

WATSON  
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MEMOIRS

by

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Edited and Prepared for Circulation  
by Ida Russakoff Hoos  
in Loving Memory of Manya Simkin Russakoff  
and in Honor of  
Susman Russakoff  
on his Eightieth Birthday  
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Skowhegan, Maine.

The story of a typical immigrant who landed in the United States in December, 1904, written in memory of my departed First Love and Wife, Manya, who stood by me not only for the forty years of our happy married life but since early youth, when I was an apprentice getting only fifty cents a week. Noble, dear, devoted Mother, and friend to all who came in contact with her. For Manya Simkin Russakoff, life was not measured in terms of wealth or riches or even greatness; simple things, devotion and understanding ranked highest, and kindness was the most worthwhile of deeds.

We truly were made for each other. Born in the same state, Chernigov, Russia, only about seventy-five miles apart, we were united by Fate, a miraculous story that I shall relate farther on. How proud she was when she, too, arrived in America, for I had sent for her after having been here a little over a year. Although she had already settled in Paris with her people, she joined me unhesitatingly. Really, I do not attach any importance to myself; I was an average young man and, at the time we met, far too young to be considering marriage. Moreover, there was still the four years' service in the Czar's army ahead before I could plan my life. Not even the whisper of an engagement seemed appropriate, but we kept company.

Why she stuck to me, when there were so many more serious-minded young fellows who would and could get married, some with military exemptions because of

physical difficulties or need to support parents, I do not know. I had no prospect of avoiding military duty and, besides, was not ready to consider settling down. I was too much of a happy-go-lucky type, always liked to learn the Russian stage songs, dance, go to the theatre, tell jokes, and I gave little thought to the future. It was in an era when young men were joining the revolutionary organizations, and we both attended meetings of the underground workers. We used to meet secretly in houses where illegal literature or imported leaflets were read and inflammatory songs sung. It was a sort of game, but it was a dangerous one. Every now and again one of our number would disappear, and the word got around that he had been sent to prison for possession of an illegal pamphlet, or to Siberia for attending a gathering. I never became too deeply involved, especially since being caught would deprive me of seeing my Manya. In Jewish her name was Gute Malke, which means Good Queen, and queen she was; but she never put on airs. Simple, undemanding, she liked my behavior, my humor, and my honesty. So she stood by me. Whenever I had time off, I was with her, and I do not mind telling that I gladly walked more than three miles after the last tramway had finished its run so that I could be with her. How proud I was to stroll with her, on sparkling winter nights and on balmy spring and summer evenings. Our favorite spot was the lovers' lake that lay at the end of the die-straight, three-mile Prospekt, at the head of which stood a statue of Catherine the Great, for whom the city of Ekaterinaslav was named. (The city is now called Dnepopetrovsk.) As one looked up this avenue, one could see "the beautiful Katerina," pointing her finger at her lovers' lake near Potiemkin.

Manya and I spent many hours near that lake. We always returned to her home, which was a very poor place but the best that her folks could provide. When we got there, it was usually late, but her mother or sister always had some refreshments on the table for us. There may have been only a piece of pastry or a bottle of soda, but I was given to understand that I was welcome. That is why, even now, I send packages to her family in France, in appreciation for what took place almost fifty years ago--a piece of pastry and a bottle of soda.

Little did they suspect that I was going through a period of inner turmoil about the present and the future. I had begun to develop hatred toward Russia and all it stood for. I did not feel that I, as a Jew, should sacrifice my life to those pogrom-hoodlums, nor did I want to join the revolutionary forces and risk arrest and exile. Instead, I kept trying to figure out how I could possibly get to America. America. America. You might have thought that someone had invited me to come or had promised me something. I did not even have a five-ruble piece to buy a decent second-hand suit. Nevertheless, that was in my mind.

At that time, I was finishing my second year with the watchmaker to whom I had hired myself out at one ruble and fifty kopeks a week. I had found Mr. Chavkin to be very friendly and had enjoyed many kindnesses from his wife, who was a motherly type. When he told me that he could not hire me for another year, (the way you made the contract was to agree on a wage and shake hands on it), I was terribly disappointed. The money involved was less a matter of concern than the fact that Mr. Chavkin was a good mechanic and I felt comfortable

working by his side at the bench. Assuring me that I was now ready to hold a job in a shop with a better clientele and at a higher wage, he still offered me the opportunity to stay in his house. In about a week, I located a job in a city some two hundred and fifty miles away, near the Rostov section of Russia. My pay was to start at ten dollars a week with room and board.

It was hard to leave each other, but we were still awfully young, and military service was threatening. So we parted as chums, Manya and I. Little did she know that all the while I was thinking about America. Ten rubles a week. I had learned from books a few things about America, but never a word did I utter about my thoughts to her or to anyone else. But that was the prelude to the finish with Russky and the beginning of a new life in America with my Mahyetchka joining me.

Tenderly I loved her and faithfully I was devoted to her all the years we were together. I stood by her as a devoted husband and friend. Innocent that she was, she trusted me implicitly in everything I did throughout our lives. She knew that I was on the job doing my best and that her interests would always be well taken care of. I tried to be worthy of her and fulfilled my part in honor and respect not only to her, but to my parents and my brothers and sister and her family and to my own dear children.

God bless you, the living, and may those departed ones rest in peace. I did my best.

Pa

5 A.M.

December 10, 1948

## CHAPTER I

So I was born just as millions before me, except that my birth took place December 29, 1884 in Starodub, Chernigov Gubernia, in what is known as White Russia. My babyhood was better arranged than that of my four brothers, born after me, because it was during a period of relative prosperity for my family, and we had a servant girl. This maid, Havka, used to come back to visit after we could no longer afford to keep her. I must have been about four then, for she held me and kissed me and made a great fuss over the fact that her Zinka was growing up. I can still remember the obnoxious odor of vodka. All that affection was no doubt staged so as to obtain a five-kopek piece for another drink.

It seems that in my youth my father must have done well, because we had good tableware, a large soup ladle, sugar holder and tongs of solid silver, a brass samovar, and copper cooking utensils. Father had a fur-lined overcoat and a fine Sabbath suit, and Mother had a nice-looking fur Pelerina (cape). But the riches did not last, and I do not recall any affluence. By the time I went to Cheder, I remember that we kids were going to bed hungry, not for pie or cake, but for just a piece of black bread, which, combined with a bit of flaxseed oil, would have made a satisfactory meal. Later, I learned that my father was too charitable for his own good, and that people were inclined to take full advantage. If he heard that a poor family needed money to buy a cow so that their children would



have milk, he gladly made a loan and seldom collected. This he did out of kindness but also because he was a pious man. Like all good Jews, my father wanted to have to his credit during his lifetime thirteen thousand Mitzvahs, or good deeds. Since no one can ever be sure how long he will habitate this earth, it was important to work at fulfilling this mission at every opportunity. I believe that my father succeeded. His open-handed charity did not cease even when he came to America. After having visited in Skowhegan, he settled in Brooklyn, New York, where he and my mother opened a small grocery store, with my help of course. So he was in business again. And just as a hungry animal smells food, so people soon found that Reb Avrom was a fine, generous man, especially when he established a Minyan, a small congregation, in his parlor, with his own Torah and Megillah. These, incidentally, are still being used in a Brooklyn synagogue. In any case, since the rule of life is to leave with the same worldly goods with which you enter, he certainly fulfilled it.

It must be said, however, that he was a fine man, full of good humor, and the center of attention at parties, where he could keep his listeners enthralled as long as time itself with the tales he would spin. My mother was born in Starodub. Her father, Osher Ekesiel Zusman Belodubrovsky, was a jeweler, as were his people before him. My mother, Sarah, was the oldest of six sisters and one brother, Gershen, to whom everything was left as sole heir of his father's estate. I imagine that my mother, having the largest number of children, had tried to get him to see the justice of helping her, but Uncle Gershen was not as liberal with

aid to his own folks as was my father to strangers.

None of what I have said is meant to imply that my father was an ignoramus, far from it. He had come to our city as a young orphan from the small town of Bretch, about sixty-five miles away. He had received a preliminary Jewish-Hebrew education but wanted to learn more and had come to Starodub, which was a larger city with a considerable Jewish population and a Yeshiva, where Hebrew learning could be acquired. Who would take care of him in the big city? The Jewish people. Even the poverty-stricken tailor would take in a boy for a meal a week, that being the most he could afford. Others gave a boy a day's board. That, too, was part of the thirteen thousand Mitzvahs, although how these were calculated I cannot tell you. And so my father became a student, and not an ordinary one, either, for he could also read, write, and speak Russian, which was not regarded with universal favor among the Jews. In those days, it was felt that a young man should learn Hebrew, but never mind the treyfe (non-kosher) books. He was a good-looking fellow, too, for why otherwise would my grandfather have chosen him from many eligible Hebrew students (known as Yeshiva Bocherim) as a suitable mate for his eldest daughter?

The union was, of course, pre-arranged. I do not think that my mother had a choice; in fact, she saw him for the first time through a crack of the door. There was probably some sort of bargain made, such as room and board for a year. If any money was involved, I never knew it. So things went on, and my mother, may she rest in peace, did like all Jewish women and regularly brought into the world another child every two years. This, too, was part of the thirteen thousand

Mitzvahs, for the Jewish parent wanted above all else to be sure that he would have mourners to say Kaddish (the mourners' prayer) for him after his departure from life. So important was this concern that Jewish Law recognized childlessness as a valid reason for divorce. A couple without offspring could, after ten years of marriage, seek other mates. How many children my parents had in all, I cannot say; I do know that six sons and one daughter lived. My sister, Eda, was the oldest among the living; Samuel was next. I was the third child, the second son, and named after my grandfather, Zushe, who had died shortly before my birth. My grandmother lived to a good old age.

The Cheder I first attended was quite unlike anything my children and grandchildren will experience. It was not in a fine, ventilated building with central heating, blackboards and lighting arranged with sight-preservation in mind, or anything close to such undreamed-of comfort. School for me was a kitchen with a splintery-wood floor, a board table, and bare benches. The atmosphere did not encourage study: The ever-present Rebbetzin, wife of the teacher, regularly and constantly scolded him for his shortcomings and his poor earning capacity. The cow would drop a calf in the corner of the room, with the Rebbetzin officiating at the birth. The goat would come in, and there would be a blessed event involving four little goats. You can imagine the odor, not improved by the hens fluttering about in quest of a place to lay an egg. But, in spite of the chaos, the Rebbe took seriously his mission to impart learning, for this, too, was part of his thirteen thousand good deeds.

As you can see, the situation was nowhere near what we have in America today, where, if the teacher does not earn enough teaching Hebrew, he may give dancing lessons. Enrollment in Hebrew school costs money here, and there are curriculum committees, grades, and textbooks. With all this, the boy reaches the age of thirteen equipped to recite only one small part of the Haftorah. And even though he can read it, how many words can he translate? What does he know of its meaning? But if the Rebbe in Russia had ten students and received one ruble from each, he considered himself in the million dollar class. And how varied were the pupils! There was I, a beginner. Next to me was a boy who could already read; another could translate. Some could read and translate from Hebrew into Jewish one of the Five Books of Moses, line by line; another could chant passages from the Torah. And there stood the Rebbe, leather strap in hand, ready to descend if you made a mistake, using a sharp elbow to prod you into reading faster. Like an orchestra conductor, he would absorb everything that was going on in this turmoil, what with his wife, the cow, the goats, the hens, and his children all about.

Then would come the evening when he visited our house. First my father heard me read what I had learned. When I recited a line well, a kopek would drop as from heaven as my reward. I was a good student and received instruction not only in Hebrew reading and translation but also in writing, reading, and spelling in Yiddish. The Rebbe was the master as long as you attended his Cheder. The strap was used not only as a threat; it often landed on bare buttocks. If the

victim was unusually strong, and the Rebbe could not hand out the proper punishment himself, the Rebbetzin came to his aid. This, too, was part of the thirteen thousand Mitzvahs, which were intended to help one find an empty place in heaven when one reached there.

This was the environment in which I received my early education. For the most part, my efforts won praise; the Rebbe did not have to shout at me, nor elbow me, nor use his strap. But I did get a severe beating once. It came about like this: All the pupils had to provide their own paper, pencil, pen, and ink; we generally carried them to and from Cheder. There were no buses; we youngsters had to walk. The streets were not paved, and, of course, there were no sidewalks. When it rained, the mud was knee-deep; in winter, mountains of snow lay everywhere. There were no snowplows to clear the roads. How long our hours at school were, I do not remember, but when we left home in the morning, we carried a lunch with us. We stayed until the kerosene in the Rebbe's lamp was out and the wick was beginning to burn. How we escaped suffocation in that kitchen, only the good Lord knows.

Because my Uncle Gershen's house, where Grandmother made her home, was closer by than ours, my mother allowed me to stay there. Grandma was a kind soul and I was lovingly received. In some ways, it was much better than home, for here I was well fed and even got fresh milk to drink. Since we did not own a cow, this was a rare treat. Grandma used to urge me to drink a glass of milk right from the cow, and another and another. You see, she was especially pleased that I, her first grandson, was named after her

husband. This, too, is part of the thirteen thousand good deeds, since thus is your name perpetuated.

On one of the nights when I slept at my grandmother's, it happened that the stopper from my inkwell had come loose, and ink had spotted my vest. I knew that my parents would not punish me, for this was an accident. Next morning, I went to Cheder as I did every morning except Saturday. Soon after the pupils had recited the morning prayers as is done in the synagogue, the Rebbe pulled me from the bench and sarcastically asked how I had spilled the ink. I was not afraid of him and explained candidly that it was an accident. To him, this was no excuse, and, to teach me a lesson, he administered his customary punishment. I was bewildered; when night came, unmindful of wind and snow, I made my way home. There, with bitter tears, I told my mother what had happened.

Father used to stay out evenings. He was always in good company, among some of the Belodubrovskys, drinking tea, playing cards (but never for money), reading the paper, or just gabbing. What transpired between my parents when he got home that night, I do not know precisely. But I was not allowed to go to Cheder the next morning, and soon after found myself enrolled in another one. This was the first time I realized that my parents believed in a child and would stand up for him. I believe that in my generation this was unusual. I certainly appreciated it. Going to Cheder was no hardship to me. I learned to write Yiddish, did well in my Hebrew studies, and was not punished. My folks decided that I should attend a school of higher learning, and so I entered a Yeshivah.

Before long, my father stopped bothering to check on my progress, for he knew that I was reading and singing properly. In fact, I soon became better than my father at reciting by heart.

Whenever I visited Grandmother's, I always went around back of the counter, where jewelry of all kinds was displayed. There were wall-cases full of silver and pendulum clocks of all sizes on the wall. At the bench behind the counter sat my Aunt Rachel, working side-by-side with a hired watchmaker. She married him later and moved to a place about forty miles from Starodub. But at that time, I liked to station myself next to the bench to watch them work. It was not long before I was asking questions. Grandmother, my parents, and Uncle Gershen all began to ask me whether I wanted to become a rabbi, a merchant, or a watchmaker. Mind you, I was not yet ten years old, but already I had shown an inclination to earn something, perhaps to help out by being away from home so that I could turn over the food I might have eaten to the younger members of the family. And so I started to learn watchmaking.

## CHAPTER II

My mother was a very hard worker. She was small in stature, and where she got the strength and energy to bear the load I just do not know. As a child, I saw many hardships, although it must be noted that my family was not alone in its deprivation. Nevertheless, young as I was, I understood that times were hard. I used to help out, not as the children do nowadays, with a few minor chores for their allowances. No one paid me; there just was no money. There were plenty of tasks to be done, for the way we lived was certainly primitive by today's standards. For water, we had to travel a long, narrow path to the well. We carried across our shoulders a yoke, from each end of which hung a wooden pail that could hold three gallons. With the heavy rope that we always brought with us, we lowered the buckets and filled them. Fastening them to the yoke was no easy task, for we had to bend down, tie the first one on, and then, balancing the bar in the middle, tilt down almost double to attach the other without a spill. Now, carrying the rope, we made our difficult way homeward; it was all uphill, with no sidewalks or paved roads. Walking so as not to turn the water in the pails into ocean waves that swayed and slopped required real skill. At home, the water was emptied into a barrel in the shed. There were no arguments among us children as to who should or should not go after the second load, otherwise Mother went. Three or four trips were required for one day's supply.



Mother was the only girl in her family. I do not remember the exact details about her education but think that she received her education in some sort of private school, not one run by the government. Being the oldest and educated as well, she avoided domestic duties. Later, she worked as salesgirl with one or the other of our aunts who had places of business catering to the peasants. They sold yard goods, kerchiefs similar to what the girls wear now but much larger, and shawls with fringe all around, such as we had on our piano in Boston many years later. So, thanks to her job and her friends, my mother managed to get home when all the work was done. In later years, her hard labor more than made up for her lazy youth.

However, I am not going to belittle others and put myself on a pedestal. I was the one, however, who gladly filled the water barrel. I was the only one who would eat the hard outside of the bread and give the soft inside to my mother because her teeth were poor. It was I who stood by her side when she baked cakes and cookies to be sold in my father's store. You see, when people attended a wedding, usually staged in the synagogue yard, it was traditional to bring a cake--not very large. My mother's pastry was known as very tasty. She was famous for her Eier Kuchen, Lekach, Zucker Lekach, and Ingberlach. Not only that, but she used to feed geese all winter long. First, she would buy ten, feed them to fatten them up, and then have them dressed. I helped her pluck and separate the feathers. Then, she would skin them, sell the torso, neck, feet, and wings separately, and render the fat. She had quite a reputation for her Schmalz (fat) and

Griebenenes (cracklings), which Father sold. This good business would last from Chanukah to Purim.

In addition, we used to have fairs in Starodub two or three times each year. Mother would put up a tent in the marketplace and sell the things we had made to the peasants, who came in regularly for these events. Although I still want to be modest, I must say that I did not see the older members of my family around to help, but I certainly pitched in. Mother was also especially busy around Christmas and New Year's time, when she baked and decorated cakes. These were covered with white frosting, adorned with colored sugar, and had appropriate holiday sentiments written on them, in accordance with the customer's order. Besides doing all this, she had to bake a forty-pound batch of rye bread as well as a batch of Challeh and, perhaps, a cake for the family for Sabbath.

She had plenty of other household duties besides. There were no automatic machines to wash, rinse, and dry clothes, nor were there electric irons. Washing was a much harder process of those days. First, you soaked the clothes, every spoonful of water having been brought in on someone's back. We used to have a hollowed-out stump of a tree, which we set on a flat stone out in the yard. Into this we put a few wet articles, then wood ashes, then more clothes, until it was almost full. All the while, kettles of water were being heated in the oven. Quite different from an electric range was that brick oven in our kitchen. Inside it, on one side, burned the wood; on the other, were the kettles. Now, we would grasp a long-handled fork, shove it under the kettle, and lift it up.

Careful! Hold it steady, balance it, and pull it toward you and outside. Next you get some rags so as not to burn your hands, and then you carry the kettle outside. Step up on something solid; now watch out that the hot steam does not scald your face as you pour the water in. After you have brought out all the water, cover the tub and let it stand overnight.

Next morning, the shoulder yoke which carried water is put to another use. Perhaps you have guessed what it was. You piled the wet laundry on each side, evenly, for you knew by eye or by feel when there was a balance. Maybe you had to take several trips now. And so you started to walk, this time not with water pails to the well but in a quite different direction. You took short-cuts through alleys and zigzagged for quite a distance. Finally, you reached the riverbend, and there you were not alone. Just as in a section of a factory you find fifty or more people all doing the same thing, so here, too, a number of women were all going through the same motions with their wash. You selected a spot near a rock; that was to be your bench. You had brought your tools with you,--a piece of hard wood about five or six inches wide, with a flat face about eighteen inches long, and a handle. Then, you knelt down and went to work, doing just what the others were doing. You splashed the article in the water, placed it on the rock, pounded it with the Pranick, bang! again and again, then rolled it over and repeated the process. That was about enough and so you took on the next victim. Those pesky things! Why did they get so dirty? Maybe another clout would make it stay clean longer. Anyway, came the time to fold the wash

and pile it back onto the yoke. But mind not to forget those tools; they are very important. The fellow who leaves his implements behind is out of luck. They cost ten to fifteen kopeks, and such money is not easy to come by.

Well, the worst is over, and you can relax now. You have only to fill the wash tub, rinse the clothes, and hang them out to dry. At least, you find some similarity in the drying process: If you want your laundry to dry out in the fresh air, you have to watch the weather. On a clear, sunny day, you might have been able to get all of the clothes out at one time. Then, all was well. But the weather played tricks there, too, and you had to be prepared. Perhaps a black cat had crossed your path; you had to scramble to get the wash in because of a sudden shower. Too bad. You just shouldn't have let that cat cross. It would have been better to have let the yoke drop, pick up a stone, and throw it, so that this bad luck messenger would have run in some other direction. Then you wouldn't have had to take all the stuff in and hang it out another, better day. But, thanks to the One who is in heaven, even though He did say that with the sweat of your brow you will earn your daily bread, so I imagine that laundry is part of living. And, at last, you have the clothes washed, pounded, dried, and safely indoors.

Yes, we know that there is ironing to be done. But in those days, our techniques were different. We had a rolling pin twice the size of the one that a wife normally used on her husband, and a ribbed piece of wood somewhat longer than the one you took to the

river as a pounder. Then, you cleared everything from the table, now to be used as the finishing bench. You took a towel, wrapped it around the roller, now down onto the table; with the other ribbed piece of wood, you smoothed it; now again with the roller and so on until the piece you were "ironing" was sufficiently soft. What we did about shirts, I just do not know. We kids wore blouses, but I guess they smoothed out ~~on~~ our bodies. And so the laundry was done every other week.

It was really not as bad as it may seem. I forgot to mention that bringing the water in during the winter was not nearly so hard, because then we could mount the barrel on a sled and get it to the well and thus bring back a day's supply in one trip. There was a song in Russia that went, "So friend, if you like to go sliding, you'll have to like to pull the sled back up the hill, too." In our case, however, I slid empty downhill and had to pull the loaded sled up the hill. Since this was no pleasure trip, you can believe me that I was careful. In fact, one did all such tasks carefully so as to avoid having to repeat them. For example, I often washed the dishes, and my father was especially particular that the backs of the plates be clean, too. You can imagine the difficulty, with no grease-cutting detergents or soap powders. And God forbid that any of the glasses be left spotted! You see, we still had from the old days all the silverware that I described and some nice cut-glass tumblers. We used to drink tea from the glasses and not from cups. Father would hold the glass up to the kerosene lamp to check on my skill in wiping tea glasses.

In general, however, he did not bother with

domestic details. He performed the duty of attending synagogue three times a day and did not hurry home. Between the afternoon and evening prayers, the rabbi would sit at the head of the table, with his followers grouped around and, once again, as rabbis have done for thousands of years, would read a passage from the Gemorrah. Some of his listeners would ask questions, and he knew all the answers. Then, it was time for the last prayers, after which the worshippers dispersed. All this would add up to another point or two in the thirteen thousand. But Father seldom came right home. We tended store while he did his Mitzvahs (thirteen thousand). When he finally showed up, we all went home.

And what a home it was! Like many youngsters, my older brother and sister were constantly fighting, and there was plenty of squabbling among the rest of us, too, I suspect. This turmoil could not help but affect my mother, who had good reason to be nervous. Perhaps the bread supply was running short; she might have found that a dish had been broken, a tragedy when replacement cost five precious kopeks. And so she distributed a mother's curses with variations. But, of course, a mother's curses are blessings, as everyone knows. She really meant nothing bad.

A special day in her week, and one that required lots of work, was the Sabbath. Let me tell you how a Jewish family prepared for this day. Remember that the Sabbath is a day dedicated to Him Who is creator of all good and goods, and so you have to give honor to Him. Never mind that you had to go hungry during the rest of the time. Come the Sabbath, every poor

Jew is a king. Mother used to display the Challeh to Father as soon as he returned from the synagogue. He would heft it and beam as though he were receiving Elijah, the prophet, who was expected by all the pious to show up some day and leave a present. You could exercise your own imagination as to what it would be; I guess it depended on what you most wanted. So Mother's Challeh was tops, but how about the other things?

You had to prepare the Kashe from groats, from which you had carefully removed the shells and anything else that might have fallen in. Then there were those dried peas; the pesty worms liked them, too, I guess, for we had to inspect them one by one. Then there was the hoof Ma had bought for Pitchia (fricasee). That was very nutritional but an awful nuisance to prepare. First, you had to singe the hair, burn it, scrape it, burn it again, and scrape it several times. Do you think that is so simple? You had to put a pointed wooden stick between the skin and bone and hold it over the fire, taking care that the stick did not get burnt. You kept pulling it out, scraping it, thrusting it back into the flame, until the skin was nice and clean. You will excuse me for comparing it to the skin of a piglet.

Now everything is ready. Who did it all? Well, I hate to make an issue of it, but what can I tell you? Saturday was fast approaching; by sunset everything had to be done. Mother had been in the market, helping in the store. Yesterday she had baked cakes for a couple of weddings. And she had had to sell them, a complicated matter. One did not simply put on a price tag and expect the customer to come in, select a cake, pay,

and walk out. Oh no! not in Starodub! She first chooses one that is nice and round and evenly risen, with a light brown crust. Then, she begins to bargain. You put it on the scale and tell her that it will cost her thirty-five kopeks. How much does it weigh, she demands. You show her. But, she objects, it cannot be; that is too much. You suggest that she take another. No, she likes this particular one, except that...well... This goes on back and forth. On the scale once more. The customer takes the weights off and tests to see whether the scales are in balance. Someone may be trying to put something over on her. Mother places a match on the scale to demonstrate how sensitive it is. Well, asks the customer, how much will you take for the cake? Thirty-four kopeks. No, I will give you thirty-one. Mother puts it away and turns to another customer. The first one is afraid that she will lose the cake of her choice. She offers thirty-two kopeks. Mother keeps on talking to the second customer. The first woman eyes the second to see whether she is interested in that cake. Thirty-three kopeks is all she will give. The other picks up the cake that is on the auction block.

Horrors! how dare you butt in! This is mine! No, you have not bought it yet. What do you say? Let me have it. You should make it thirty-four kopeks. The sale is consummated at thirty-four. And that, in substance, is the way it went on.

When Mother came home from all this, everything in the house was ready for the Sabbath, the potatoes peeled, the carrots scraped, peas soaked, the hoof singed. She had only to put the things together and



into the oven. By the time the sun set, the candlesticks had been polished and the candles set in place. Now, she washed her hands, put on a crocheted cap which looked so festive and beautiful, passed her hands three times embracingly over the lighted candles, and offered the prayer which sets aside the hard week which has just passed and thanks God that He ordered the Sabbath. It is a pity that He did not ordain two Sabbaths in one week; we could have used the rest. But if only one? Well, Thy command is law, and who are we mortals to complain?

And now she waits until Father comes home from the synagogue, with a singing of Gut Shabbos, with the traditional Friday night Sholom Aleichem joined by us all. Then, supper is served, with everyone relaxed and happy. Thus is the Lord's Day well begun.

### CHAPTER III

My father was not at all handy. I never saw him drive a nail even to build the Succah, which had to be started Yom Kippur night. You drove a piece of wood into the ground. That was the starting point. Then, the building got under way. Mother was the architect and the chief of construction. We even had windows, the ones otherwise used to protect us from winter storms. Father did get his own Lulav and Esrog, the palm-like stalk and lime that come from Palestine and are essential for every pious Jew's Succoth observance even if he cannot afford to buy them. The Shammos from the synagogue would visit the home of each member, wake the family, and all would go into the Succah. Thus would the day begin, and the Succoth festival would last for six days, during which we ate all our meals out under God's sun and stars. Besides being the place for the ceremonial blessing of the greens, in thanks for the early spring fruits, and as a temporary dining-room, the Succah had another, less formal function. We kids, with all our friends, played there. Our favorite pastime was gambling with walnuts, and the secret can now be told. We used to do a little cheating!

Here is how the game went: One player would take two handfuls of nuts, and you had to guess if he had an odd or an even amount. If you had put up two nuts, and were correct, you got four in return. Or there was another combination: You might include yours with the count of what the other boy held in his hands and would

either lose all you put in or win double. So we used to open our nuts carefully,--not all of them--, eat the meat, and fill the shell with a mixture of flour and water. We'd then glue the ends. In that way, our losses would not be quite so great. If and when the game became hot and you had a lot of winnings, your opponent might buy five or six from you for a kopek and continue playing. But such tragedy have I seen in our midst, as when we ran completely out of nuts, the good and the bad, the real and the Ersatz! Anyway, it was exciting.

All week, there would be in the Succah the variety of goodies that Mother had baked for the holiday. Relatives would come in, drink a glass of wine or of tea, help themselves to the delicacies, and always ask Mother for the recipe for this or that favorite. Then, likely as not, Father and Mother would go with the others to someone else's house, not for a full meal, but for this kind of snack. By late afternoon, they would all be just a bit verschnushket (tipsy), and even if they were really quite drunk, the police did not bother them. This applied not only to my parents but in general. I never knew of a Jewish man's being arrested during holiday times. A whole group of them would come swaying down the street singing, "Whatever we are, we are Jews; Whatever we are, we observe the Mitzvahs; Whatever we are, we hold onto the Torah." Too bad the festival had to end so soon. If whoever had set the time-regulation had made it last a month, we children would certainly have been happy, and the worries of everyday existence would have seemed to diminish. But again, there is the saying, "With the

sweat of your brow shall you earn your daily bread." And so, once again, we resumed our fight for existence, and fight it was.

The deals one made were small and had to be measured by the gain or loss involved in selling the things one had bought to the dealer, who in turn sold to out-of-town, bigger merchants. Twice a week, the farmers came to Starodub with the things they had for sale,--a horse's or cow's hide, a sheep's pelt, some strings of dried apples or mushrooms, a few rolls of pigs' bristles, eggs, chickens, even homespun linen, or a few bunches of flax for rope. Each dealer was fortified with a small hand-scale and a few pennies in the pocket. He would run from one wagon to the next, peering in to see if there was anything worth buying. The peasant's horse meanwhile grazed at will and his master stood idly by. This was the low end of the trading process. The big dealers bought from the small ones and sent the products off to distant places.

What did the Muzhik (peasant) accomplish by this transaction? Well, he pocketed about enough to buy his vodka. His horse knew the way back to the farm village. And if his Matrona was too insistent about knowing what her Ivan had done with the money,--just as if she didn't!--she got a good beating. So was she convinced that Ivan really loved her, and they started all over again. To add all this up, it amounted to nothing, nothing to live for and not enough to die with. This was the situation as I saw it. Poverty, sickness, destitution, and drunkenness,--not much to be enthusiastic about. But only the sinner complains; others take what comes. So I was a sinner.

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At the time I began my apprenticeship in watchmaking, I also attended school. This was not a public institution but rather, one established by the grace of Baron de Hirsch. I had given up the Hebrew Yeshiva in favor of this school, where the students become Russified. The only Jewish content in the curriculum was the daily translation of the Books of Moses into Russian. Otherwise, we studied reading, writing, spelling, arithmetic, geography, and penmanship. Our hours were much like those of school children in America; there was a recess, during which we boys played ball. The entire program covered four years, what with the three-month summer vacations. When you completed it, you had an elementary education.

As you may remember, it was in my Uncle Gershen's place that I started to learn watchmaking. Ordinarily, a parent had to pay three hundred rubles for apprenticeships, but I do not think that my folks had to pay anything. As to my duties, you might think that all I had to do was to get up in the morning, go to school, come back, and start learning bench work. It was not that easy. Yes, I did get up early, very early. I first had to recite the morning prayers, have some breakfast, and then get going. When I returned, if the weather was fair, I had to take the baby out in his carriage, then fill the woodbox. After that came afternoon prayers. Then there were the lessons to be done in my copy books. Supper time and evening prayers soon followed. With Bobeh (Grandma) there, I really did say all the prayers I was supposed to. There was no getting out of it. But how about filling the lamps with kerosene, trimming the wicks so that the

reflection would be even, and washing the chimneys ever so carefully, else they would break. The lamp had to shine brightly when it was first lit. It was only after these chores were done that I could stand beside the man at the bench to watch him at his work. If he happened to like the apprentice, he might disclose the name of the part or the tool he was handling or perhaps explain a bit of the process. It was my luck that this fellow hated even himself. So it was Grandmother who primed me on the use of the lathe. She was always a great inspiration in my taking to the trade. After the man left the bench, it was she who taught me the way my grandfather used to do the job. So I would take a piece of hard wood, put it in the lathe, and turn it in the shape of a fancy wine glass. After that, I would try my hand at brass, turning it down to whatever little gadgets I wanted to make; she would caution me to be extra careful when I came to a thin point, for it was soft and would break, thus ruining the whole effort. Finally, I learned to turn steel and make dummy balance staffs, not to fit anything, but just for practice. But the pivots were fine enough to fit jewels.

In a short time, I became quite proficient with clocks. In fact, my uncle made me the wonderful offer that if I fixed all the clocks awaiting repair, he would have a pair of boots made for me. Even though most of my work had to be done in the evening, I did finish and got my new shoes. This reminds me of the two grandfather clocks he showed me. They had been ruined in a pogrom. Beautiful as they were, they were now an awful mess. The job of restoring them was

entrusted to me, and, even if I do have to say it myself, I put them back into working condition and perfect order.

And so my work went along. Saturdays, after dinner, I would go home and read the Bible for Father, to show him that I had not forgotten how. While I remember the births of my brothers, Max, Morris, and Jack, I was not at home much with them. In school, I was just an ordinary student as I had no time to do lessons properly, but I did become a bit of a salesman there. Kids used to gamble, like betting that the point of the egg they were holding would break yours. If it did, you won the egg. And so I used to bring eggs to school, hard-boiled and ready for the battle. And apples. A fellow would bet that with his finger on the half-way mark, by striking with the fist of his other hand, he could split it in two. So I sold apples. I probably earned twenty-five to thirty kopeks a week. That was a lot of money. What did I do with it? What did I do with the money I received as a tip for delivering a clock to a customer's house? Didn't you know about it? Well, I did; and whatever kopek I got found its way into a snap-top purse that I had hidden under the eaves in the barn where my uncle's cow was housed. Even at times when I had no money to put in, I would stop by every now and then to slide my hand in under to make sure that it was still there. Do you want to know what was the purpose of saving and hiding that treasure? I'll tell you later; I did have a plan for it. And in later years, the plan was fulfilled.

Going back to the pogrom...I will never forget it.

I couldn't have been over five, if that old. It was an hour or two before Kol Nidre, on Yom Kippur Eve. Mother dressed me up. I remember wearing an apron with polka dots. Then, I went to Grandmother's for her blessing. This I recalled from the year before. She put her old hands on my head and said in a whisper, "God bless you and keep you,"--in Hebrew, of course. And I felt so safe and protected from all evil. It must have been three-quarters of a mile to Uncle Gershen's, where she lived, but I knew the way, and it was safe. Little did any of the Jews suspect that a pogrom was to start that day.

The whole thing had been engineered in such secrecy that no Jew had even dreamed of its happening. If they had had wind of the plans, someone might have run to the higher-ups, the sheriff or the governor, and by slipping a bribe in a willing hand, they could have put a stop to it. But this came like a hurricane. As I was nearing my grandmother's house, I noticed some commotion but had no notion of what it was about. All I knew was that as I approached the bank, which I used to pass on my way, the watchman, who had evidently taken a shine to me because I spoke Russian, suddenly rose as if from under ground, grabbed me in his arms, and carried me into Grandma's yard. At once, we all fled into a deep cellar to hide, having scooped up as much of the jewelry as was possible in so hasty a flight. The windows of the cellar had iron sashes and hooked from the inside. Silently we sat there in the dark, unable to see each other. Grandmother held me on her lap, where I guess I fell asleep. During the night, when I awoke, I discovered my mother there,



too, with Uncle Max, who was an infant. I remember her begging him not to cry, but he would not have been heard outside. Mother later told us how she had stolen her way here in the hope of finding me. The watchman had let her into the bank yard, from which she was able to reach here safely.

I had been in that cellar before. It was there that Grandma kept pickles and cabbage, put up for the winter. Many was the time that I had climbed up and down those stairs. It was deep. But deep as it was, I recall hearing the noises from upstairs or from the hoodlums outside. We could hear the sound of crashing glass, the hoarse yells, and splintering wood, as those hordes destroyed Jewish homes and places of business, taking what they could and burning the rest.

Right there, I kept wondering how such a night could be Yom Kippur. Jews couldn't be in the synagogue; Muzhiks were ruining everything we had. Why? Hadn't we prayed every day? I remembered the previous Yom Kippur, when my father had stood in Schul and cried so when he prayed. Hadn't he repented enough for his sins?

What a sight next morning! Feathers were actually flying thick. Everywhere fires were burning. In the marketplace where once had stood a cluster of stores only ashes remained. The buildings owned by Goyim still stood, but the merchandise had been emptied from the Jewish tenants' stores. My uncle's place was a shambles; but our house was miraculously intact. How? When Mother and Father had fled to the cellar, they had left the candles in observance of Yom Kippur burning. Moreover, they had forgotten to fasten the inside catch

of the shutters. The wind had forced these open, and the drunken looters had evidently thought that this must be the house of one of their Goyim. So our home was saved. But not many miracles took place. An atmosphere of gloom hung over us all.

To this day, I simply do not know how the Cossacks happened to come to Starodub. It was rumored that the pogrom had been in the air, and that some Jewish leaders had tried to prevent it. They had gone to the higher-ups with money in the hope that these officials would send in a company of Cossacks. Perhaps that is what brought them. But they came galloping in on their fast horses one night too late. But how relieved we were! And what a glad moment when my mother with Uncle Max in her tired arms and me dragging on her skirts entered our house! Father and Mother embraced, and we all kissed each other.

It seems that the Jewish community had agreed to take care of the Cossacks and their horses. Our family had no room for the men but could supply space for three horses. During that time, the town was overrun with mounted Cossacks. I understood that they arrested some forty pogrom hoodlums and tore up floors and roofs in the city as well as on nearby farms in their hunt for stolen Jewish belongings. They also took hay for their horses wherever they happened to find it, and if a pig was loose, it never reached its home. I might add that Starodub had a great many pigs, and there was a lot of mud in which the pigs could bury themselves. You should have seen the way the horse jumped and you should have heard the way the pig squealed when they ran into each other.

The Cossacks were friendly to the Jews; I imagine they got just about everything they wanted from our frightened people, who needed protection from official and unofficial oppression. But it was quite a sight to see them riding with all their military paraphernalia. I had the pleasure of seeing a group of those pogrom-chik destroyers, chained to each other and convoyed by the Cossacks, being marched off to some distant jail. But I also will never forget the words spoken by some of the Goyim observing this scene,--that the Jews should all be killed and that next time the pogrom might be more successful. It was not very pleasant to your ear to hear such how-do-you-do's.

The wind-up of the Cossacks' stay was a gala show. It was in December, so they must have remained about three months. They had erected quite an arena, with barricades, passages and slopes, and all kinds of gadgets. In full dress and ammunition, they jumped over the high snow embankments, and then slid themselves under the horse, clinching their feet around his belly. Or they would stand up in the saddle and ride, three or four horses abreast, singing and shouting. It was an exciting day, the like of which I have never seen since.

With their departure, things settled down to normal. Jewish places were rebuilt. Some outside financial help came, probably from America. Since I was an observant child, I heard my father say that very often help was given not to the most needy but, on the contrary, to the rich. To this day, I believe that he was right. Even the squabbles between the different charitable agencies as to who should receive what portion of collected funds remind me of my early

distaste for politics in philanthropy. During the sixty years that passed since I first realized that welfare is not necessarily allocated fairly, there has not been much improvement. In fact, I think things have become worse.

You will probably recall that I mentioned earlier two grandfather clocks which had been ruined and on which I had done such a good job for my uncle. It so happened that a couple of spinsters of half nobility, who lived on an estate about ten miles from Starodub, had a grandfather's clock that needed repair. They wanted someone to come out and fix it right there. I don't know what financial arrangements were made, but I was driven out in fine style,--a pair of nice-looking horses, a beautiful carriage, and the typical coachman with fur hat and all. I was almost lost in the seat, but the riding was certainly easy,--a nice, swaying motion. I cannot tell you precisely how long the ride took, but I would not have minded if it had lasted another hour or two because the drive was pleasant and the country-side lovely. We drove through fields of flaxseed, oats, tobacco and often came to sections of the road that looked like aisles, with pine trees on either side majestically thrusting their heads far up in the sky. There did not seem to be as much underbrush in the woods as we have in America, nor were there as many lakes. All the way, after leaving the town, you saw isolated farms, two or three houses set far apart. Then, you might drive through a farm village, with its main street, a well that appeared to be public, a church or two, a school building, a country store, and a deputy sheriff's office. There were some houses along the street, with fields extending out back

of them. Small and covered with straw, these dwellings had dirt floors. But the palace I was being brought to was something out of heaven.

The noisy greeting of the huge dogs convinced me that I had better not leave the carriage, but the coachman introduced them to me, and in less time than it takes to tell it, they became quiet and friendly. I am not an artist and, therefore, cannot undertake to describe the finery around me,--the large mirrors, the piano, rugs, and elegant furniture. I have never seen the like of it. Riches were sparkling from all directions. One of the spinsters met me and showed me the clock that I was to restore to life. Since travel for me in those days was not at all formal, I had my baggage on my back and my tools in hand. When I started to take the head off the clock, the lady seemed much worried about my dropping it. But I assured her that I had worked on similar clocks and that I knew how to slide it off and not lift it.

Later, she told me that my food would be eggs, milk, cream, and cheese, and showed me to my room. She began at once to talk to me about my origin, my parents, my religion, and the like....Why was I a Jew? Couldn't I see the mistake in waiting for a messiah? He had already arrived, and because we had not accepted him, we were being punished so much. I asked her why Jesus was created from our midst and not from any other religious group. Besides, since brothers rarely agree with brothers, to say nothing of worshipping them, we as Jesus' fellow-Jews, could hardly have accepted him in any capacity higher than that of prophet. To make the story short, she tried to convince me that by

adopting Christianity, I would gain acceptance anywhere I needed to go and live and do. Besides, she would stand godmother at the conversion, receive me as her own son, and, in time, I would inherit everything she and her sister owned. To this, I replied that God's will was for me to be what I was and that I would stay that way, and not be transplanted.

Remember that it was not appropriate to discuss religion too harshly with them. After all, they were in the upper bracket socially and financially, and important in other ways, too. I took my time with the clock; I enjoyed so much the scenery and walking in the orchards, where grew all kinds of apples, pears, plums, and cherries. I ate just as much of the fruit as I wanted. It was great fun. On the third day, I had finished the work on the clock and was sure that it would run right. The ladies ordered two servants to pack fruits from the orchard and garden, cheese, and a few dozen eggs as a gift. Then we went back to Starodub, where my first stop was at my father's house.

When the coachman brought the bags of food into the house, everyone was impressed. In addition, I had received my biggest fee, a five-ruble gold piece. Boy oh, boy! I didn't know what to do with it! Should I hide it in my secret place under the eaves of the barn? I did; and it served its value a thousand-fold. Soon after that, my only sister got married, and I removed it from its hiding place and graciously presented it to her as my wedding gift. Was she ever surprised! And so was the rest of the family. And they all knew that I had not stolen it.

My little snap purse received its share of my tips, and to this day, I do not know how much it contained, for I don't think that I ever counted. The report that the clock was running nicely was music to my ears. And my life continued about the same. During the summertime, my kopek collection improved. My aunt Fanya, Gershen's wife, had me go along to market with her as bundle-carrier; that meant a few copper pieces from her. This was early every morning, when the peasants brought in the various foodstuffs that they had for sale.

I was growing tall for my age. I had no friends, since, except for the school recess, I had no time for play. And I was nearing thirteen; even if I was eleven and a half, I was aware that Bar Mitzvah was approaching and that, with it, came full responsibility. The thought kept nagging me: what then? It kept pounding in my head. Where should I work? I definitely did not want to continue working for relatives. My mother had an uncle and a cousin who were both jewelers, but I was not attracted to their shops. Uncle Gershen was none too liberal. If I was worth a dollar a week, he probably would pay me twenty-five cents and claim that even that was too much. And so my ideas were beginning to take shape. As soon as I became Bar Mitzvah and had paid my respects to my parents, I would leave Starodub. I was sick of that place where Father and Mother and so many others had had to struggle for their meagre livelihood. I would go to Ekaterinaslav, which I had read about in a book.

My Bar Mitzvah came soon after I had finished the

last class in the Baron de Hirsch School. I read the Haftorah alone, with no prompting. There was a scanty sweet table. No one gave me any presents; I didn't even have a new suit.