

How can I describe the village of Tetiev, the little town where I was born on June 5, 1912? It was a town like Anatevka, if you remember Tevye the Dairyman from the stories of Sholem Aleichem. There were about 80 houses in rows forming a circle around an opening in the middle of which was our town square. The streets were nothing but small, narrow, unpaved dirt roads that became muddy when it rained. There were the small shopkeepers - shoemaker, tailor, grocery man, butcher, baker. Most of the establishments were right in front of each home, or in the home itself, with the family living in quarters in the back. The houses had three or four rooms, but the more well-to-do might have five or seven rooms. The houses were mostly made of wood, while a few, I think, were of stucco. The shul [synagogue] was in the middle of town.

Tetiev was located in the southern part of Russia, close to the Black Sea and about 100 miles from the big city of Odessa. My parents, Gedalia Spevack and Esther Soroky were married in this town. Life in Russia at that time was unsettled, with pogroms and injustice to the Jews. It was really no place for a young Jewish couple to make a life for themselves and to build a future. Therefore, in 1913, just a year after I was born, my father, together with his brother Louis, left to seek his fortune in the United States. He told my mother that as soon as he made enough money he would send for her and for me, and we would live happily ever after. But it took many years before that promise could be realized.

My father and his brother came to Cleveland, where their older brother, Baruch, had settled and also where many other relatives and friends of Tetiev had immigrated. Little did my parents dream that they would be separated for ten years, with the outbreak of World War I and the loss of communication. But, of course, my dad did not know that when he first came to Cleveland. He worked very hard and saved virtually every dollar to send us the passage money to join him. In just one year, in 1914, he already had enough money to send for his wife and his little son, but the war had cut off all communications. It was not until 1922 that our family was reunited. After the war was over, an agent was sent to Russia by the Tetiever Shul to find members of different families. The agent found my mother and me in Odessa. However, he also found a little girl from another family. So, without telling anyone, he used our passports for this other family. The little girl, my mother, and I came to the United States illegally, although we did not know it at the time. It took many years for my mother and me to become citizens of the United States because of this situation, even though my father was a citizen.

But, I am ahead of the story. My memories carry me back to Tetiev in my early years, when my father was in the United States and my mother and I lived with my maternal grandmother and grandfather. These Soroky grandparents - his name was Arel Leb and her name was Laika - had eight children, some as young as myself. I recall that Grandpa was a fairly well-to-do shoemaker. He was a very good one. He made boots to order for many

of the wealthy gentiles, who were called pritsim [plural of poret, landowner] by the Jews. This is the home where my young years were spent, and I can remember them rather well. It was a happy, lively, Orthodox home, with Jewish customs, traditions, and superstitions that my mother carried on in her home after we came to the United States and to Cleveland.

I played with my Aunt Iris, who is one year younger than I (we were both nursed by my grandmother), and my Uncle Harold, who was just two years older than I. We played barefoot on the streets because our shoes were saved to wear on Shabes [Sabbath]. I remember we played a game with a wagon wheel, we played tag, hide and seek. I recall the holidays, Passover, Chanukah and the Shabes evening, when the smells of the home were delicious. My grandmother was a fantastic cook and baker; her strudel, honey cake and sponge cake were her specialties. On Shabes evening, Harold, Mannie, Yankel, and I would go to shul with Grandpa. He would carry his talis and tefillin in a little black velvet sack. The rabbi of the shul was very respected and many people came to him to solve their problems. These were happy days for me, even though my father was thousands of miles away in a big country called the United States.

Harold and I went to chaidir [Hebrew school], but it lasted only for a very short while because of the unrest in Tetiev. One other thing I remember. I used to go with my mother to the marketplace on Thursday to buy vegetables and fruit and other things. My mother used to bargain over prices, but that's the way it was (in my travels in the past several years, I have found out that bargaining is still around in markets in many countries). By the way, my father's father, Grandpa Spevack, was a peddler with a wagon and a horse. He sold dairy products, but his main business was with fruits and vegetables. I used to go with my Grandfather Spevack on his horse and wagon to the countryside to buy the produce. He was a kind, loving man.

World War I was over and the armistice was signed. But in Russia, civil war was raging. Many groups were fighting for power, and the Jews, who had always been scapegoats, were harassed more than ever. There were many pogroms in the little towns of Russia where the Jews lived, and the Jewish homes were looted or destroyed. People were murdered, women were raped, children were kidnapped, and synagogues were pillaged and prayer books burned. There were the Bolsheviks fighting the Cossacks and the Cossacks fighting the Bolsheviks, and the Jews were always caught in between.

I witnessed bloody pogroms as a child, and the memory of them is still in my mind. I can still hear the screams and crying and remember the tears of women who became widows, children who were orphaned because of the pogrom, and the wailing of brothers and sisters and children. I have had nightmares well into my adult life of the pogroms in my town of Tetiev, and in my

dreams I see the pogromists, with knives, with guns, killing and looting.

These were the conditions under which I, as a young child, learned to see the world, and I couldn't understand it. I was always with grown-ups and I learned how to keep my mouth shut. But then, even then, I asked my mother if there was a God. Everyone was always praying to God, and I couldn't understand why God was allowing this suffering and killing to take place. But my mother was so understanding. She gave me tenderness and affection and told me that soon things would be different.

I must tell you that all of my life I had a very special love for my mother. I know now that in Russia, when she was only in her mid-twenties and I was only between six and eight years old, we had a very special bond. She would have killed for me. As I remember her in that period, she was strong and had a spirit to survive. I never could have lived without her. I was so little and she was my strength. And, if you look at her picture, she was simply beautiful - a really beautiful woman.

I will tell you about one of the pogroms, not the big one that destroyed the town, but just a typical pogrom. Mother and I were running out of the town. We got separated from the rest of the family. We were walking on this country road, when we saw in the distance a big brigade of Cossacks with swords, on horseback, riding into the town to kill Jews. Mother and I were in the middle of the road. On each side of the road there were steep hills that were too difficult for us to climb. Mother, with some kind of strength that she got from who knows where, threw me like a ball over the hill and then climbed up to where I was. We hid behind a haystack. The peasant, who was working nearby, was ready to pick us up with the bay. Mother gave him some money to keep quiet until the Cossacks rode off.

The town of Tetiev had little protection from pogroms. But the Bolsheviks were a little kinder to the Jews than the Cossacks. A week before the big pogrom that finally drove us all away, one of the Russian captains brought all of the Jewish men to the square and told them that the Cossacks and the peasants were planning a pogrom in a few weeks. He warned them that it would be a bad pogrom. He told them that he would give them guns and ammunition to protect themselves. But the Jews in the town never killed, and they refused the guns. They thought that God would help them. Then, before the big pogrom did come to Tetiev, everyone in the town knew that the Cossacks were coming and knew they would have to run again. Our family started out for the shul to hide, because they never did too much damage to the shul. We went to the shul, but my mother had an intuition that we should go further. My family listened to her. We went to the end of town to the home of bobe Laika's, my great grandmother, who was killed later on that day.

The pogrom began in the morning. The shul was destroyed and burned, with many of our friends and relatives inside. Those that tried to escape were killed.

Grandpa Arel Leb was murdered. That same day, mother's youngest brother, Yankel, and his young wife (they had been married for only two months) were killed. Old man Spitalny, the talented musician, was killed in front of our eyes. Mother's sister, Sonya, who was bearing a child, was brutally jabbed in the stomach, which killed the child before it was born. Somehow, we opened a door in the back and all of us ran down the hill. Not all of us made it. The whole town of Tetiev was on fire. You could hear screams everywhere.

Mother did not let go of me for one minute. I think I only had a pair of pants on. We ran over dead people. We ran for miles and miles into the fields, and we hid in barns. There was Grandma, Sonya and her husband, Frima and her husband (both of their husbands were Spitalnys and musicians), Iris, Manny, Harold, Mother, and me. We decided to run to Odessa. On the way, a kind gentile hid us for one night and gave us food and shelter. In a big city, we thought we would have a better chance to survive. And we did!

It was a miracle that we got to Odessa. I did not have any shoes on during the miles of running and hiding. My feet were swollen and cut, and they were operated on in Odessa because of infection.

Odessa presented other challenges. Harold, Iris, and I were placed in orphan homes, Harold and I in a boys' home, and Iris in another one. I remember that there was a big gate around the orphan home. Mother went to work as a maid, cleaning and cooking. They gave us very little to eat in the home. Most of the time I was starving, small and undernourished. Mother would hide a piece of chicken from the house where she worked, and she would give it to me through the fence.

But that wasn't often because she couldn't get away from the house very often. In 1922, the agent found us in Odessa, and at last mother and I were reunited with my father after ten years of being separated. Two years later, the rest of the family, Grandma, Manny, Harold, and Iris, joined us in Cleveland for a real reunion. And thus began our life in America.