luggage was carried with us from place to place). Travelling at that time was very difficult, as we had to travel – especially in Germany – either first class, which as too expensive, or fourth class, which was only fit for cattle – just large bare freight cars; we had to sit on our baggage, and when it rained the water leaked down on us from the roof. I was not quite eight years old then, but I seemed to worry more than the others, fearing that one of us would be left behind or that our baggage would be lost. My little brothers Sergei and Isaak were left in my care and I was in constant fear of losing them as we changed trains at the different stations – these seemed numberless.

We passed through Koenigsberg, Berlin, etc., and finally reached Hamburg. Here we were told that our steamer would not be due for a week and we were obliged to get lodgings at a hotel to await its arrival. Everything was novel and interesting to us children. We were greatly impressed with the cleanliness of the city, and were fascinated by the sight of women washing not only the outside door steps but the walls of the houses as well. We marvelled how small children talked German so fluently, and were in great awe of the policemen in their imposing uniforms. Through the dishonesty of the steamship agent who took advantage of my mother’s ignorance, we were assigned to a very slow, second-rate steamer; though my father had paid for first-class tickets we found ourselves in the steerage of the steamer “Marsalla”. No doubt it had gone to the junk heap shortly after, for that is where it belonged then.

The trip from Hamburg to New York took seventeen days, unheard of these days. My poor mother was seasick most of the way so I took charge of the younger children while my sister looked after mother and other sick members of the family. There were many breathless moments when little Isaak was almost blown overboard as the boat rocked from side to side. Some of the storms were so furious that we were not allowed on deck. To me it all seemed fun but we were dangerously near shipwreck. There was one jolly old sailor who took a fancy to me and he used to bribe the baker to give him some hot rolls for us, as the only bread the steerage passengers got was soggy, mildewed black bread. The rest of the food was abominable.

One day I spied my old sailor friend beckoning to me excitedly, and as I ran toward him he

exclaimed: “The Captain, to whom I spoke about you, has invited you to tea. Come at once and I will take you there.” We climbed numberless steps, at least it seemed to me, and finally entered the Captain’s dining room. What an enchanting place it seemed to me after the drabness and the ugliness of the steerage! A kindly old man in a resplendent uniform was the captain. Bowing to me he asked me how many brothers and sisters I had. I answered bravely: “One sister, five brothers, two cousins, one mother.” He smiled and said: “Hold out your apron”; then he dropped into it nine cookies, one for each. I was quite at ease as I said: “I also have two little playmates – orphaned sisters going to America to rejoin some relatives.” The captain laughed heartily, and giving me two more cookies told the sailor to see me safely back. I was quite a heroine when I returned to the steerage and was quickly surrounded by a crowd all talking at once, asking details of what I had seen, heard, etc. I must have been a queer, motherly little kid, full of fun, and yet so efficient and so brave, for I took care of my little brothers.

A few days later we heard the welcome cry “Land, land”. There was much excitement as we got ready to embark. We were all on deck as we sighted the Statue of Liberty, and deafening cheers arose on all sides. My father was on the pier waving to us excitedly (we had been separated for almost a year then). After the greetings were over father handed us a big bag full of bananas – a fruit we had never tasted. I can still recollect the taste of the first bite, so different from anything I had ever eaten.

After hours of waiting at Castle Garden we were finally allowed to depart. We boarded the “L” at South Ferry and gazed with open-mouthed wonder at the new scenes spread out before us. The hustle and bustle of the big city and the strange language bewildered us. We must have looked very queer in our foreign clothes; although we were very proud of the German garments we wore. We arrived at our destination – a flat in an East Side tenement, and were surrounded by a crowd of people staring at us as if we were animals at the zoo. The children of the neighborhood delighted in calling us “greenhorns.”

A new life began for us. We wanted to be Americanized immediately and made every effort to learn the English language. As soon as I learned the alphabet I began to decipher the numerous signs displayed. I think those signs were the biggest factor in my early English education. I entered the first grade in public school and thought the work very stupid. In three months I learned enough English to be able to skip three grades, as I had a good foundation in elementary subjects. But there was much laughter in the class room when I stood up to read as my foreign pronunciation of words sounded very funny.

When I was nine years old, in the sixth grade, I was at the head of the class most of the term, but as by that time there was a new baby girl in the family, I had three children to take care of before and after school. It was not easy to keep my place at the head of the class as tardiness and absence counted against me. My rival in that class was a pretty little girl named Rose. She was rather a delicate child – a dainty little figure, a close cropped head full of black ringlets, big blue eyes, and milk white skin. Her sister being a school teacher Rose received plenty of help and encouragement at home, and besides she had plenty of time to study and play. At the end of the term I was heartbroken to learn that Rose was awarded the medal, which I worked so hard to earn. I had been absent several days while my mother was ill and so lost my standing in class. My teacher felt so sorry for me that she gave me a book as a special prize.

When I was in the eighth grade and just about to enter grammar school, my father announced to us that we were to leave New York to settle in an agricultural colony which was then being formed. I cried bitterly when I learned that I had to leave my beloved school but hoped that my hardships at home would be over when we lived in the country. I was quite worn out caring for three children. My poor mother was on the verge of a breakdown as by that time my father had lost all the money he possessed in several unsuccessful business ventures and mother had to keep boarders to help eke out a living. Farming seemed to be the only solution for us then, it would at least keep us from starving. And so full of hope and courage we arrived in D--. But oh, how many disappointments, heartaches and hardships awaited us in our future home! We found happiness there eventually but at what a price. Why, I could let the children roam at will without meeting the dangers which threatened them in the city. Even then the welfare of the little ones was my greatest concern. And I loved nature so! I wanted to lie down and kiss the ground and thank God for bringing us out of the ugly city into a land of sunshine and promise. At the age of ten I could visualize nothing but a free, happy, broad life in the open, which would bring health and joy to us all. Years later when I stood on the very same spot surrounded by my own adorable children I thought of the queer little girl who had such vision, faith and courage, qualities which gave her strength to carry on the battle for existence in spite of tremendous handicaps.

My father eked out a living from a provision store which he conducted and which was patronized mainly by woodchoppers and other workmen who were clearing the land and building homes for the first settlers. There were only two houses in the village at that time. As our house on the farm allotted to us was not ready we were obliged to seek quarters in a near-by village.

My brother M- and I, and later S-, entered the public school in Woodbine and were well received in spite of the fact that we were the first and only Jewish children attending that school. Our teacher was a simple, kindly man and we worshipped him. He was very kind to us, making us feel at home at once, and besides he allowed us to hold his hand when we walked home from school. Such intimacy after the coldness of the big city was bliss to us and we were very happy there. I can still picture the class in geography and hear the sound of our voices as we sang aloud the state and capitols – a lesson one can never forget. In arithmetic we did physical exercises as we studied the multiplication tables and thought that great fun. M- and I made friends easily and spent many happy hours sleighing, skating, playing games, etc. We began to improve physically and were glad to see mother relaxing and rapidly regaining her health and strength. My tasks at home were much easier, but unfortunately the baby, who was puny and sickly most of the time, developed pneumonia that winter and would not let me out of her sight. Her persistent cry of “Rock me, rock me” still rings in my ears.

Father spent only the week-ends with us. He would walk in on Friday afternoons the four mile walk being a long journey. As most of the inhabitants of the village had never seen a Jew, the arrival of the bearded man from the colony would frighten the children and they would run for shelter crying “The Jews are coming”.

Finally the day arrived when we were to go to our own home on the farm. It was a great occasion for us and caused much bustle and excitement. Our belongings were piled on two wagons and we sat on top of the loads, no doubt presenting a most comic sight; however there was no one to see us as the roads were deserted then.

The farm houses, all built on the same plan, were by no means beautiful or well built, but to us the little box like house which we spied as we neared the farm meant HOME. And a happy home it proved to be notwithstanding the meager and hard existence we were to lead out there. Father set to work to cultivate a few acres of land, the boys helping; in fact we all had to help when planting time came. It was no easy task to clear the land of the large stumps and plough the virgin soil. The soil was very poor, the tools inadequate, and on top of it all the mosquitoes were so numerous that it was agony to work. At last we were rewarded with fresh vegetables by the middle of July and had enough potatoes to store for the winter. With groceries from our store and milk and other dairy products from our cow we had plenty to eat. The fresh air and exercise helped to make us sturdy youngsters with a zest for life and fun.

The first school in the colony was opened that winter. It was located near the railroad station, about a mile and a half from our farm, in a rickety frame dwelling. There were about fifty children. A teacher was engaged from the nearest village. As Miss H- was a native and the children were all foreigners it must have been a hard task to understand each other. We were all eager for knowledge and learned very rapidly all that our teacher tried to impart. With what fervor we used to sing the national anthem: our little hearts swelled with emotion as we gave thanks for being privileged to live in the "land of the free, and the home of the brave." American born children can never experience that thrill nor know the deep gratitude we felt. Miss H- had a strong, high pitched voice, such as is in great demand in church choirs, and as I was a clever little mimic I used to imitate her to perfection, to the great delight of my family and friends. Our friend S- who had arrived from Russia at that time to join her family on the farm lived with us while their house was being built, and it was her great delight to wake me up at night and make me imitate Miss H-. So much giggling ensued that Father had to put a stop to it. To this day we never fail to recall that experience when we meet, and the recollection brings back all the joy and gaiety of the simple enjoyments of our youth.

One of our favorite recreations while at school was our daily game of tag played on the countless piles of cord wood lying around the school and railroad station. This wood was chopped by the pioneer settlers and was their chief means of livelihood. My brother J- was one of the wood-choppers then and as he had a keen sense of humor he used to regale us with stories he heard from the men he worked with. They spoke of their homes in Russia, Romania, Besabarabie, etc. and the many harrowing experiences they passed through before they reached America. These men all lived in an unheated barn at that time and slept on straw on the floors. When they came in from work their clothes were wet from perspiration and when they woke up in the morning they found their shirts standing stiff and frozen. I am still wondering how they ever put those shirts on again.

Among the great events in my life during my school days was one never-to-be-forgotten tragedy which still brings tears to my eyes when I think of it. As I was a fairly good elocutionist I was always chosen to recite at entertainments. The first public school entertainment to celebrate a legal holiday was the important occasion. It was held in a big factory loft and every man, woman and child in the community came to join in the festivities. Among the important personages present was a Mr. A- representing the trustees of the colony. We were very anxious to make a good impression on Mr. A- who took a keen interest in the school activities. I was chosen to recite "The landing of the Pilgrims". For weeks I studied hard and knew every word and gesture

by heart. But I did not know that poverty and not lack of zeal would be my undoing. When I started to get dressed for the occasion I realized that I had no shoes to wear; my only pair were so badly torn that I could not possibly wear them. My mother suggested that I wear hers and though they were much too big there was nothing else to do. As I got up on the platform I felt strong and brave and quite sure of myself. I felt deeply moved as I stood underneath a large American flag, a sea of faces turned eagerly and expectantly toward me. There was a hush as my strong, clear voice rang out: "The breaking waves dashed high on a storm- and rock-bound coast." All went well until suddenly I happened to look down at my feet or rather at my shoes, and then my head swam. My heart contracted and my composure forsook me. I broke down, gave one long cry and rushed off the platform. It took me a long time to get over that terrible tragedy, and it took much coaxing and pleading before I consented to recite again.

I absorbed knowledge rapidly and within a year or two I had completely mastered the three R's. Then a new teacher was engaged for the school. He was rather an eccentric man. Instead of teaching us new subjects he devoted most of the time to story telling. I soon became bored with this method and begged my father to let me go to work in the factory. Finally he consented, and so at the age of twelve I became a wage earner and was proud of the fact that I was helping to support the family. The grocery business was a failure by that time as most of the settlers were buying on credit or bringing their produce in exchange. The farm yielded very little, as the soil was poor and there was no ready cash to pay for proper tools, etc. It was not easy to feed a family of ten even though five of them were working. And how my mother slaved – up early and late, baking enormous batches of bread, washing, ironing, cleaning with no facilities at hand. Water had to be pumped, wood carried in great armfuls to feed the stove, and worst of all finding the wherewithal to feed so many hungry mouths. The \$2.00 per week I earned helped somewhat at least.

I started as an errand girl in the factory and soon became a favorite with my employers and fellow-workers. I was full of fun and my genius in mimicry kept them all in good humor. My boss was very stern and severe with me, and as I was rather timid I was in constant fear of him. After working a few weeks I thought I had made a grave error by not staying in school. I begged my father to let me go back but he would not encourage such weakness. I had to take my punishment and stick to my job. The foreman was not very popular with the employees and they took every opportunity to poke fun at him. He had a funny walk, just like the one that made Charlie Chaplin famous. I used to imitate that walk to perfection to the great delight of the workers. One day as I was walking thus through the factory and causing the usual merriment, I felt a sudden hush, but unsuspectingly marched on Chaplin-like. Something in the faces of my admirers made me turn around and right behind me was the foreman looking daggers at me. I fled to the office where the superintendent, a kindly old man, pleaded with the foreman to forgive me. I believe that secretly my protector was quite pleased with my performance as he was not over-fond of the foreman.

I worked in the factory for over a year and there studied human nature and learned much. There were many agitators among the employees who organized strikes and caused much trouble. As I was working in the office and stock room I heard both sides of the situation. One day I was advised that I would be called before an investigating committee sent from New York by the trustees. Imagine me, small, timid and ignorant, standing before that august body. I do not know how

much good or harm I did by answering a few questions shyly, but I was an important personage to my family and friends.

Then came the panic. The factory was shut down, business was at a standstill, and there was an empty larder at home. A canning factory in a near-by village offered work to all who wanted to come and live there. There was an exodus of young people from the colony. One of the women rented a house in the village and we all lived there. There were about 50 young people of all ages, and such fun we had there we never experienced again. There was singing and dancing every evening, swimming and boating in the lake, much fruit to be picked in the orchard, and our employers were kind to us. This bliss lasted for several weeks only, but we all came home happier and better for the experience. The rest of that summer we eked out a scanty living by picking and selling berries. It was most trying and back-breaking work, sapping our strength and giving poor returns.

One day, like a thunderbolt out of a clear sky, came the announcement, which was to cause a tremendous upheaval in my uneventful life. As I jumped off a wagon in front of our house, after ten hours of berry picking, I was met by my father who quietly told me I was to leave for New York next day to look for a job. An innocent sounding statement, but oh, what it meant to me! To leave my happy home, to face adventures and hardships undreamed of. I was barely fourteen years old, small for my age, burned black by the sun, and weary in every bone. My father explained that as the berry picking season was coming to a close and as there would be no work in the factories for a long time, something had to be done to keep the family from starvation, and it had to be done at once. I tossed and cried all night but was up early to pack my one other dress and other few belongings to get ready for the trip. My sister A- and I bid the family a tearful farewell and started on our weary journey. It took eight hours to reach New York, now it takes four. All I could see as I sat in the train were the tear-stained faces of my little brothers and sister. I did not dare to let my thoughts wander on what lay before me.

When we arrived in New York we sought out a relative and asked his advice as to the best way of finding employment. He suggested that we go to Newark and apply to the General Electric Company, with which company one of his sons held an important position. Armed with letters of recommendations we went to G.E.C. next day and were immediately set to work. We found shelter with one of our cousins who lived in Newark. This cousin was one of those who came to America with us and a kind man was he. He had left a sweetheart in Russia when he came with us, and as soon as he had saved enough money he sent for her and they were married on our farm. He was glad to be able to reciprocate for all my parents had done for him.

As the G.E.C. factory was located in Harrison we had to travel over an hour to reach it. We had to get up at five o'clock in order to be at work at seven. The rules of the factory were strictly enforced – if one got there a minute after seven he would be locked out and obliged to wait in the gate house until eight, thus losing an hour's pay. I was always in mortal fear of being late as I could not afford to lose a cent knowing how urgently the family needed my earnings. The gate house meant prison for me, and I still shudder when I think of the agony I endured while sitting there the one or two times I happened to be late.

I was put to work at washing bulbs, a rather tedious and unpleasant task when kept up steadily for ten hours a day. For this work I received \$3.00 per week, which I spent as follows: \$2.00 were sent home regularly each Monday; sixty cents for carfare, two cents for a postage stamp,

and the rest I saved. When I passed a candy store I used to avert my eyes quickly and whisper "Get behind me Satan".

My sister was put to work in what was called the "dark room" – the bulbs were tested there in complete darkness except for two discs which threw light on the bulbs only. She stood this torment for two weeks only and then left for New York to seek more pleasant employment. I lived in Newark for nine months, working faithfully and steadily at the G.E.C. plant, hardly ever seeing daylight, eating dry bread and cold tea twice a day, and a cold left-over meal when I reached home at night. Up at five in the morning and in bed at eight o'clock in the evening five days a week. On Saturday I would get home at two o'clock in the afternoon, when I would do my washing and help my cousin with the housework.

This period of my life had a very definite effect on my character. I became reserved, bitter, and unsociable, my heart seemed turned to stone. I could not make friends at the factory as the workers were almost all low-class Irish and none as young or small as I was. I was a miserable and pitiable little creature, and as my health began to give way under this unnatural way of living my mother decided to take me home. Out of my savings I bought a dress and shoes and looked quite respectable when I reached my beloved home on the farm. I had been earning as much as \$6.00 per week for several months. I had been transferred to the inspection department where I did piece work inspecting flares and became quite efficient.

I had several outstanding experiences during the time spent in this factory. One day, while washing bulbs, I was aghast to find the tip of a large 100 watt bulb in my hand. The rule in that department was that if a tip broke off accidentally it was to be reported to the foreman and he would make it O.K., but if the tip was broken off through carelessness on the part of the worker the fine would be 10¢ for small bulbs and 20¢ for large ones. Not daring to surmise what it would mean to the folks at home if I were fined 20¢, I tremblingly approached the foreman and asked him to O.K. my slip. The brute looked at me suspiciously and bellowed: "That tip did not come off, you broke it off!" I looked at him squarely in the eyes and answered: "Do you think I would lie for 10¢? If you do not believe me ask the girl next to me how it happened." Fortunately the girl stated that I showed her the tip as soon as it came off and the man had to O.K. the slip. But my pride was terribly hurt and I could not do much the rest of that day. I could not see what I was doing as my eyes smarted from the effort of keeping back the tears. Next day I approached the foreman again and asked to be transferred to another department as I could not forget the insult and could not go on working under him. He looked at me closely and, as if not believing what he saw on my face, he laughed uneasily. What did my feelings mean to him? I was just a queer little girl and one of the numerous slaves whose business it was to work but not have feelings. Then I got angry and said: "If you will not have me transferred I shall report you to Mr. R-." He looked at me in amazement but said nothing. A few days later I was told to report in the flare inspection department.

The room I found myself in was much larger and brighter than the one I left. I was relieved to find that it was much cleaner, as there were no tubs of sloppy water standing around. The work was much pleasanter, but it was piece work (80¢ for inspecting 1,000 flares). I worked feverishly before I was efficient enough to inspect one thousand a day. In time I did as many as three thousand, but it was no easy task.

The foreman in this department was a kindly Irishman, and I often found him watching me intently as I worked on unceasingly. One dark winter morning, as I went outdoors to take the car to work, I found that as it had been snowing all night the streets were covered with snow and slush which reached to my ankles. I waited for a car for an interminable time and fearing I would be late I started to walk. I walked for some distance before I realized that no cars were running because the streets were impassable. I walked the whole distance of several miles. By that time it started to rain, and as I had neither an umbrella nor rubbers I was soon soaked through and my frozen skirt was clinging to my legs. When I reached the factory, shivering and exhausted, I was surprised to find the gate house open though it was late. When I entered the room I worked in I found that the foreman and only two others were at work. Nobody else had dared to brave the storm. The kind men scolded me gently for coming out in such weather, made me take off my wet shoes and stockings and thaw out in front of the radiator. This act of kindness compensated for the ordeal I went through and I was elated at the thought of sending the usual amount home.

I shall never forget how happy I was when I said goodbye to the prison I had been in for over nine months, and the joy with which I anticipated the trip home. I was so impatient to get there that the trip seemed endless. As the train came nearer and nearer to my destination cold shivers ran up and down my spine and I cried for joy. The thrill of seeing again my home, family and friends after such a long absence almost made me delirious.

I stayed home through the summer and regained my health rapidly. Things were beginning to improve at home by that time; the boys obtained employment and the crops on the farm were plentiful. It was decided that I was to return to Newark to study shorthand and typing, which another cousin had offered to teach me.

The superintendent of the colony had all plans ready for opening an agricultural school for the sons of farmers and required more clerical help. I was almost sure of getting a job upon finishing my course. J- was then working in a factory and studying at night to prepare himself for college at the suggestion and with the help of kind Mr. S-, whose broad vision made it possible for at least one farmers son to become a great scientist.

At the end of the summer I met my future husband for the first time. He came to the colony at the suggestion of Mr. S- to study agriculture. But as I left for Newark shortly after we did not get a chance to get acquainted, especially as I was very shy and reserved. I did not meet him again for a year and by that time he was leaving for college.

My life in Newark for the next nine months was more bearable. I went to Mr. S's house three times a week for lessons in shorthand, and the rest of the time I spent in studying at home. I also helped my cousin with the housework. I joined the Newark Public Library, and many pleasant hours I spent in that sanctuary. I was an inveterate reader, and though my reading matter was not always wisely chosen it was at least a source of unending pleasure. During that time I read works of Dickens, Scott, Hugo, Elliot and also more inferior books by Marlitt which were then popular.

I stayed in Newark about seven months, and then went to New York to learn typing. My brother W-, who worked in New York then, paid my board bill of \$2.00 per week. I lived with distant relatives on the East Side. The family consisted of mother, father, eight children, and three boarders, and we all lived in five rooms. The parents and three younger children slept in one room, two of the boys slept in the dining room, one in the kitchen, two of the girls and I slept on

an improvised bed on chairs in the living room, and the boarders in a room on an upper floor. All I can remember is the kitchen sink constantly piled with dirty dishes, a kitchen table never cleared as we all ate at different times, and a couch in the kitchen always occupied by some tired member of the family. The beds were full of bugs and our heads and clothes full of vermin, what else could be expected in such crowded quarters.

And yet, strange as it may seem, in spite of those sordid living conditions I developed wonderfully. As I walked to work in the morning people used to turn their heads and look back at the fresh, young face, full of hope and the joy of living. I had a marvellous complexion, such as would be the envy of any actress, but I never used anything but ice cold water to wash my face. I believe that the thought of going back home to work and the bright future it promised gave me a zest for life. Oh for the dreams of youth – nothing can ever take their place.

My strict training served me well at this time, for though alone among strangers, and with many temptations around me, the dangers of the big city did not affect me. Though many invitations for dances were extended to me by the men at the office I did not accept any. I was only sixteen then and would not go to a dance unescorted by a relative. One of the boarders at the house, a Mr. K-, fascinated me with his excellent playing of the mandolin but I did not care for him personally. He plied me with attentions and invited me to dances and theatre but I would not accept any invitations from him. However, as I wanted to hear him play mandolin, I devised the following plan: Immediately after supper I would stretch out on the couch pretending to be asleep while Mr. K- played his mandolin fast and furiously to wake me up; thus I enjoyed all the music I wanted.

To get my typewriting experience I practiced in the office of a lawyer who was very kind and patient with me. I received no pay, as I was probably more of a hindrance than a help. I was pleasantly surprised when I received a Christmas gift of \$5.00. The experience I received in that office was all the typewriting training I had. Not enough to prepare me for a position. But what I lacked in experience I made up in faith and courage.

When I returned Mr. S- sent for me and offered me part time work at the office at a salary of \$3.00 per week. The poor training I received did not prepare me adequately to undertake the work, but as I had courage and strength I resolved to overcome all the difficulties. At first there was not even a typewriter to work with, so I took letters in shorthand and wrote them out in longhand – a rather clumsy method and waste of time: However, I was getting valuable experience and Mr. S- was a kind and patient employer. When the typewriter finally arrived I was overjoyed and practised for hours not minding the numerous mosquitoes, which tormented me; I just slapped them and went on and when I stood up a lapful of the pests scattered to the floor.

One day Mr. S- handed me a set of books and told me to go ahead and do the book-keeping. I did not know how to start but resolved to learn. When the New York accountant came around on his usual monthly visit I asked him to teach me. I would have become an excellent book-keeper in time but for the fact that my teacher thought it more opportune to make love to me. I dispensed with his help and struggled on alone taking a few lessons in the public school.

I worked with Mr. S- for six years, and in that time learned to love my kind though strict employer, who in turn became dependent on me, for I used to anticipate his every wish and carry out all orders efficiently. By that time I had complete charge of the office and was getting the

magnificent salary of \$60.00 per month, which money I dully turned over to my mother. My own wants were few. Two months before I married I kept my salary to pay my wedding expenses, and with the addition of \$75 in gold which I received as a wedding present from the Directors, I also had enough to buy my trousseau. Could a girl do the same in these days?

But I must go back to the days when I was sixteen and recount the happenings which occurred during the six years before I was married. How many times I have wished that my children could have been raised under the same conditions we lived through then, for we were truly living an ideal life, so full and wholesome, so carefree and yet so constructive. We were pioneers, helping to build an ideal community. Our minds were clean and uplifted, our thoughts pure and unselfish, and we were looking forward to a bright future for our people. I truly believe that if the colony had been located in more ideal surroundings, that is, as far as our farming and colonization were concerned, the future of Jews in America and other countries would have been a brighter one. There would have been other model colonies of that kind and the movement of back to the land would have solved many problems and averted the hazard facing them now.

As there were no theatres or movies at that time we had to create our own amusements, and in doing so we brought out our best qualities. We also laid down the foundation for strong bodies, thinking minds, and the ability to fight our own battles unaided and unafraid. The willingness to serve and to sacrifice gladly was also a great factor in our future lives. This training helped me greatly in raising my own family in spite of many obstacles.

We turned every holiday, birthday, and community undertaking into a joyous celebration, and in so doing brought out much dormant talent. There were pageants, theatricals, concerts, dances and school entertainments to pass the time. Everybody joined in wholeheartedly to make each affair surpass the last. We formed literary and athletic clubs, dancing school, reading and sewing circles. Although practically the same group of people met and carried out each undertaking we never tired of each other and always discovered new joys in the companionship. No doubt the same spirit permeated us all, the giving of the best in us for the good of us all and for our beloved little colony.

The rehearsals for every affair kept us constantly occupied after working hours, and thus gave us much wholesome diversion. Money meant nothing to us personally, but we were happy when we raised money for public funds through our efforts. I was president of the Literary club, the first librarian of our newly formed library, the star actress and the best dancing teacher. Such utter joy as all these tasks afforded me:

I would lie awake nights planning the programmes for the club meetings and entertainments, and from the meager store at my command always managed to have something novel and amusing. I remember particularly one birthday party that I planned for Mr. S-. There was a tableau in which his four daughters represented the four seasons of the year. The scene was laid in the living room of their home. As the curtain rose there was a gasp of admiration from all present. The girls resembled a gorgeous painting in their colorful costumes. One of our members had written appropriate verses for each child to recite, and as Mr. S- listened he was deeply moved. I saw him furtively wipe away the tears of joy which sprang to his eyes. It was truly a never-to-be-

forgotten picture.

It is unbelievable what wonders we created with the crude materials at our command. At one of the masquerade balls my costume represented the agricultural school and received first prize. It was made of several yards of red calico completely covered with leaves, grass, vegetables, fruit and flowers, all products of the school farm. I worked over this costume for days but it must have been worth the effort.

I shall never forget the first wedding which took place in the colony. The groom was a husky young woodchopper and the bride an employee in the town boarding house. As the expenses for this wedding were defrayed by the Directors it was a great social event for the colony and the inhabitants turned out en masse. The factory loft was again put in service. Long tables were laden with good things to eat and drink, all prepared by the housewives of the community. Music was furnished by a Philadelphia orchestra. I was about twelve years old then, and though it may seem improbable, I think that I was in love, no doubt a childish infatuation such as experienced by many impressionable youngsters. There was a handsome young architect who was sent to our town for his health – he suffered from tuberculosis in an advanced stage. His cheeks were always ablaze with rich color, he was well bred and witty and made a great fuss over my friend M- and me. He was very cheerful and bright in spite of his misfortunes. M- and I just worshipped him and tried to outdo each other in pleasing him. I used to spend hours in front of a mirror to make myself look nice. As my chief article of adornment at that time was a large white organdie scarf tied in a big bow under my chin, I took great pains to have that scarf white and stiff all the time. Although M- and I were inseparable friends until then our friendship received quite a jolt as we were jealous of each other. We were very gay at this wedding, however, because the bride had been madly in love with this young Apollo and we knew we were getting rid of a rival. The poor girl knew that her love was hopeless. She was a poor orphan and was glad to find a man who would give her a good home and a safe harbor. As the Directors presented the young couple with a cow and chickens they were sure of a living; they were both young and strong and not afraid to tackle the farm problems. They did become the most successful farmers in the colony. Evidently love was not an important item in their lives.

The young architect died shortly after. M- and I wept bitterly when we heard the sad news. Thus ended our first romance. Our friendship was renewed with greater fervor and continued happily for many years, until the real romance came into our lives and estranged us again.

It would take pages to describe the many social activities of our youth. There was always something of interest going on in the colony. Many people in New York and Philadelphia were watching our progress with interest. Many artists who became famous afterwards were among those who took part in our affairs and contributed much toward our development. Among our notable visitors were educators, artists, composers, and statesmen. With what awe we listened to Booker T. Washington, Vladimir Korolenko, Jacob Riis, Woodrow Wilson, Rabbi Krauskopf, and many others.

These six years (16-22) I consider the most important period in my life. They brought me interesting work, education, the satisfaction that comes from service, and romance. Of course my life did not run smoothly through those years. There were many heartaches, sorrows, disillusionments, disappointments. For instance, I craved knowledge, I wanted an education and begged

to be allowed to go to High School, to College. My parents did not consider it important for girls to be educated as there was but one goal to be reached – marriage. Alas, I realize how much better I would have been able to tackle the tremendous task of raising a large family if I had had the proper education. My brothers had to be educated first, and it was my duty to work and help them to get an education. How many nights I cried myself to sleep, sick with the realization that sacrifice and service were to be my lot always, that all my ambitions and aspirations were to be stifled and buried in my heart. I often wonder how my life would have changed had I been allowed to follow my inclinations and live my own life as young people do nowadays. I finally resigned myself to my fate and found happiness in service.

I have read somewhere that people in this world are divided into two classes – “those whose bodies control their minds and those whose minds control their bodies. Perhaps the majority of people are slaves of their impulses, of their inclinations, of their instincts; but there are those who have disciplined minds and disciplined bodies, and they are the salt of the earth.” Perhaps I was unconsciously striving to discipline my body and mind. I was building character and contributing something important to the scheme of life, and these experiences carried me sagely through a life of hardships. They have given me a store of philosophy, which I could not gain through books alone.

Then again the work at the office was not easy, especially since I had such poor training for the job. As I said before, I learned stenography and typewriting in a very unsystematic way and bookkeeping at haphazard. I had to trust to my native intelligence to carry me through. While I adored Mr. S- he was not an easy man to work for. He was extremely nervous and irritable, hard to please, for he was a sick man and fought against heavy odds. Sometimes he would dictate to me for hours and then find some flaw in his writing and tell me to destroy it, or if a cent was missing in my cash I had to work over my books for days to find the mistake. This was good training for me however, and made me accurate and reliable, so that I became a very efficient secretary and office manager in a short time.

At this time I also found a keen disappointment in some of my friendships. I gave myself unconditionally and wholeheartedly to my friends, but discovered to my sorrow that some of them had used me to further their own petty ambitions. Such experiences cause deep wounds which heal very slowly, but as we go through life we must suffer such disappointments sooner or later.

And now for the romance which culminated in marriage. When I was about seventeen, the young man I referred to in a previous chapter as my future husband, came back to the colony as a college student, and what a furore he caused among the girls! His college uniform set off to perfection his graceful young figure and handsome face – in fact he was so handsome that he took one’s breath away. His manners were charming, his disposition sweet and loveable. For two weeks there was one round of gaities as our young Apollo was wined, dined and entertained. As I was shy and reserved I kept myself in the background. One of our school teachers fell madly in love with this young man and after he returned to college they kept up a lively correspondence. After he graduated he came to the agricultural school to teach, and as I worked in the office of the school we saw a lot of each other. However I steeled my heart against him as the school teacher was my friend and I knew how much she loved him. But his parents and friends made every effort to discourage the friendship and at last the romance was ended. I consoled my friend and begged her to forget one so unworthy of her, but she was heartbroken and left town shortly after.

For two years after that the memory of that broken hearted girl came between me and him. However, our daily contacts and constant companionship developed into deep friendship and finally into love. Still I discouraged all talk of marriage and finally my young friend's health suffered and he had to go away. During his absence I realized how much he meant to me and did not hesitate to tell him so in our correspondence. When he returned, fully recovered and handsomer than ever, we announced our engagement and were married a year later.

If I were a gifted writer I could make a beautiful, romantic tale of our courtship and marriage. All I can say is that those were happy years. Yet there was always a tinge of sadness at the thought of what might have been, and at the many things left undone and words left unsaid. But is that not true of everybody's life?

In spite of the hardships of my early years and having to conform to rules of conventionality and prudishness, I managed to make life abundant within my own heart. As soon as my first baby was born I seemed to cease to exist for myself. My every thought, feeling, and emotion was given unconditionally to my dear ones, and their happiness was the only reward I asked for.

And so I expect to go on to the end – hoping, praying, serving, loving – realizing that “only the strong are free”.

—*Elizabeth Lipman Pincus, 308 West 94th Street, New York, New York*



Elizabeth and Joseph Pincus, 1902



Elizabeth and Joseph Pincus, unknown date



Elizabeth and, clockwise from top, Maurice (top) and Gregory, Bernard, Sophie, Alexis, and Lee



Alex, Sophie, Maurice, Lee, Bernard, Gregory



Pincus and Lipman families at Woodbine, c. 1908

Back row: Aaron Lipman, Elizabeth Pincus, Ida Lipman, Cecilia Lipman, Raymond Lipman, Joseph Pincus

Middle: Michael Lipman, Annie Lipman, Jacob Lipman, Ethel Lipman, Charles Lipman

Bottom row: Bernard Pincus, Evelyn Lipman Seltzer, Maurice Pincus, Lee Pincus, Gregory Pincus, unknown boy

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¹ This memoir is entirely in the words of Elizabeth Pincus, who typed it around 1943 and distributed carbon copies to family members. Sophie Pincus Dutton, Elizabeth's daughter, owned the copy used here. Geoffrey Dutton (Sophie's son) retyped the memoir in Microsoft Word in 2000, changing only spelling and punctuation. It is available at the following URL:
http://maxentropyproductions.net/papers/Russian_American-Episodes.pdf