

Memoirs

Morris "Moe" Berkson

David Berkson provided the following hand-written memoirs written by his father Morris "Moe" Berkson. In 2006 David discovered his father's memoirs among some old family photographs. These memoirs were distributed at the Greenstone family reunion as Julius Greenstone is Morris Berkson's uncle:

Departure for America

"One by one you are leaving me" was my Grandfather's cry when I came to bid him goodbye on leaving home for the golden land of the United States. Never will I forget the anguished look in his eyes as he arose from his seat to give me his blessings. As I came into his room he sat bent over the open book of the Talmud he loved so much to study. A great scholar was he. His shiny forehead and flowing gray beard gave you the image of a Patriarch of biblical times. Young as I was, a mere lad of sixteen, I appreciated the disturbed feelings of this dear old man. That parting left me with the most awed and indelible impression. I was one of his several favorite grandsons that recently had left home, going out into the new world to seek their opportunities which were not in store for them in their native land.

I left Mariampole, Lithuania, the town I was born and raised in, to go to the promised land, the United States of America. This was the hope and aspiration of almost every Jew in the Diaspora. Of course, fortunate and enviable was the one whose hopes materialized and this dream having been eventually fulfilled.

I was unable to obtain a passport in my own name to cross the German border, being underage and living just far enough from the border where they did not issue any passport to the residents of our town. Luckily, an Aunt of mine living in a town close to the border had been successful in obtaining for me a young man's passport whose age was 21. I, of course, used the assumed name when crossing over the border. I remember when the gendarmes boarded the train I was on going into Germany. They asked me a number of questions as to my age and purpose of going into Germany. I stuck to my guns and before I realized it there I was in the more modern and advanced land of Deutschland.

In that border town I met my cousin Aaron Block, who came there under similar circumstances. He was about 6 years my senior and I looked up to him as my guide and protector. We were both to proceed from there to New York where his oldest brother was to meet us and guarantee that we would not be burdensome to the community. At that time there were no immigration quotas, but you had to have someone responsible for an emigrant.

After spending the day in the border town of Eitkunen we took the train to Berlin and spent the day there. From there we were to leave that evening on an early train to Hamburg where we were to sail the following afternoon on the German liner Kassisserin Augusta Victoria for New York.

We were most impressed with the city of Berlin. The wide boulevards, the tall buildings, the spacious stores, the "*Unter den Linden*", that was all a revelation to a couple of green young men who stepped into a new modern world. It was the first time in our lives that we learned of inside plumbing and could not believe that they did not have outside latrines.

My cousin Aaron, besides being smitten with the sights of the city, had a more mature adolescence that gave vent to the gaiety and entertainment some of the public places had to offer. We visited several cafes and in one of the bars they assigned a waitress to each table. He was so enchanted with the waitress of ours that I had a hard time to distract him from his environment. I warned him that we would miss our train to Hamburg. As it happened we did miss the train we had reservations on and were compelled to take a late overnight train. Not having reserved seats on that voyage we had to ride 3rd class. What a ride that was! We had to sleep on the much crowded floor, all cramped up without a pillow or a cover. We arrived in Hamburg in the morning with barely enough time to make the boat for our trip across the Atlantic.

It took us 10 days to cross the ocean. In those days this was a record breaking time. The ship was fairly new and modern and our accommodations were excellent. We traveled 2nd class thanks to the benevolence of an Uncle of ours who provided us with 2nd class means of transportation. I remember how sorry I felt for the steerage passengers who were not as lucky as we were. Their cabins and diet were far below our standard. They were also denied the privilege of visiting the upper decks. Our cabin was elegantly furnished and the food was ample and tasty. I will confess that the first couple of days I had qualms about and felt ill at ease eating the non-kosher food. After watching many more of my Jewish fellow passengers partaking of these sort of meals, I gradually lost my conscience and became reconciled to this.

We had very calm seas on that trip and the service and stewardship was fabulous. Having never experienced such luxury it was, of course, gratifying. The last day of the trip was most exciting. We kept straining our necks for hours for a glimpse of the promised land. When the Statue of Liberty finally loomed on the horizon a burst of joy exploded from the throats of the passengers. Closer and closer our ship was nearing the harbor until we finally reached the docks of Ellis Island.

Memories from Home

As I was to touch the ground of my destination memories from home flashed through my mind--The scenes of my recent departure from my dear parents and family, my farewell to some of my bosom boy friends with the envious look in their eyes. While I felt proud and important having been fortunate

to get the opportunity in setting out into the new world, a feeling of sadness overtook me leaving my dear ones behind and not knowing if I shall ever see them again. My cherished desire at that moment was to be reunited with my parents, and in some measure be able to repay them for all the care and attention they gave me and the anguish I may have caused them.

I was one of six children in our family, and the older of the two sons, next to the third daughter my parents had. As I understand my arrival as the first male heir apparent was quite a family event. We were a devoted and harmonious family. The relationship between my mother and father was most congenial and indeed complimentary. To my recollection there was never a harsh word uttered by them to us children, nor any manual punishment inflicted upon any of us if one of us committed a misdemeanor. The most severe chastisement by father, if he ever got really angry at one of us, was his pretended harsh expression in Yiddish, "*A gutter id soldier nisht kennen*" which literally means "you should not have to visit the so called Sage" for consultation. This, of course, meant you were in trouble. This expression while sounding like a curse actually was just the opposite.

At the age of five I entered Hebrew School. The first day of enrollment was quite exciting. As a token of good luck and inducement for the fresh pupil it was customary for the father to flip a shiny coin while the child's eyes were closed. This was supposed to have come down from the angel in heaven and send the child off to a good start. I enjoyed school a lot, and I can say with humility that I excelled in the various subjects I was taught. We young students in Russia did not know of any athletics or national sport games. Our only competition was in the area of study and to merit an education was our aim. As I grew older our hours in school were quite long. I recollect they were from 9 am to 5 pm. Morning we devoted to the learning of Hebrew and the Bible and the study of the Talmud and its Commentaries. In the afternoon our time was spent in learning Russian and academic courses, which were all taught in the Russian language.

Ours was quite a cultural town. While the town was predominantly Jewish, there were a number of gentile schools for the Poles, Lithuanians and Russians. These institutions of learning were equivalent to our Junior colleges. The students in the gymnasias for men wore special uniforms which were the envy of our Jewish boys. Very seldom would they admit a Jewish boy in that college and you had to come from a wealthy family to even be considered for enrollment. All in all Mariampole was a literary community. We had our libraries, a Hebrew one in our school and a public library for Russian books. We had a number of English books translated into Hebrew. I remember reading the well known book by James Fenimore Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans* and also the famous book *Looking Backward* by Edward Bellamy—and many others.

We had several literary and debating groups that our young people belonged to, and though I was too young to join any of them, I was curious about them. My older sisters were members of these groups and whenever they met in our house I would eavesdrop, most of the time not understanding what it

was all about. There was a strong revolutionary movement going on among the young of Russia advocating reform and demanding a relaxation of the iron hands of the government's despotic rule. Of course, these meetings of these socialistic agitators were held in secret and their activities heavily covered. My sisters were not actual members of the underground movement, but were great sympathizers of their cause.

Then one night these adventurous young ladies sneaked into one of these clandestine meetings to listen to one famous revolutionary addressing this gathering. In the midst of the heated discussions word came that the police are on the way. Pandemonium broke out in that deserted shack across the river on the outskirts of town where they met. Luckily these rebels escaped in time wading their way through the shallow waters of the Sheshupa River. I remember how my folks kept vigil that night waiting for my sisters' return. When they finally came home in the wee hours of the morning they brought with them this famous revolutionary dressed in a red over shirt. He was evading the police by hiding in our house. My folks and us children were in tremendous suspense until this unwelcome guest left our house at the break of dawn.

Those were very disturbing days in Russia. Autocracy, oppression and police control were dominant. It was just at the time Russia had lost its war with Japan and domestic strife was at its peak. It became difficult for the government to cope with the unrest and rebellion of the populace.

The Tsar then suddenly declared an amnesty for political prisoners and granted autonomy to the people. Free speech and expression was the rule of the day. A sigh of relief was heard throughout the land. The revolutionaries came out of their hiding and you could hear their oratory loud on the corners of the streets in the big cities and towns. But after three days of jubilant celebrations and exuberant demonstrations of the people the government, without warning, treacherously retracted its generous concessions to its citizens. The police, having kept close eyes on the young socialists who actively participated in their movements towards the promised free society, made wholesale arrests and thousands were exiled to Siberia.

(The written memoirs end at this point. There are however, also notes which indicate that his father was a hide salesman and that he had gone to the United States and was absent at the time of Morris' Bar Mitzvah. These notes also indicate that other chapters were being planned. The subjects were to include: trips to Kauvna, the first movie he saw, the activities in Mariampole—including the Park, music and religion, especially the *Schul*, and his experiences in Montreal. He also mentions having no telephone, radio or autos. He remarks about his bosom friend his cousin Sam and notes "at our young ages we were much more mature then the fellows today". Unfortunately, these experiences were never put to paper.)