

THE STORY OF AN AMERICAN

In 1908 Bessie Mack came to the United States.

She was born in a small country bordering Russia, and lived in the same town until her family left to come to America when she was 16.

Her story is similar to many other persecuted Europeans who fled their homeland in search of a free country.

Mrs. Mack's memories of the "old country" are filled with horror, fear and resentment. As a child she was deprived of a formal education because she was Jewish. Her mother hired a tutor and Bessie was taught in a dark corner of her cellar so that no one would know she was being educated.

She remembers seeing her friends shot down in the streets, her home burned, and being hid in a closet by her mother for three weeks so that the Russian soldiers would not assault her as they frequently did to young girls.

Despite all the blood shed Bessie Mack remembers a few good times.

Every morning Bessie and her brothers and sisters went swimming in the river near their house. When they got back to their house her mother had a large breakfast waiting for them.

Mrs. Mack's family had been



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Jewish Community Center in the 1930's. To celebrate the opening, she put on a public supper with over 500 people.

Entertainment was cheap in the early days. She frequently went to Peaks Island for a day of swimming, bowling, and the various other means of entertainment it had to offer. Other times, Mrs. Mack would take the street car to River-ton Park (for only a nickel) to see a play or enjoy some other amusements.

Bessie Mack remembers trips to Boston on a steam boat "a very peaceful trip".

Her limited education in Europe gave her an advantage over her friends and family

The old Jewish Community Center is no longer on Wilmot Street, the Synagogue on New-bury Street is closed and Bessie finds it harder to get to synagogue except on high holidays.

Franklin Towers is nice but she longs for her apartment on Pitt Street. "People expect too much from the government," Bessie says. "This is a wonderful country but is growing too fast for its people to appreciate it."

Bessie Mack is an American, first and foremost. She knows what its like to live in a country where life is a luxury Mrs. Mack has been a

preparing to go to America for several years. Cousins, aunts, and uncles had settled in various parts of the United States with many going to Evansville, Indiana where her family settled when they arrived in 1908.

One of Bessie Mack's favorite aunts had settled in Portland, Maine so it was here she came in 1908. Portland was a booming metropolis to this young girl coming from a town smaller than Biddeford.

She could speak no English, but began to catch on fast. Mrs. Mack became an American citizen the next year when she married Maurice Mack, the son of her favorite aunt.

Maurice had come to America in 1905 to avoid being forced into the Russian Army and a 7 year hitch in Siberia. (Many other young men came to America to avoid this torture). After arriving in Portland, Maurice started Mack's grocery store, near the site of the new police station.

Bessie enjoyed the early years in the grocery business. She loves people and found this to be great fun. She learned to speak English and began to teach herself to read.

Active in community affairs, she helped organize the new

from the "old country", thus she gladly wrote letters for them.

She is sorry that we have to deal with the Russians because of the cruelty they have exhibited. Bessie Mack sympathizes more than most with the Jew in Russia who can't leave. She knows how cruel the cossack soldiers were to her.

After coming to America, she would question the cruelty of Russia and her aunt would tell her "The good people suffer for the bad." (How true it frequently is)

Maurice Mack died 21 years ago. After his death Mrs. Mack converted their home into a three family dwelling where she lived for several years. Then moving into an apartment on Pitt Street she saw that neighborhood deteriorate as the East End had. Houses came down all over the city--good homes--to make way for more roads.

Says Mrs. Mack, "It makes me want to cry like a baby."

Three years ago Bessie Mack lost most of her personal possessions in a fire on Pitt Street. Now she lives in Franklin Towers. Her window overlooks the Portland that she has seen continually change for the past 68 years.

hard worker and has been an asset to Portland since her arrival in 1908. As she sits in her attractive apartment in Franklin Towers working on her latest afghan or croch coat hangers, making delicious little cookies and designing her own drapes, she thinks of the things that have happened in the past--when she and her husband sold eggs 2 dozen for 25¢, but at 82 she thinks ahead as well. Bessie Mack plans the purchase of a new dictionary to improve her English, to make her a better American. But this writer feels that Mrs. Mack and others like her are the people who make 13th generation Americans like myself take a better look at how great our country is, despite its inadequacy that exists within any society. Let's be like Bessie Mack and not take for granted America.

as told to Donna Miller by
Bessie Mack.