

*Before There Was You*  
*A Family Story*

*Stories Retold by Florence K. Gussman*  
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*...And then there was you.*

## Before There Was You

Some people are so famous that everyone knows their name. People write about them in books and all their relatives keep their memories alive. We do not come from such a family. No one wrote about any of us. Some families live in one place for hundreds of years and their births and deaths are recorded in the special records of that town and in family bibles. We are Jews and we were forced to move many times, so we didn't belong to any special town. As for the family bible, our family was too poor to have one.

How then do we know about our ancestors? (grandparents and great-grandparents) In the past we knew by listening to stories and repeating those stories to our children. This was a good way to keep records, if one remembered to listen and if one didn't forget what they were told. I'll start a new tradition with the oldest story I was told. I'll write it down.

Life for people in Russia in the old days was very hard. There was seldom enough food to eat. People did not have fruits and vegetables all year long. My mother and father told me that a piece of Sabbath bread with a little fat on it was the kind of treat that chocolate whipped cream cake is for you. Even the tsar (king) of Russia did not have the daily comfort that we have today.



For Jews life was even harder. Because Jews prayed to God in their own way and did not accept the Russian religion, they were mistrusted and hated. Some Russian people called the Jews ugly names. Other Russians threw sticks and stones at the Jews. The government made laws that told the Jews where they could live and where they could not live. There were laws that told the Jews what work they could do and what they could not do, who could go to school and who could not, and what they could own and what they could not own. Sometimes the government organized a pogrom (a massacre or attack) upon Jews. Why? They wanted the Jews to give up their God, their ways of worship, and their ways of treating people. But the Jews did not change. They remained Jews.

In 1827 Tsar Nicholas I began to draft (force to join) six year old Jewish boys into the Russian army. He sent his soldiers to Jewish homes to collect little boys. These boys were put in special cantons (camps) for six years. Here they were fed forbidden foods (non Kosher) and taught the Christian ways. At 12 years of age they began their military service. After 25 years as a soldier, they were allowed to go home free. During those 31 years they were not allowed to visit or even to write to their parents.

What could the Jews do to save their sons? People who had money, paid the collectors to leave their sons at home. Some people bought boys from

poor families to take their sons' places in the roundup. Some people cut off fingers or toes so that their sons would be useless as soldiers. Some people hid their children in the deep forests until the collectors were gone.

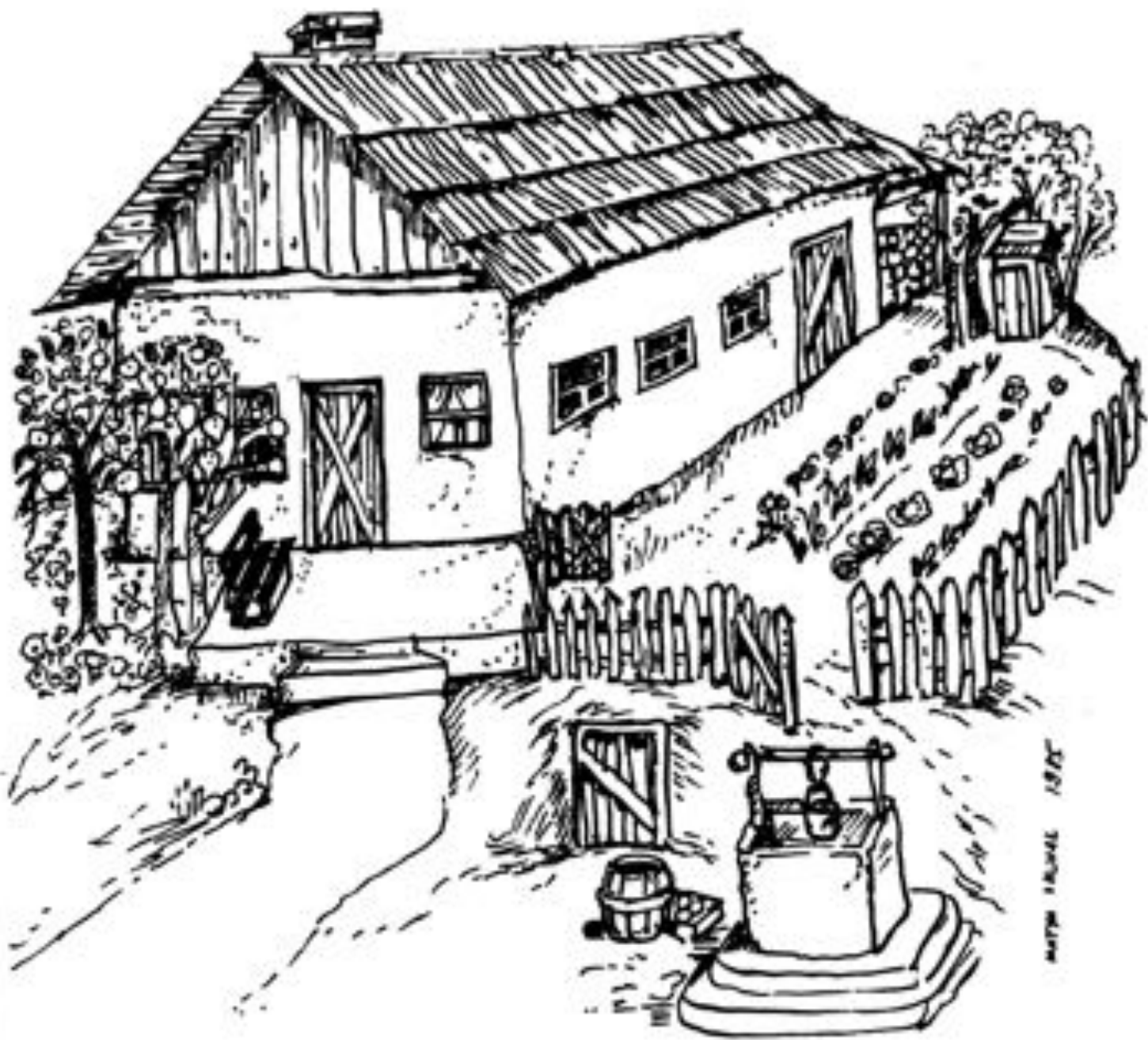
One six year old was hidden in the woods. He promised he would wait without making a sound. He would not talk, if he was found. He waited and waited. It was always dark in the woods. The sun never reached the floor. How long had he waited? How many times did he sleep, and wake, and sleep again? How long was it since he last ate? He'd go eat those berries and come right back. He cried silently and waited.

As the days passed he had to go further away to find berries and nuts, but he always came back to his tree. Was it really his tree? They all looked so much alike. This day he heard voices and axes. He made himself as small as possible and waited shivering under his tree. The voices sounded closer. Maybe if he closed his eyes tightly, those men would not see him.

But they did see him. They were men of the Gubenko family. They were in the forest to get wood to make willow rakes. They swept up this poor, hungry, dirty boy and took him home to be washed, fed, and



loved. For a long time he did not talk. He never told them his name or anything about his family. They knew his story without being told. The Gubenko family raised him as if he had been born to them. They named him and sent him to chedar (school). When he grew up, he married a Gubenko daughter. What was his name? David Getzie Gubenko.



MARY TRUHAL 1872



## Life in Koshovato

Bubbie Sonya and Zeide Menashe grew up in the same town. They lived in houses that had dirt walls and floors. Zeide told me how they made the houses. The men would erect a wooden wall and pack mud against the outside. The dirt walls were 18 to 24 inches thick. Sometimes the men built two separate walls with an air space between. On the coldest days, the women stuffed straw in these spaces and burned it to make the walls warm. They needed these very thick walls to keep out the intense cold, as they only had fireplaces to keep them warm.

In Sonya's house they had hard dirt floors. When they prepared for the Sabbath, they would wash the floor. Now how can you wash a dirt floor? Sonya would make a paste of clay and water to smear over the floor. She applied this with careful palm strokes, all going evenly in one direction. When the floor dried, she would make border designs with pastes and dribblings of different colored clay. Then she would guard her floor from the careless steps of brothers and sisters until it dried hard and all was ready for the Sabbath.

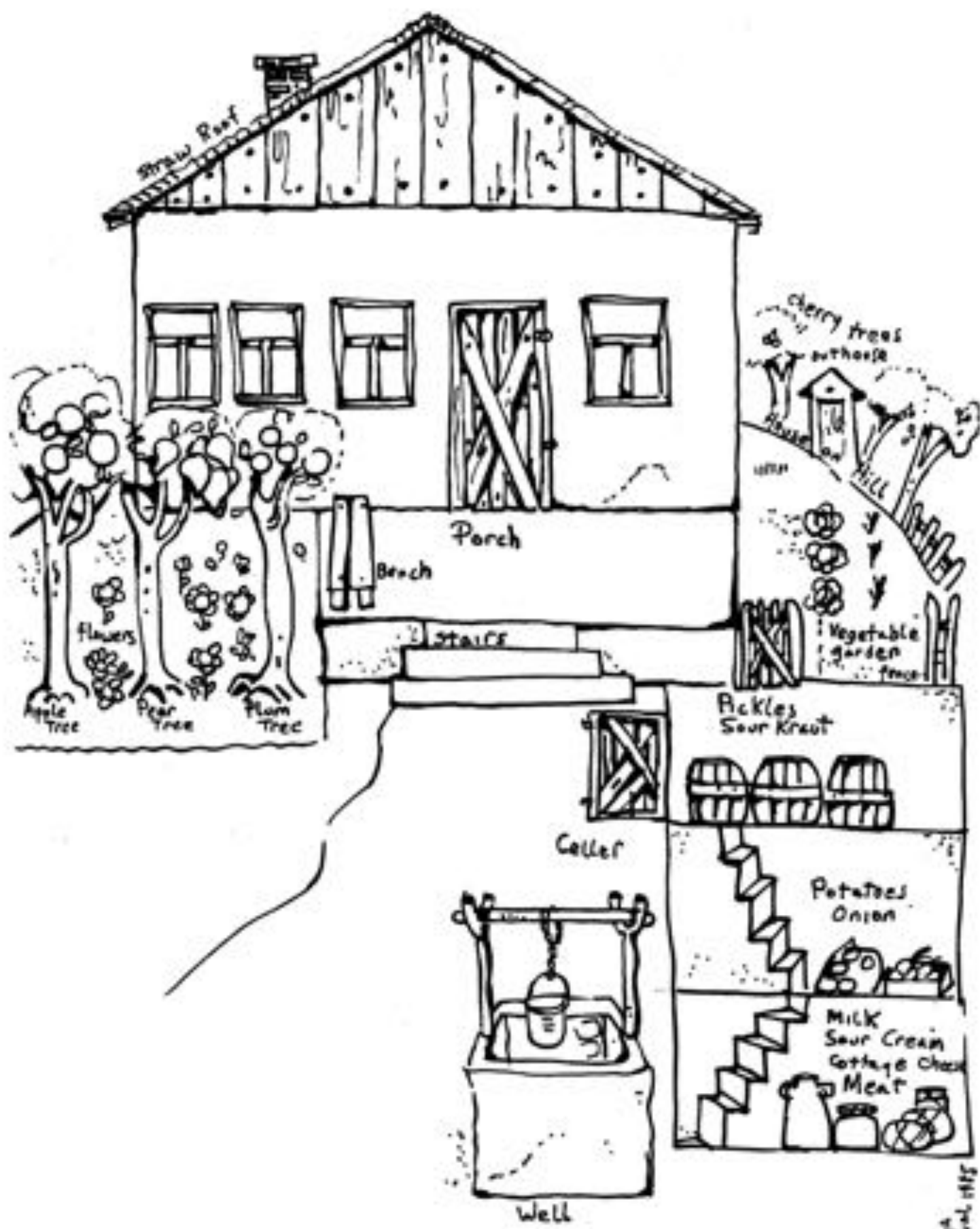
Sonya's house had a roof made of thatch. (bundles of straw) The roofs were very

thick so neither rain nor snow would come through. They brought water into the house from the town well in the street. There was a privy (outhouse) nearby. There was no electricity. People used oil lamps for light and in place of a refrigerator or ice box, they had a root cellar.

In the whole town of Koshovato only two people subscribed to a newspaper, the doctor and the pharmacist. A newspaper was a terrible extravagance. A book was much more sensible. No, there were no radios or television sets. The light was too dim to read by, so they spent the evenings telling stories as the women and girls fluffed feathers and the men and boys sorted beans.

In those days people traveled by horse and wagon. When Menashe was six, a visitor came in a car to their town. He did not see another car for twelve years. There were trains, but not to their town. Most roads were made of dirt, but in Koshovato some streets were paved with stone blocks.

Sonya's father was a maker of willow rakes and barrels. After the High Holy Days, in October, he would take twenty men and they would travel to the forests to make willow rakes and boards. They would live and work there all winter. Just before Passover, in the spring, they would return home. In the spring and summer they would make barrels.

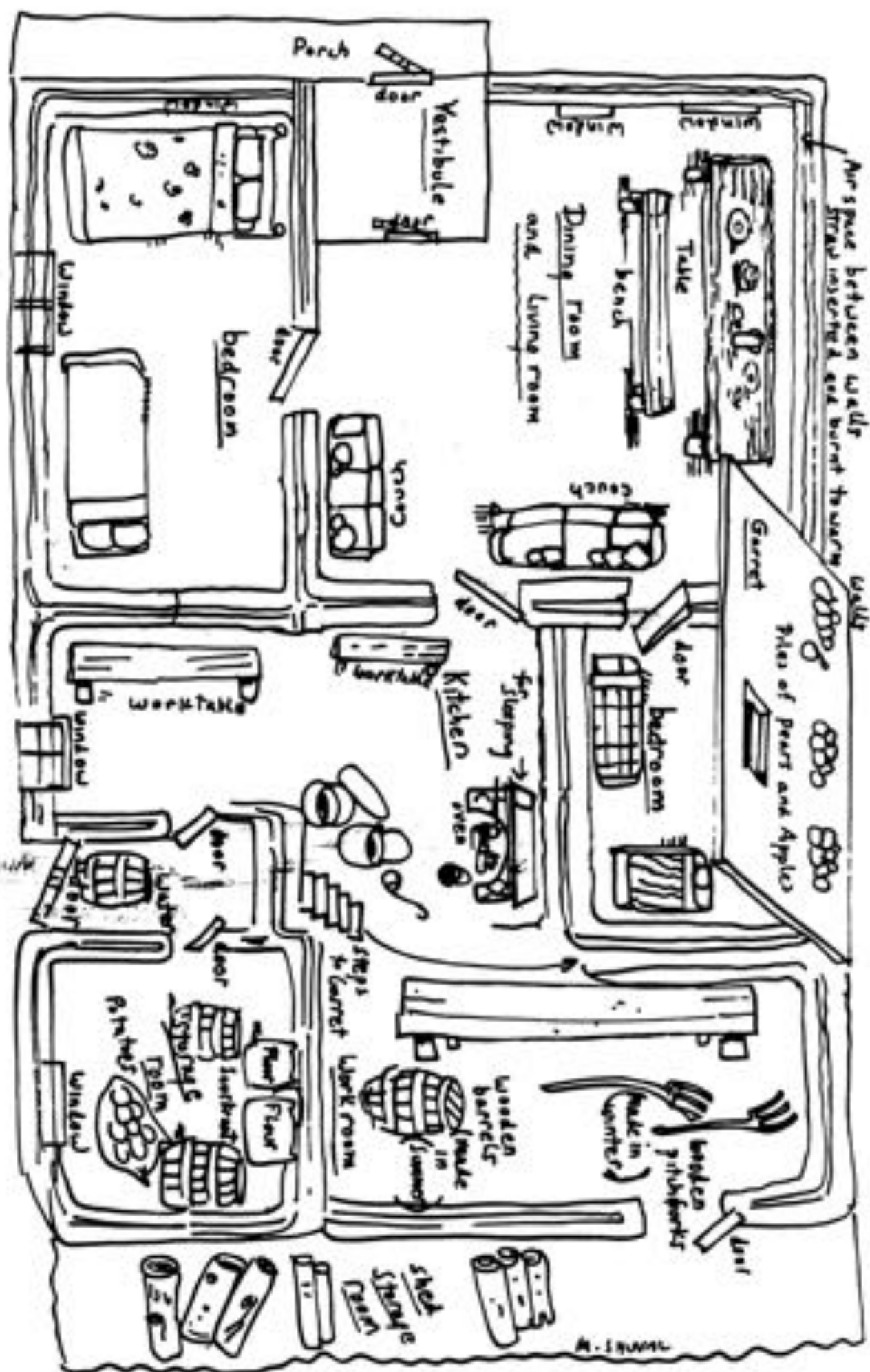


Melba Shoval 1985

They dipped the boards in tubs of boiling water. This made the wood pliable. Then they bent the wood to form barrels.

Menashe's father was a merchant. He had a general store where he sold beans, flour, grains and some liquor. The Korostoshevsky family was a little more prosperous than the Gubenkos. For example, one room in their house had a wooden floor. Behind the store, they, like the Gubenkos, had four rooms to live in. One room was the parents' bedroom. Another bedroom was for the girls. The boys slept on couches (benches) in the living-dining room, and there was a large kitchen.

This is the floor plan for the Gubenko house. The workroom and the shed were attached to the house.



A. 1944

## Zeide Shlomo and the Goat

Spanning the creek on the outskirts of Koshovato was a bridge. At first there were many accidents on the approach to the bridge. Carriages or sleighs would slip on the icy stones and careen toward the creek. The townspeople decided to plant trees on both sides of the road to prevent accidents. This living fence was a wonderful idea. It would not need painting or repairs and it would last forever. It seemed the perfect solution.

However in Koshovato there were goats that wandered about as dogs sometimes wander in America. They usually belonged to someone who neglected to tie them up. These goats would gnaw the trees and damage them. It was the policeman's job to protect this natural barrier. If the policeman knew the goat's owner, he would bring the goat home, but fine the owner. If the policeman didn't know the owner, he would beat the goat with a stout stick to chase the goats from the trees.

The Gubenko house was situated near this creek. One day Zeide (grandfather) Shlomo rounded his house to see the policeman beating a goat. "Stop! Stop!" he called.



"Leave that poor animal alone!"

"Aha!" shouted the policeman. "Pay five rubles and I'll put my stick down."

"Not a ruble!" shouted Shlomo. "It's not my goat."

"Then why do you care if I beat it?" shouted the policeman as he thrashed the goat across its rump.

"Get away from that dumb animal... he's one of God's creatures and only does what goats are suppose to do," threatened Shlomo.

By then the whole Gubenko family had gathered and stood spellbound at the sight of Shlomo fearlessly defending the goat. Now the policeman turned his anger from the goat to Shlomo. "Pay or go to jail!"

"It is not my goat. I will pay nothing," insisted Shlomo.

Bubbie (grandmother) Tova pleaded with Shlomo to appologize. She pleaded with the policeman to listen. It was useless. They were like two angry bulls.

The policeman took Shlomo to jail. Thus the pious Shlomo Gubenko spent a night in jail, all because of a goat.



## The Boys of Koshovato

Menashe Korostoshevski and Yussel Gubenko met in chedar (Hebrew school). They started Hebrew school together at age five. They didn't study the Russian language, geography, or history. They studied Hebrew and the Bible. They learned to pray and to conduct themselves as pious Jews. But when the doors of the Hebrew school opened, they shook off their solemn and sober shells and became shkuzim (mischief-makers).

One of their favorite pasttimes was to collect ripe fruit from their neighbors' trees. When caught in the act they were not above pelting the neighbor with his own fruit.

They had one poor neighbor who was blessed with seven daughters. At that time in our history, religious Jews thought that no family was complete without a son. The neighbors pitied this pious couple who seemed unable to produce a son. Menashe and Yussel, young hellions, took special delight in tormenting the parents and their seven daughters. In America they might have rung their doorbell or made phoney phone calls, but this was Koshovato and there were no doorbells or telephones. They did other things. Every Passover when one of the daughters would open the door to invite Elijah to enter, our boys would shove a goat through



the door. The following morning the neighbor would visit Israel and Shlomo, the boys' fathers, and complain that he had been the butt of a terrible goat, I mean joke. Menashe and Yussel would be beaten and lectured at length. From one Passover to the next was a long time. The bruises faded and the lectures were long forgotten. The following Passover they would do it again!

Once when Menashe and Yussel were ten years old, they pooled their money with two friends and bought a horse. It wasn't much of a horse, but at ten they were not very good judges of horseflesh and besides their capital was limited. Proudly they displayed their purchase to the father who they hoped would house their investment. As he examined their purchase critically and vocally, they decided that maybe they had overpaid. Quickly they agreed that they would claim they paid only half the true amount.

"So how much did you pay for this mitzia (bargain)?"

"Only five rubles."

"Only five rubles?" with that question he lifted the tail and studied the horse's hindquarters.

"What's wrong?" demanded the boys.

"For five rubles the horse shouldn't have a backside. A tail maybe... but no backside."

## Sonya Goes to School

When Sonya was a girl, her school was very different from your schools. All the boys went to chedar (Hebrew religious school) from the age of five until they were a Bar Mitzva (13). The girls went to a separate school. Not all the girls went to school. Those who did were taught to read and to write a little Yiddish, to recite a few prayers, and to add and subtract a little.

Sonya was the youngest child in her family. Most of the other children were married and gone. She was sent to the Girls' School but it wasn't enough for her. She was very unhappy. To begin with there was little to learn, and whenever Sonya knew an answer she shouted it out. It would come out while she waved her hand. Everytime that happened, she would be beaten with a cat-of-nine tails. When she came home, she cried and complained to her mother. Bubbie Tova went to her husband, Shlomo, and finally convinced him to send Sonya to a more worldly school.

In 1915 when she was 13, Sonya went to Tarashta to take exams for the gymnasium (high school). Sonya had to pass oral and written exams in Russian language, mathematics, history, and

geography to enter it. She had studied very hard, but still she was frightened. The oral exam before seven stern teachers was especially frightening. She passed and was accepted into the fourth form.

It wasn't easy. It was very expensive, and her family was very poor. Everyone thought that education was wasted on a girl. But because she was determined, she was the first member of her family to go to and graduate from a high school.

Tarashta was far from home and Koshovato. At first she lived with her Aunt Krennie's family and later, she moved into the house of her father's cousin, Moishe the Red-head.

The years from 1917 to 1920 were very unsettled. Armies of White Russians, (favored the Tzar) and Bolshevicks, (favored Lenin and Trotsky) and bandits crossed the Ukraine. Soldiers from all these armies attacked travelers and especially Jewish travelers. In 1918 Sonya traveled to Kiev to arrange for her attendance at the University. On her return she was met at the station by two wagons from Koshovato. She joined the group of Jews who were traveling from the train to Koshovato. It was a dangerous trip. For protection, the young Jewish men had organized themselves into self defense groups called Shomrim (guards). They were



Ms. Journal 1897

short of guns but long on bravery. Several of these Shomrim were waiting with the wagons to escort them on their way to Koshovato.

Just as they were passing the forests, down from the hills came a band of shouting Cossacks on horseback. In no time the wagons were overturned and almost everyone was killed.

Sonya lay face down in the dirt, hardly daring to breathe. The Cossacks rode their horses over the bodies. It was horrible. The hooves just missed her, and she dared not move. Then there was silence and still she lay there. An eternity seemed to pass. Suddenly she heard a young man screaming, "Isn't anyone else alive?" Only then did she dare to lift her head and open her eyes to the slaughter around her.

"I'm alive!" she cried. "I'm alive."

Only those two escaped. Now together they ran to the woods to hide in case the Cossacks would return. Later they were met by a search party that came from the town when the wagons did not return.

Sonya never did study in the University in Kiev. The family had to run away from Koshovato to the safety of larger towns. Now Sonya had to stay with her family and help them. Later she would go to America instead of Kiev.

## The Picture Bride

"Quick call your father! There is a letter from the Fetter (uncle) Nachum," cried Tova.

Shlomo's brother Nachum lived so far away that Sonya had never met him or her cousins. A letter from Fetter Nachum could mean there was a new baby, or a wedding, or there was trouble. No matter, it would be exciting. Sonya listened as carefully as a three year old could to the letter and its discussion.

"My daughter Lyba, by my first wife Freida, is a strong willed and rebellious daughter. She reads about Alfred Dreyfus, and blood libels, and pogroms, and tells me that there is no life for Jews in Russia. She insists that she will go to America, Argentina! Alone! A single girl! Her stepmother and I are beside ourselves. She will not listen to reason. What can I do?"

Shlomo and Tova exclaimed, "Jacob!" Their son Jacob had been in the Russian Army when the Russo-Japanese War began. When the Tzar told his soldiers to march east to Siberia, Jacob marched west to his cousin Aaron Luchansky in Erie, America. Surely Jacob would help and watch over his cousin Lyba Gubenko. Hurriedly they drafted a letter to



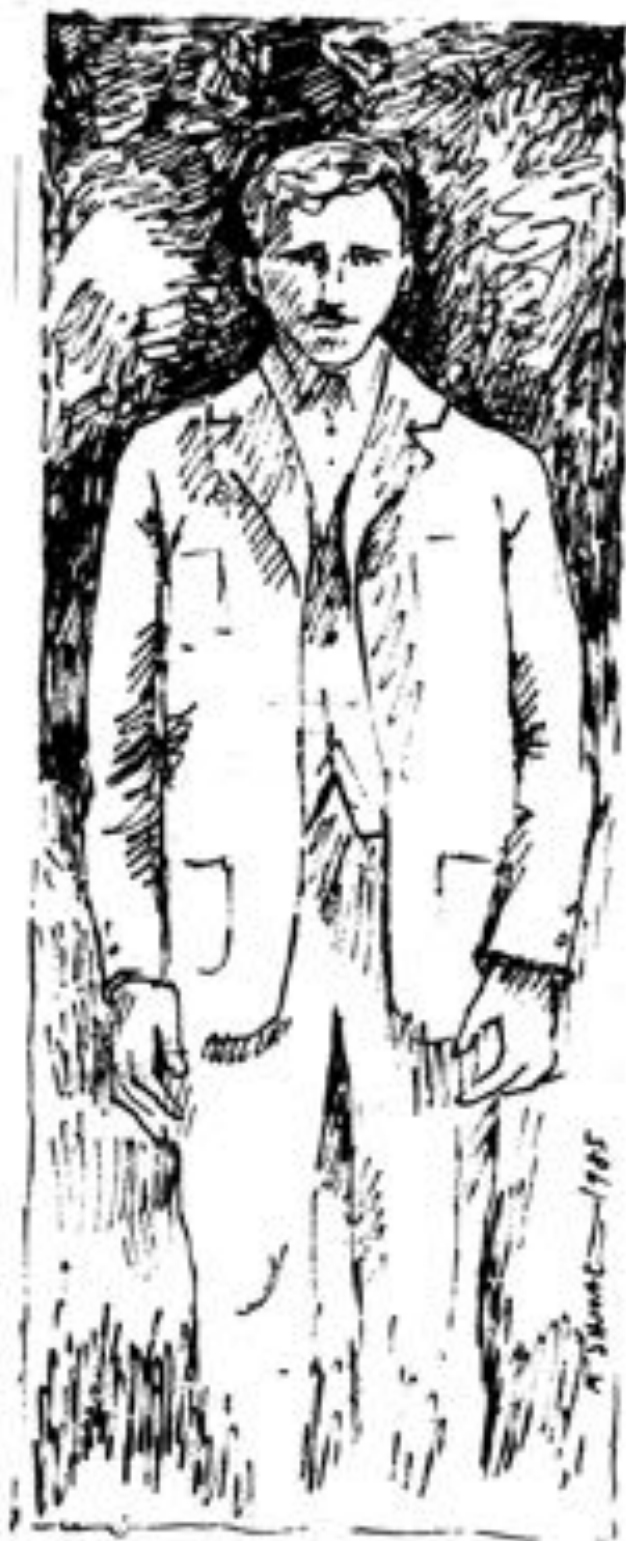
Jacob, and another to Nachum and Sarah.

Things did not move smoothly. True Lyba knew no one in Argentina, but she was not about to write to a strange man and ask for his help and protection. After all this was 1905. Jacob had to write first. He did. Jacob wrote to Lyba, and she answered. He wrote again. She sent him her picture and he fell in love with the girl in the picture. He invited her to come to America as his bride. She accepted.

Before she left for America, Lyba decided to visit her future in-laws in Koshovato.

Koshovato was a very small provincial town. Some of the streets were paved with stones, but most of the streets were either dusty or muddy. Koshovato and the Gubenkos really weren't prepared for Lyba's arrival. She was a regular fashion plate. Her dainty shoes were useless in Koshovato's mud holes. Her stylish hats didn't protect her hair from the street's dust or the fireplace's smoke. The women of Koshovato smiled at her elegant hats and drew their practical Kerchiefs tighter.

But the most impressive thing about Lyba was her manners. She was so genteel, so other world to Tova and Shlomo. They were both awed and amused by her style.



It pleased them to watch her rise gracefully from a chair and glide quietly across the room. But the way she tilted her head and bent her little finger, as she drank tea, made them smile.

Lyba's departure date drew near. Tova and Shlomo asked their daughter-in-law to be, what they should send with her to America. They were dumb struck when the bride announced that a Kallah (bride) should not travel unchaperoned to America. She insisted that they must provide an escort to keep her safe. Tova and Shlomo were stunned. Was this the same girl who planned to go alone to Argentina, America?

Poor Tova and Shlomo, what could they do? Jacob was already in America. Their next son, Sholke, had disappeared on a trip to Moscow. Their eldest remaining son was David. He was a Bar Mitzvah; he was thirteen. But America was so far away. A bride should be escorted to the Chupah! No one ever returned from America. There was no one else. Thirteen year old David would have to be the escort and the protector of the bride.

Everyone cried when David Gubenko left for America.

## No Gambling Here

I wouldn't say that the letters were untruthful. The photos were a good likeness. But neither the letters nor the photos prepared the young couple for the truth. The truth was that Lyba and Jake were quite different. Lyba had great expectations. All her life she was an avid reader. Reading was always more important than household chores. Diapers and dinners often waited until a book was completed. Jake, on the other hand, was a plain fellow. He worked hard as a peddler. He would arrive home too tired to read and study. He wanted lighter entertainment. He enjoyed a good game of cards.

Lyba hated cards. "A terrible waste of time!" she declared. And if the men increased their pleasure by betting a few pennies on the cards, Lyba would declare, "It's gambling! Satanism!" She hated every form of gambling with a passion.

Once when the five Gabin\* children were very young, their father came home late with a fist full of dollars. Business had been good and he had earned more than usual.

Lyba eyed him suspiciously. "You were gambling!" she accused.

Jake, a tease, winked at the children and answered, "All of life is a gamble. But the money's

\* In America Gabenko was shortened and Anglicized to Gabin.



good."

Well it wasn't good to Lyba. "Gambling money," she thought. While Jake's mouth dropped open, she threw the money into the stove and burnt it all up!

What happened next? To tell you the truth, I don't know for no one ever told me.

## Choosing A Rabbi

In the shtetle (small town) Jews were very pious. They lived their lives by the laws of the Torah. The Rabbi was their religious leader. He was also their judge and mediator. No Jew would willingly go to the town's Christian courts or police. Therefore the choosing of a Rabbi was a very serious and important matter. People took firm stands on the nominees.

When Menashe was a young boy the synogogue had to hire a new Rabbi. Menashe's father, Israel, was a very pious man. Israel's grandfather Joseph had been rabbi of this synogogue and his father had been cantor. Israel was involved in selecting the new rabbi.

The selection was not being made easily. Tempers were running high. Suddenly a blow was struck and then another. Tova Gubenko's cousin dove out the window. After all he was just a visitor and not really involved. As he flew through the open window, his pants remained behind, securely snagged on a nail.

Israel Korostoshevski picked up the seven branched menorah (candelabrum) to make a point and brought it crashing down on the head of a determined opponent. This moment



of passion cost the fellow his hearing in one ear. Israel was ordered to pay his victim 75 rubles. That was an enormous amount of money. Who was chosen rabbi? No one remembers.

## Welcome to America

David Gubenko had left Russia when he was thirteen. Life in America was hard. At first he lived with his brother Jake and his wife Lyba. Jake was his first employer. Jake paid David five cents a day. After Dave learned English, he moved to Buffalo where he worked as a produce clerk. Here he made big money—fifteen cents a day.

Through the years Dave worked hard, changed jobs, and saved money. Eight years after he went to America, Dave sent for his sister Rose. When he left Russia she was eleven years old.

Anxiously he paced the train platform as he waited for her. The train arrived. The passengers stepped on to the platform and hurried away. He peered into faces, but he could not find his sister Rose. Finally only one tall good looking woman remained.

Respectfully he approached and whispered, "Rose?"

Haughtily she turned her back to him.

Again he ventured a little louder, "Rose, I'm your brother David."

Angrily she replied, "My brother David never looked like you!"

They were silent for a moment, peering into each other's eyes, trying to see a thirteen year old boy, an eleven year old girl. Then they exploded into laughter, hugs, and tears.

"Welcome to America."



## The Business Trip

In the old country youths became independent much earlier than we do. To begin with most Jewish boys finished school by the time they were thirteen. Between thirteen and eighteen most children left home to go where there was work. In that world it was not unusual for a sixteen year old to be an experienced business man.

Menashe was sixteen. He had been working for three years and proved himself an apt and resourceful trader. It was in the spring of 1916 and there was a severe shortage of salt in Kieve. Menashe learned that there was a man in a neighboring town who had salt, but was afraid to make the journey to Kieve. The times were troubled and the woods teemed with bandits. To travel from Koshovato to Kieve, a journey of a day and a half in a wagon drawn by two horses, it took a great deal of courage. Menashe agreed to deliver a wagon load of salt and flour to Kieve for a share of the profits. The hazardous journey was accomplished with no mishaps.

Returning from Kieve to Koshovato, Menashe and his companions dressed as peasants. Looking at them you would never guess that a young Jew was traveling with his two employees. If you noticed them at all you would surmise, "Local farmers."

Menashe had sold the salt and flour and concealed the fat bundle of rubles in a hole he had carved in the wagon chassis. Suddenly partisans emerged from the woods and surrounded the travelers. "Your money!" they demanded. The three men firmly insisted that they had no money.

"Well then, we will use you and your wagon to bring water to our camp, Brothers," they commanded.

As the water splashed over the barrel rims onto the wagon bed, Menashe worried about his concealed rubles.

"Fear not little Brother. Don't frown so. Soon you will be done here and on your way home."

At last they were on their way. When they arrived into the safety of Tarashta, the two peasants hurried into the inn to boast of their adventures. Alone at last, Menashe appeared to be inspecting the wagon wheels and chassis. He saw that the rubles were wet, but they could be dried. The money was still safe.

As Menashe prepared to leave, the townspeople urged him to stay in Tarashta that night. They told him that a big battle had been fought that day between the Red Partisans and the government soldiers. "There are many deserters and bandits in the dense forests between Tarashta and Koshovato," they cautioned.

Menashe would not listen. It was only six more versts\* to Koshovato and he knew his father

\*A verst is 1,067 kilometers.



would be worried. Again they set out. Halfway to Koshovato they were halted again by bandits. Menashe heard the question he dreaded most.

"Are there any Jews here?"

"No Brothers. Do we look like Jews?" answered the larger peasant as he started the horses on their way.

## The Reluctant Soldiers

One day in 1918 the soldiers of the Bolshevik Army descended on Koshovato searching for young men. Every young man they found, they took away to serve in their army. Menashe was caught in the round-up. The next day when Yussel returned to Koshovato he learned that his friend had been conscripted by Trotsky's Army. He immediately set out in pursuit. He did not want to be separated from his dearest friend.

There they were, the two of them, in the army. But such a disorganized army. No one appeared to know where they were going. A few men in uniforms shouted orders at the crowd of country men and boys who were huddled together in the train cars. No one in charge knew their names or even exactly how many males were assembled in those railroad coaches.

Pensively Yussel asked, "Menashe, do you want to be in the army? Do you like it?"

They hadn't even started to drill. They hadn't yet marched with packpicks or been shot at. They didn't have uniforms. Still Menashe knew he wasn't going to like it and he told Yussel as much. Yussel agreed. The army had had its chance and lost: they were going to go home. But how?

Yussel had a bold idea. He told Menashe to get off at the next train stop and start walking, not hurriedly, just normally. If he was stopped, he should



tell the questioner that he was going to buy a pot of tea. Yussel cautioned, "Don't hesitate and don't look back no matter what. Trust me. I'll catch up and we'll escape together."

Menashe did it! He was out of the station and two kilometers down the road before Yussel caught up to him. They began the long walk home. Koshovato was far away and the young men soon decided that walking was too slow and tiring. They tried to hitch rides in wagons,

but they weren't too successful. Sometimes they got a ride and sometimes they got a good crack from the driver's whip. But the important thing was that they were out of the army and on their way home. Soon after reaching Koshovato they were to set out on a longer journey to America.

Sholke, Yussel's older brother, was not as fortunate. In 1911 when he was 22 years old he was conscripted for service in the army of the Tsar. Shlomo, his father, raised a 1000 rubles to buy Sholke a blue ticket. This card certified that he had a medical disability (heart murmur) and was unfit for military service. The financial sacrifice was worthwhile for Sholke was now free from all military obligations or so they thought.

Six years later the blue card was worthless. Sholke was on a business trip to Moscow to purchase dry goods for his store. Suddenly Bolshevic soldiers entered the train and mobilized all the young men on board. There was no discussion or medical examination. One minute you were a passenger and the next minute you were a soldier.

They gave him a gun and sent him east to fight the White Army of the Tsar. Sholke had never held a gun in his life. He did what he was told to do. Finally his luck changed. An officer asked where he was

From.

"Kiev, Sir," he replied.

"Where in Kiev?" asked the officer.

Soon they discovered that they had a mutual acquaintance and better still Sholke had delivered packages to and knew the lady who was the officer's mother. The officer felt kindly toward this "friend" of his mother, and decided to help the young man.

"You don't belong in the infantry. You are no marksman. You little shopkeeper, belong in the quartermaster corps." And so it was.

Sholke was safer and more at ease in the supply side of the army. One day, looking at the invoices and train schedules, he noticed a train would be returning from the East to Kiev. He spoke to no one, but when that train left Siberia, it had an unauthorized passenger. Sholke was on his way home.

## The Rabbi Is Not In

In the shtetl the worst thing you could be was an informer. No one was hated more than a person who would tell the civil authorities about another Jew. Jews had their own courts and laws to handle criminals.

No, not all Jews were honest. Even Koshovato had its unethical element. A small group of men devised a plan to bilk the insurance companies. When a man prepared to leave Koshovato for America, these entrepreneurs insured his life. When he arrived in America, they declared him dead and collected the insurance money.

The first time it worked perfectly. The second time the insurance company began to ask questions. The third time, the insurance company insisted that they would need a letter from the rabbi, witnessed by their agent.

What could the rabbi do? He could not be an informer! He could not lie and say that a man who was breathing in New York was dead in Koshovato. He did the only thing he could do. Whenever the insurance agent knocked at the door, he slipped outside, and the agent was told, "The rabbi is not in."



# Pogroms

A pogrom is an organized massacre or attack upon Jews. There were many pogroms in the 1800s when Nicholas I ruled Russia. Again in the early 1900s when the Russian army was crushed shamefully by the Japanese, there was a campaign of pogroms sponsored by government officials. These pogroms usually lasted about three days, before policemen broke them up.

The First World War ended with the Russian Revolution. The period that followed was a time of uncertainty and lawlessness. From 1919 to 1920 there were vast pogroms against Ukrainian Jews. Koshovato was in the heart of the Ukraine.

At first the Jewish families tried to stay in Koshovato. The young men organized themselves into a self defense group (Shomrim). They bought rifles and pistols for protection. Sonya told me that her family was attacked so often in the beginning that they arranged to sleep in the fields of a friendly Christian farmer. He was afraid to let them hide in his barn, but he did let them hide in his fields. As darkness began to fall, they would slip away from their homes into the fields. Tova Gubenko caught a cold. Because she was sleeping on the damp cold ground, it got worse and worse. Soon she had pneumonia. Without medicines and proper care her lungs succumbed to tuberculosis.



One night the Cossacks attacked. They were furious to find empty houses. They wanted to kill Jews! They began to search for victims. The group hiding in the field could see them approaching. A baby began to whimper. All were terrified. The Cossacks might hear the baby and turn toward them. The mother could not silence

her baby. Finally she jumped up and raced toward the creek. She was intent on drowning the baby and herself rather than let her neighbors be discovered. A boy tackled her. The community would not allow her to kill herself and the baby. It was a miracle. The Cossacks heard only themselves. They all lived through that long night.

Chaika (Ida) Korostoshevski married Benjamin Noskoff during this period. After the wedding ceremony they returned to her father Israel's house. A toast was proposed. "May you share a long fruitful life together. Le'Chaim!" Just as they raised their glasses to their lips, they heard a piercing voice in the distance. "Jews hide yourselves! The Cossacks are coming!"

Pandemonium broke out. Mothers snatched up their children as they ran. People scattered in every direction. The bride flew out one window. The groom dove out another. In the wild race for cover and safety, they lost each other. Hiding in the woods, Chaika cried forlornly. What could have happened to her young husband? They were finally reunited three days later when peace returned to Koshovato.

Not all bandits traveled in large groups. A series of small attacks in 1917 were perpetrated by a single poor peasant. He came to town, shot his rifle to chase away the Jews, and robbed a house or two. On his third attempt he was caught by the Shomrim. Because the Jews were afraid of retaliation, they did not harm him.

They just threatened him and let him go. Incidents did not always end so happily. A Gubenko cousin, a very large man, a blacksmith, refused to run away each night. He was so strong he felt sure that he could defend his home. In the morning he was found dead. Both his hands had been chopped off.

A particularly serious situation developed in 1919 when the terrible anti-semitic General Petlura (a White Russian General) and his aide Denekin were retreating toward Odessa and the sea. Wherever they went, they killed Jews. They would stay in Koshovato for three days.

As they approached Koshovato, the Shomrim raced from house to house to warn the Jews to hide themselves. The Shomrim would be the last Jews to leave the town. Yussel Gubenko was arrested and beaten up. Young Meyer Korostoshevski (14) was wounded in both legs. Menashe raced home to help his family escape. They were gone and he was trapped by three of Petlura's men. They chased him around a rubber tree and over the furniture in his father's house. The soldier's rifle butt crashed into Menashe's jaw. He collapsed. When they saw that his mouth was bleeding, they left him there and robbed the house. Thankfully they did not see the gun in his pocket. Had they discovered the gun, they would surely have killed him. After they were gone, Menashe hid himself in a nearby stable.

After that the Jews left Koshovato. Some went to America, or Kieve, or Moscow. Our family went to Boguslav

where there was a larger Jewish community and a bigger defense militia. After a year the Jews were forced to run away again.\* This time our family moved to Tarashta still believing that there was safety in numbers.

Tarashta held terrible memories for three of the Gubenko sisters. When they began their odyssey, Tova Gubenko was sick with tuberculosis. Sonya nursed her mother, but without proper medication and good food, she could not restore her health. In 1921 Tova died in Tarashta.

Genesse Gubenko and her husband, Ben Zion Blinder, sold their meager belongings. With the proceeds they bought a horse and wagon. They would take their five children and make their way west. Ben Zion had glaucoma. They could not go to America.

Yetta Gubenko was pregnant. Her husband, Hershel Krafchenko had sold most of their belongings. He had a horse and wagon. He and Yetta would go to Rumania and then to America.

As the two families prepared to leave, Trotsky's Bolshevik army commandeered their horses and wagons. Hershel and Ben Zion were forced to drive work crews to repair telegraph wires just outside the city. The workmen and their guards returned without Hershel and Ben Zion. "We were attacked by bandits! They kept the Jews," they explained.

Quickly Jewish men went to search for them. They were found crucified on the telegraph poles.

\* see article on Boguslav in Appendix



## An Engagement Agreement

Here are the conditions and the solemn agreement between both parties who, on one side, Mindel daughter of Mikel, representing her son, Tzvi, and on the other side, Shlomo, son of Abraham, representing his daughter, Esther Yente. When we asked her, she accepted, so the groom, Tzvi, will marry her in a Chupah Kidushin K'dat Moshe V' Israel. They also accepted not to hide from each other any kind of money, but to control their wealth and property equally and will live with love like everyone else. Mindel Krafchenko, representing her son, the groom, solemnly agrees to distribute the money of the dowry ... she cleared that completely, and she also solemnly promises to provide clothes and shoes to her son the groom for the wedding, clothes for weekdays, and for Shabbat, and for holidays, as customary, including pillows, and sheets, and blankets as customary, and also gifts to the bride as customary. Shlomo Gubenko in representing his daughter, the bride, promised to pay the money of the dowry in the amount of 10,000 rubles, and he gave that into the hands of the groom. He also solemnly promises to provide clothes and shoes for the bride for the wedding, clothes for weekdays, and for Shabbat, and for holidays, as is customary, and also pillows, sheets, and blankets, as is customary, and also gifts to the groom as is customary.

The wedding will be whenever both sides agree. The expenses of the wedding will be paid by the father of the bride. There will be a penalty on whomever breaks this agreement of half of the dowry.

The guarantor from the side of the groom is Moshe Simoff ben Shlomo David; the guarantor from the side of the bride is Yakov Shepatovsky ben Ben Zion. Both sides agree to compensate the guarantors so that they will not have any damage.

Signed today, Friday, Sedra Terumah, the first of Rosh Hodesh Adar, the year 5680, here in the town of Koshovato.

## Zionism

Sonya was a strong advocate of Zionism. In Tarashta she helped organize a Zionist group with 28 members. After the Revolution the government gave houses and land to collectives. The Zionist group applied as a commune. They were given a house with a garden and five acres of land on the outskirts of the city.

Eight boys moved into the house. Girls had a more difficult time. Pious parents were shocked by the idea of girls living in a commune. Sonya was the first girl to agree to live in the Zionist House. She was nineteen and independent. Her mother was dead. Her father had remarried and moved away. She was living with her widowed sister Yetta. There was no one to restrain her. Her girl friends were not as free. Their parents were pious. They raised many objections, "What will the neighbors think? A daughter lives at home until she goes to the marriage canopy."

The girls pleaded and argued. When a girl's parents appeared to waver, she announced, "Sonya, the daughter of Shlomo Gubenko, is moving into the Zionist House." Finally there were four girls to move into the Zionist House.

During the days they farmed their five acres. At night they had discussions and studied





Hebrew. An informer reported them to the police. It was illegal to study Hebrew and be a Zionist. These activities were considered counter-revolutionary. He gave the names of the leaders to the police. Sonya and three boys were arrested and imprisoned. The police demanded that they sign a paper that promised that they would not study Zionism or Hebrew. They refused. The three boys were locked in one cell. Sonya was put in a cell with two women who had each committed a murder.

The cell was dark and dank. There were wooden benches to sit and sleep on. In the corner

there was a chamber pot. Twice a day they were let out for a little exercise. At these times the boys would tell Sonya, "Don't sign. Stand strong."

Everyday Yetta and Genesse would sit outside the jail with their young children, pleading with the men who went in and out, to save their little sister. Yetta, Genesse, and their friends brought the Zionist prisoners food.

After two weeks, when they still refused to sign, the authorities sent the incorrigibles to jail in Kiev. The jailers rode horses. Accompanying them were two guards with horses and a wagon. The unrepentant Zionists had to walk. They walked about 85 miles to their new jail cells.

In Kieve they were again ordered to sign the paper that promised that they would not study Zionism or Hebrew. "Sign or you will be sent to Siberia!" they were told. Soon the leaders of the Zionist movement in Kieve sent a messenger to their cells and urged them to sign the papers and save their lives.

Chastised and frightened the four young people agreed to sign the papers. Sonya returned to Tarashta and her sisters. She was determined to leave the U.S.S.R. with her sisters and their children.

## The Border Crossings

In 1921 Menashe traveled 150 miles to the border town of Zagifka. Traveling with him were his two sisters, Mindel and Chaika (Ida), and Chaika's husband Ben and their two children. They waited and waited for an opportunity to cross the border. Mindel grew discouraged and impatient, and finally returned home. Chaika and Ben agreed to wait as long as it would take. Menashe was determined to find a way to shorten the wait.

Menashe waited and watched. When you wait and watch long enough, you learn when and where a group will cross the border. He was aligned with four other young men. They learned that a group of 100 people would be moving across the Dniester River into Bessarabia, Romania.

The five young men stopped the group on the road. "Take us with you," they demanded, "or no one will cross the border!" Since the group was desperate to go, they agreed to this blackmail.

For a week they hid in a field near the border. Menashe remembered that he ate raw potatoes, berries, anything he could find. He remembered that a woman died and was buried in that field. Finally on a dark night the smugglers reappeared. "We cross tonight!" they whispered. Quickly people gathered their families and their belongings. There was a problem.

In the group was a woman with two children. The older child, a big heavy girl, had scarlet fever. They would not leave the woman and her children behind. The girl was much too heavy for the woman to carry. They decided that the five young men would take turns carrying the sick girl. Menashe offered to go first, while he was fresh. The girl was strapped to his back. They began to run. Everyone ran to save himself. The four disappeared. Menashe labored. He thought his chest would explode and he would die. His legs were collapsing. They could not make another step. Surely he would die. "Just one more step, one more," he pleaded until he reached the Dniester.

At the river they ferried the people across in a row boat. The woman, her two children, and Menashe were among the first to be ferried across. Menashe's four friends were brought across last.

On the Bessarabian river bank, they counted the people. Five had not paid the smugglers' fee. The five young men were identified. The mother paid for Menashe because he carried her daughter to Romania. The other four were beaten and robbed of all their belongings.

Once on the other side of the Dniester River, they were hidden in private homes from the Romanian police. Menashe spent the first night with a Jewish family. In the morning he lay on a wagon bed. Straw was piled on top of him so that he would be hidden from police and informers. In this way he was brought

penniless to Yasser. In Yasser he went to the Jewish Center. At the Koshovato landsmanshaft (brotherhood) he gave his name. They gave him money sent by his Korostoff cousins in New York. They gave him a place to stay. After two months in Yasser he moved to Kishinev. From Kishinev he sent papers to Chaika and Ben Noskoff and Yussel Gubenko that allowed them to enter Romania legally.



In Romania Yussel got a telegram. He learned that his mother and his two brother-in-laws were dead. Sonya, Yetta, Genessie and six young children were alone. He decided to return. It was very dangerous. If he would be caught, they would kill him. They considered young men who left the U.S.S.R. traitors. He arranged to be rowed across the Dniester River. In the middle of the river, he was robbed of everything even his shoes, and then he was thrown overboard. He swam to the Russian shore. He traveled only at night. He walked barefoot 150 miles to Tarashta.

In Kishinev Menashe waited and waited. He could not get a visa to enter the United States. There were quotas and waiting lists. Some of his friends gave up and went to Argentina. After almost two years, he got an opportunity. A large generous family received a visa. It was for the family and not for individuals. They took Menashe and four of his female cousins. They shared their last name with these Korostoshevskis. One woman they made an instant sister. The three younger women were instant daughters and Menashe was their son. Together they traveled to America. They took no money. It was a Mitzva, a good deed.

They traveled together, second class, on the freighter Migael Ellis. At that time it took a boat eight to ten days to cross the Atlantic. It took the Migael Ellis 31 days to reach the United States. First they traveled from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean Sea, stopping in Bulgaria, Turkey, Greece, Italy, Algiers, and Gibraltar, before sailing across the Atlantic.

When they reached New York, the Korostoshevskis did not go through Ellis Island. Nachum Korostoff met the boat and collected his relatives. Nachum was a success. He knew what to do, he had money, and he owned a car. Menashe spent his first night in America in Nachum's house.

The next morning Joseph came to New York for his brother. Together they returned to Philadelphia and a new life.

## Sonya Travels to America

Although they had little money Jacob and David were determined to bring their three sisters to America. They decided to bring Sonya, Yetta, and her two year old son Harry in 1923. As soon as these two young women had jobs and were self supporting, they would bring Genesse and her five children to America.\*

On March 23, 1923, Sonya, Yetta, and Harry left Tarashta by train. They traveled first to Kiev, then to Moscow and finally to Riga. At the health station in Riga they were told that Harry had ringworm in his scalp. They could not go any further until it was cured. While they were waiting in Riga, the women used up their meager funds. Their passage was paid for by their American brothers. No one allowed for this kind of mishap.

When Harry was at last cured, they continued by train to Lebow, Latvia. They had missed their boat. It would be four weeks before the next ship left. They had a place to stay, but no food and no money. How would they manage? While they worried, officials herded them onto the health inspection. At the health station they met good fortune in the shape of Esther Moorachovski, their first cousin. Esther had

\* While Sonya and Yetta were on their way to America, the laws in the U.S.S.R. changed and it became impossible for Genesse and her children to emigrate.



just arrived in Lebow. She too was undergoing the humiliating de-lousing procedure required of all immigrants. Quickly they shared their news and their problems. Esther had a little money. She bought food and shared every morsel with her cousins. Sonya still remembers that herring was cheap on the waterfront. She remembers eating the bones clean from head to tail.

The trip on the small boat across the



stormy North Sea was terrible. They traveled third class and were often sick. The boat was tossed and turned by the rough seas. Fortunately it was a short trip to London, England.

London's health inspection station was the worst one in their journey. They were modest young women, but they were treated like animals with no feelings. Inspectors watched while they showered and then bathed in large public baths. They had to scrub again and again with coarse soap. Their long hair was scrubbed and pulled and scrubbed again. It was true that most of these travelers were infected with body lice, but their treatment was dehumanizing and mortifying. Their baggage was deloused by heating and then they had to scramble to find their meager possessions. First class travelers were not treated this way.

From London they traveled by train to Liverpool. Here the three weary travelers boarded the ship Homeric of the White Star Line. They traveled third class. Only Sonya and Harry were good sailors. Yetta and the other women were sick from one shore to the other shore. On October 4, 1923 Sonya, Yetta, and Harry arrived at Ellis Island. Gubenko became Gabin and Krafchenko became Kraff. They were in America now.

They had to wait on Ellis Island until their brothers sent twenty-five dollars for each woman. On October tenth, they were pinned with tags "Erie, Pennsylvania" and put on a train in New York City.

## A Meeting in Pittsburgh

Sonya, Yetta, and Harry watched solemnly as America passed outside their train window. They knew it would be a long ride from New York to Erie. Long ago they had given up hope of understanding the names of the places they passed. They dozed a little and suddenly the conductor was shaking them and pulling them and their luggage to the platform.

"Erie? Erie America?" they asked.

"No. Pittsburgh. Change to Erie," he said and was gone.

Others jabbered at them and helped them find seats. Soon they realized that there would be another train. They sat stiffly on the bench waiting. Harry slept.

Suddenly they heard laughter. People were laughing and pointing. There in the station they saw a lazy cloud of feathers rising and expanding. Sonya recognized immediately that this was another immigrant. Those feathers, precious feathers from home, were loose. Americans didn't seem to understand that feathers were precious. They filled pillows and bedcovers. When a girl married, she would need those feathers. Sonya rushed to help. She bent to the work. It was not easy to catch and collect those elusive devils. Grab a handful. Shove them into the bag. Now another. Still another. Two young



women working quickly, silently. They ignored the giggles and rushed after their capricious quarry. Imagine their surprise when the feather rush was ended and they looked up.

"Esther!"

"Sonya!"

Hugs and kisses and laughter punctuated the surprise meeting. They chattered happily in Yiddish. Esther was changing trains here to go to her brother in Chicago. Sonya, Yetta, and Harry were changing trains to go to brothers in Erie.

America seemed a little smaller, a little less frightening.

## My Hands Are Cold

"Papa, my hands are cold when I have to walk to school," complained his darling little girl.

Izzy looked at her thoughtfully and asked, "Do you wear your mittens?"

"Yes," she nodded.

"Do you keep your hands in your pockets?" Izzy inquired gently.

Again she responded yes.

"In the morning I will have an answer for you. Do not worry darling. Papa will find an answer for you."

In the morning when Vivian was dressed and ready to leave for school, he pulled the mittens over her hands. Then he put a hard boiled egg in each hand. "These will keep your hands warm. When you get to school eat one. It will warm your stomach too. Save the other for recess."

Vivian threw her arms around her Papa's neck and hugged him tightly. Papa was so wonderful. He could make everything right.



## The Passover Dishes

Sam was in America just a little more than a month and he felt very American. He no longer dressed like an immigrant and he had an English vocabulary. So his command of English was very limited, but who would know? Certainly not the more timid greenhorns (new immigrants) with whom he lived and associated.

Sam had two serious problems facing him. He didn't have a job and he didn't have any money. On to this scene came the Fetter (uncle). The Fetter had just come off a boat from Eastern Europe. He had no knowledge of American ways and even less knowledge of English, but he had some money. The Fetter was a business man who saw lost time as lost opportunity. He looked at America and knew he could do business.

The Fetter was despondent. He could not talk. He was lost. Slowly he raised his head from the kitchen table. His eyes alighted on Sam, his dazzling Americanized nephew. The Fetter broached Sam with a business deal. "Give up your other interests." Sam spent a lot of time walking around New York looking in store windows. "You know this English language. I have money. We will be business partners. We can trust each other dear nephew. Agreed?" This was Sam's golden opportunity and he grabbed it. They

shook hands heartedly amid shouts of "Mazel Tov!" (good luck)

But now what? It was just before Passover and they reasoned that all good Jews would want and would need new dishes for the holiday. Together they went out and contracted for some inexpensive dishes and a pushcart. So it was arranged.

Two days later, nothing had been delivered. The Fetter had given a downpayment and he was getting frantic. Maybe the delivery would never come! He began to badger Sam. They must go to the factory and get their dishes or their money! Sam was worried too, but he didn't dare let the Fetter know this. Besides, in order to prove his own worth as the "American" partner, he had to handle the problem in the American way, and not run around like a... a...immigrant. So in his best American style, he told the Fetter to relax. He, Sam, would handle the matter with a simple telephone call, -another American marvel.

No one of them had ever used a phone in Europe or even seen one. The Fetter was really excited and impressed. With awe he gave Sam the nickle that was needed to work this miracle.

Sam put the nickle in and waited. Nothing. He turned the funny little dial and shouted, "Operator!"

A strange voice came over the wire and said, "What number, please?"

How could Sam know the number? Could he read English? No, but he had that native shrewdness that kept all Yankees from pulling a fast one on him. He told her!

"I want my dishes! Don't try to trick me."

The voice kept repeating, "What number, please?" and finally, "One moment Sir. I'll connect you with the supervisor."

Sam ignored them. He threatened, "What you think you're dealing with? A Greenhorn?" (a new immigrant)

And the supervisor replied, "One moment, please. We'll connect you with one of our linguists."

Sam didn't know or care about a linguist. He simply told them that they'd better not fool around with him. He was a good American! They'd better deliver his dishes tomorrow or else! And just as the linguist asked in a language he could understand, "What is wrong, Sir?" he slammed the phone down and turned to bask in the Fetter's smiles of admiration.

As luck would have it, the dishes and the pushcart arrived early the next morning, and the great business venture began! They weren't selling for very long. Their weren't even tired of shouting, "Dishes! Kosher, beautiful, Passover dishes for sale!" when a policeman suddenly materialized. Sam saw him coming out of the corner of his eye and just faded into the crowd. He had had enough of policemen in the old country. So, - there they stood, the Fetter and the policeman, each talking in a different tongue. And the crowd around them listened intently, pretending not to understand either language.

Policeman: "Do you have a license? Let me see your pushcart license." Since he said everything in a calm tone, and since he never once touched or threatened his body with a single motion, the Fetter





thought he was being treated with respect. When the policewagon came, he went along on this new adventure willingly. As he climbed on, he called over his shoulder, "Sammy, take care of the business. I'll be back soon."

Now, too late, Sam knew another fact about American business. A fact called "licenge". But he didn't know what would become of the Fetter. So he rushed home with the cart and all their wares to wait and worry about this new development.

In New York in those days there were so many new immigrants ignorant of the language and the laws that would the police lock them all up, the jails would have been overflowing and the city would have been bankrupt feeding the prisoners. So the policy was for the judge to give them a stern lecture and sentence them to one day in the station house. At night they would set them free in order to make room for the next day's offenders. If an offender was lucky he would get arrested in time to enjoy a meal or two. That day the Yiddish interpreter was not to be found and the Fetter understanding nothing actually enjoyed his experience.

When he finally arrived home that night, he found his wife and daughters crying and mourning. Even his tantas (aunts) had joined the mournful chorus. The neighbors had hangdog looks and Sam, -all six feet of him, was trying to fade into the woodwork. Upon this scene burst the Fetter, laughing and smiling, and heaping praises on the

wonderful golden land," America.

"Only in America!" he chanted repeatedly.

And the crowd chorused, "What? Only in America."

"Only in America do the police congratulate the new business man. Only in America do the police give you a ride in their wagon and show you how brave they are and what they will do to any man who tries to rob or cheat you. Only in America does the judge insist that you sit and enjoy a few passing hours with him. And he insists that you be his guest at dinner to show his good will and how much he wishes you success.

"Oh Sammy, where were you? You missed it all. Ah—they talk with such respect, quietly. I am sorry you missed it Sammy, but after all, I am the older one, and I put up all the money. In America they understand and respect such things."

So it happened. Then and now, it's good to be in America.

Now you know some of the stories  
I heard when I was a child. Save them.  
Remember them. And tell them to your  
children.

## Appendix

Koshovato is pronounced Kah-shove-a-tah

Menashe is Hebrew for Manuel

Bubbie is grandmother

Zeide is grandfather

Fetter is uncle

Tanta is aunt

Shlomo is Hebrew for Solomon

Rabbi Joseph Korostoshevski came from the West to serve as rabbi in the Shul. He had only one child, Avrum. (Abraham)

Cantor Avrum Korostoshevski could not go to rabbinical school. There were no yeshivot in the area, and Joseph could not afford to send him to a yeshiva in the west.

Re-Genesse Gubenko Blinder. Papers were completed and arranged for Genesse and her children. While Sonya and Yetta were enroute to the U.S., before Genesse could begin her journey, the U.S.S.R. halted all exit visas.

Dates:

Israel Korostoshevski 1861-1926

Sarah Rebecca Beck 1866-1906 (Died because of infection introduced in childbirth)

Shlomo Gubenko 1859-1933

Tova Lutchansky Gubenko 1859-1921

Names changed in America

Gubenko became Gabin, Gubin, and Gibbons

Korostoshevski became Korostoff

## A Little History... A Little Geography



Eastern Europe . The dotted section on the map indicates the location of the Pale of Settlement, the area to which Russian Jews were confined from 1794 to 1917.

The town of Koshovato (Koschewatoje) was about 120 kilo southwest of Kiev. There were between 6000 and 7000 people in town. This included about 250 Jewish families.

Koshovato was southeast of Tarashta (Taraschischa) and southwest of Boeustlav.

In Koshovato there were three synagogues. The Shul was the largest. All could attend services there. The second synagogue was the *Bas Hamidrash*. It was a smaller synagogue where people with a better Jewish education worshiped. (The *Gubennos* prayed here.) The more worldly people, the people with the best secular education, prayed in the *Clois*. All three synagogues were orthodox.

In the spring and summer of 1919 there were pogroms in the Ukraine. Leader of the pogroms was S.V. Petlura. Following are reports of pogroms in Tarashta and Bogoslav, Koshovato's larger neighbors.

# EUROPE 1923

North Atlantic Europe  
Spain, Italy, Turkey  
Mediterranean

