

Part II.
The Transitional Generation:
My Grandparents in Nemirov and America

The transitional generation: roots in Nemirov and transplanted to America. My four grandparents were all born in the Old World in the nineteenth century and came to America in the early twentieth. It was their lot to break away from the backward, repressive and retrograde Russia where they had been born and where they spent the first part of their lives. The Russia they knew was one of a closed society. Its doors were barely ajar through which the social, cultural, economic and political changes, already in full swing in western Europe during the second half of the nineteenth, could squeeze through. Both my paternal grandparents were actually born before the serfs were freed in 1861 and my maternal grandparents not long after.

Their world was more like that of sixteenth- or seventeenth-century western Europe and, in some cases, even medieval times. The cultural environment was even more retrograde and frozen in the past and backward looking in the little villages and towns where the majority of the Jewish population had been settled for centuries, as far back as the fourteenth century. The Tsars restricted the Jews to the Pale of Settlement, the regions of Poland annexed to Russia, and were excluded from admission to schools and universities. This policy, *numerus clausus*, also turned out to be counterproductive unwittingly thwarting the Tsarist designs to convert the Jews to Christianity, eradicate their culture and meld them into Russian society as had been the "cantonist" during the reign of Nicholas I, 1825-1855. Excluded from secular culture and admittance to Russian society as a whole, the Jews of Russia turned out to be an especially "stiff-necked people" who held on to their customs, religion and culture as never before and established legal, social, educational and economic institutions of their own in the villages and towns where they were confined.

It should be borne in mind that life for most of the non-Jewish population of Russia, certainly the serfs and the working class in general, was less than a life in paradise. It was not only the Jews who suffered liabilities and injustice at the hands of the Tsarist government. The truth is that most Russians, Poles, Ukrainians as well as the myriads of people who inhabited the Russian empire, though not excluded by law, received probably less education than Jews who at least received a non-secular education in their own schools in subjects which today might be termed "Bible studies." For the most part, Jews could read Hebrew, and also read and write Yiddish as well. Jews said their prayers in Hebrew and sharpened their brains with Talmudic studies.

So my grandparents were born into a traditional society in which they and lived about half their lives; in a traditional world and hardly aware of, let alone experiences, in the secular world of contemporary western Europe; in a world millennia distant in time from the open and progressive America to which they came in the early twentieth century, to "di goldeneh mehdeeneh," the golden land. In

America they had, perforce, to adjust to a world they never even dreamed of. In America they were obliged to change, even to discard, their age-old traditional way of life and reorient their thinking regarding values and goals in life. They had to change their personal habits and even adopt an unknown daily round of life; the passage from small town life to that of the great New York metropolis, from residing in small one-story dwellings to living in the multi-story, multi-family tenements of the Lower East Side. This readjustment to life in America was less traumatic to their children; my aunts and uncles, especially the younger ones, even my mother who came here 1903 at the age of thirteen and my father in 1905 at the age of 19 or 20.

So the generations that preceded me and the generations that follow, all overlap like shingles on a pitched roof. The first row, that of my great great grandparents, only one do I know of, Libeh, is set right at the eaves. The second row of shingles, my great grandparents, Shmeel Libes and Eedis plus Doovid and Rookhel, overlaps the first by at least half; the third generation, my grandparents Sooreh Dintsye and Avrum Shaiyeh plus Yahnkel and Bahsyeh, overlaps the second again by half; and the fourth generation, my parents, Khawva Bahsyeh-Eva and Nethanel Bentsion - Sahnyeh or Sam); my generation, the fifth overlaps the fourth and the third. The sixth generation, that of my children, overlaps mine by half. Their children, the seventh generation, form the next row. The succeeding generations, with the help of the Almighty, will range all the way up and to the ridge of a roof that ascend to Heaven, each row of shingles overlapping the one below and being overlapped by the one above in joy and the fulfillment of full and useful lives to themselves, our people and all mankind.

At any given row beyond the first two, the roofing is three layers of shingles thick, three generations in contact with each other. In Malvina's case, her family recollections start with her parents. Through force of circumstances, not unique in history, but especially tragic in this century, she never knew her mother's and father's parents. So the shingles on the roof are not three layers thick, only two. As I pointed out before, I am fortunate in that all the members of the two generations who preceded me, both came to America and are buried here.

So here I am.

Up to this point in my narrative, I have related incidents and stories which I have heard from others and have described people who lived long before me. In other words, I have related what I have heard, not what I know from personal experience. That being the case, of course, one may consider that I am writing a fable, history based on hearsay, "oral history" as it is now called. I must agree that the facts I heard from others and which I report may sometimes be embellished, changed, and may even be erroneous. But the "hearsay" and the errors and the embellishments I repeat here for you to read are facts. They reveal the character of the people who told me these stories. Even the invented facts, and I must say that there many such in the account I give are part of our past. Invented facts are in their

own right also facts of reality – the non-objective painters are not interested in producing facsimiles of the visual three-dimensional world in two-dimensional terms. They are creating conceptional realities that have visual properties and are independent realities. They are not copies or versions of the visual, that is the world of the physical senses, though it requires eyes to see what they have created. The myths, the fairy tales, the downright distortions of reality, are *truths*, creations that enjoy a reality independent of their creators.

So it is with the stories of the past I heard and which I put down here for my children and their children to read. The invented is just as real and enjoys existence revealing as much about the inventor as it does of his invention. Impressionistic accounts of what transpired and which I transcribe here, reveal the tenor and the impact of the facts on the teller regardless of the truth or falsity of the facts themselves. I could not control the editing of the facts by those who passed them on to me. Nor can I edit the impact the facts had on me. My impressions and prejudices are difficult to strain out of my account of those events where I was directly involved or appeared as a spectator.

From this juncture on in my narrative, the facts I give an account are for the most part based on my own experience and I so I accept to the responsibility of passing on the knowledge of them on to you. My selections of what to include in this narrative, in a sense, also is reflective of my turn of mind, my biases, my point of view on the aims my life, my values. Therefore, willy-nilly, in spite of myself, my feelings, my impressions will be included. I am drawing on my memory, but I fear the many of the megabytes in "hard drive" have been erased and those that remain are a little worn. I might add I tend to forget the unpleasant, and unwittingly blue pencil offenses real and imaginary, facts which are totally superfluous, their absence is not felt nor does their presence make any difference.

The underlying point or truth that I wish to convey is that from now on my narrative will be based on accounts of my own experiences drawn from my remembrance of those experiences. What I know of the great grandparents and their siblings, of the ambient of Nemirov, is derived from stories told me by my grandparents and not from my own personal experience. It is not a case of fact versus fiction. Here fiction is reality, the reality of the mind-set reflected in the fictions which were passed on to me and which I now, in my turn, pass on to you.

Chapter 5

My Mother's Mother, Sooreh Dintsyeh

My grandmother Sooreh Dintsyeh, my mother's mother, was born in Nemirov about 1868. She was the fourth one of Shmeel Libehs' and Eedis' six children. In a previous chapter I gave an account of my great grandfather, for whom I was named, and also some scant information about his wife, my great grandmother Eedis. I believe the year my maternal grandmother was born to be more or less 1868 counting back from 1940, the year she died at the age of seventy-two, surviving my grandfather Shaiyeh by about nine years.

You may wonder why I never cite absolutely firm dates for births and deaths or even for events in the lives of those who preceded me in the nineteenth century. Jews in Tsarist Russia rarely mentioned, let alone recorded, dates in the civil calendar. It was just as well that they chose to be vague in this respect. Dates were not as relevant they are today. There were far more pervasive and more pressing matters in daily life than the concerns of remembering, let alone officially recording, accurate dates of births, marriages and deaths. One of the principal reasons for this indifference to keeping records of what today are considered important vital statistics, was that "mehn tseylt'zich nit dee yooren," [one does not count one's years] for fear the Almighty may choose to shorten them. Don't question Destiny! In the case of boys, who were always under the threat of being thrown into the hell of the Russian army when they turned twenty-one, it was just as well that the Russian military authorities did not have accurate records of their dates of birth.

As a matter of fact, the Russian government in Tsarist times was hardly noted for keeping accurate and complete records of vital statistics of the population as a whole. Perhaps only in western Europe, especially in emerging Germany under Bismark after the end of the Prussian War were records of vital statistics kept in the nineteenth century. Even in the United States including the largest cities such as New York or Boston, vital statistics such as births, marriages and deaths were rarely registered and stored in municipal archives. The family Bible was very often the only place where such matters were recorded. And until very recently, such records were acceptable as proof of dates of birth for voter registration, marriage licenses, automobile driving licenses and permits of like character. In many regions of the

country until the first quarter of the 20th century, family Bibles were the only repository of important family events in many small towns and even in sizeable cities.

The lack of official stamped and sealed birth certificates, marriage and death certificates among the Jews in nineteenth-century Russia is a condition not out of the ordinary. During that period, as already mentioned above, Jews were generally loath to register the births of boys because to do so was a certain means of inviting the disaster of falling into "goyisheh hent" [gentile hands], and suffering cruel and inhumane treatment in the army. Even the Russian government regarded service in the army more of a way of exercising control over the lower echelons of the general population rather than as a civic duty required of all citizens.

One the neighbors of my father's family was a "kahzyawner rabeener," [official community rabbi, a sectarian office] appointed by the crown. The selection or allotment of Jewish youths for induction into the hated Russian army was the responsibility of the Jewish community and was supervised by an official, the "kahzyawner rabeener" appointed by the Tsar. His duties were secular in nature and had nothing whatsoever to do with the religious life of the Jewish community. The duty of this official was to keep some of the vital statistics of the Jewish community especially the dates of birth of boys.

My father told me of one instance when some homeless Jews wandering from town to town because they had no official papers came to Nemirov. He registered them as natives on the official lists or censuses of the Nemirover Jewish community. In Tsarist Russia the possession of a passport was required for personal identification and for travel even inside Russia including the Pale of Settlement. To lack these official papers, that is not to be inscribed on the official census records of the town where one was born, was to be literally a "man without a country" and to live in constant fear of being thrown into prison if discovered, or worse still, being exiled to Siberia, "kahterkeh." Some parents, in order to avoid having their sons carried off to army, chose not to register their births.

My father once told me that not long after he arrived in New York from Russia via London in 1905, he received a letter from his mother, my grandmother Bahsyeh, saying the military authorities had come to house looking for him because he had reached age of 21 and was due to be inducted into the army.

The Nemirover "kahzyawner rabeener" lived next door to my father's house. His given name was Armeeder, to, which the epithet "mit dee mahtykes" was always appended [with the large voluminous white linen Ukrainian peasant trousers, mahtykes). He fancied himself something of an Hebraist. During conversations in Yiddish he would always insert rather mangled and malaprop Hebrew phrases. My father always cited one for which Armeeder mit dih matykes was famous. He once offered his opinion of a freshly baked Sabbath loaf, a khalah or challa, "Tawf khawleh, shehbeh loy flawkht." Which he sometimes translated for the uniformed into Yiddish, "A gooteh khawleh awber shlehkht geflawkhten." [A good Sabbath loaf,

but badly braided). His Hebrew was almost acceptable in saying that it was a good challah, "tawf khawleh," but he stumbled when he came to the Hebrew word for "braided" which he did not know and so substituted the word "flawkht" an Hebrewized version of the Yiddish dropping the prefix "ge" and the suffix "en" of "geflawkhten." He wished to demonstrate his fluency in modern Hebrew, the Zionist movement was strong in Nemirov, and could just have said "Es iz a gooteh khawleh, awber shlekhkht geflawkhten."

Returning to Sooreh Dintsyeh, my maternal grandmother whose maiden family name was Pilch. As already mentioned before, two of her sisters and two of her brothers also came to America, the remaining brother, I believe his name was Moisheh, but I am not sure, stayed on in Nemirov only to be killed in the early 1920's, during the days of anarchy at the end of the First World War and the outbreak of the Russian Revolution. Moisheh and one of the brothers, probably Leepeh, who left Nemirov later than my grandmother, took turns each month caring for their aged and blind father, my great grandfather Shmeel Libeh's after his wife Eedis died. They would trundle him from one house to the other's at the end of each month, even in the dead of winter.

Her sisters were Etyeh and Tema of whom I wrote before. I now remember Etyeh's married family name was Portnoy, and whose son Khai'im was a real nebbekh of a soldier stationed out at the training camp in Yaphank, Long Island. My grandmother's other two brothers, Leepeh and Elkooneh, also immigrated to this country. As a child I saw Elkooneh and his family quite often and so know more about him than I do of my grandmother's other siblings.

Of my grandmother's early childhood and of the early years of her marriage to my grandfather Shaiyeh, I know every little. Of the small straw-thatched peasant house which I described in telling of my great grandfather Shmeel Libeh's, I know more from what my mother told me than my grandmother. Her chore was to replenish the sand on the earthen floor on Fridays in preparation for the Sabbath. As a child my mother would visit her grandparents' house, probably on the Sabbaths as a rule. She and her grandparents would sit on the prizbeh and visit. The neighborhood was largely populated by Ukrainians, some of whom kept pigs which roamed freely about the yards and streets. As a very young child, probably five or six years old, I never ascertained exactly her age at the time, one day she decided to go riding on the back of a pig. The pig bit her on the thigh and left a scar which remained visible for the rest of her life. She remembers that she had to drink some non-kosher substance. It may have been oil made from lard. I really do not know exactly nor did I ever ask her for specific details of the treatment she had to undergo to heal the wound; nor did I ever imagine that I would one day be recording this incident for her grandchildren at the age of eighty-two. She was very ill with high fever for some time as a result of this attempt at riding piggy-back on a real live pig.

When my maternal grandparents married, probably in 1888, two years before my mother was born, my grandfather Shaiyeh whom I calculate to have been born in 1869, was about 19 years old. My mother always told me that her mother was two years older than her father. This being the case, she must have been 21 years old at the time. She died in 1940 at age 72, thus her year of birth could also probably be 1868. In short, she was older than her husband, by more than one year and less than two.

After my grandfather Shaiyeh died in the Spring of 1931, she went to live with my Aunt Ida, my mother's sister and the youngest child. She and her husband Izzie [Irving] Weinger and their two children, Bobby (Robert) and Sheila Marcia later bought a nice one-family row house in East Flatbush where my grandmother died in 1940. At the time of my grandfather's death in 1931 the Great Depression was in the first stages of what was to develop into an almost total economic cataclysm in the United States. This was the time before unemployment insurance, social security for retired workers. The burden of caring for the aged became the responsibility of one's children. Very few people of the working class had ever earned enough to set a portion aside in savings for "one's old age." Weekly wages were usually just enough to defray current living expenses from one payday to the next.

My grandfather who had worked every day of his life since childhood, literally up to the day before he died in a flat on Blake Avenue near Hinsdale Street, left no material goods behind other than a few personal possessions and the furniture in the four-room cold water flat. I inherited his ivory cigarette holder, a small pen knife and the small pair of scissors he used to cut the short free lengths thread after sewing, all of greater value to me than their weight in gold or precious stones. I still have the knife and the scissors which at the moment I cannot find. I just remembered while copy-editing this chapter, 23 February 1995, that I gave it to Sarah. The cigarette holder, dried out and shattered into pieces in its little case, I gave to Charlie because Charlie is named for him.

It is so many years since my grandmother died that I have difficulty in remembering what she looked like. She once had black hair which eventually turned grey, some of the original black of her hair mingling with the grey. In complexion she was almost olive-skinned, not as dark or swarthy like south Italians or Andalusian Spaniards. My aunt Libeh and Uncle Davey had similar complexions. The other children were quite fair, especially my mother. I am not too certain of the color of her eyes, they were not brown, but deep grey, mixed with light brown and blue, actually speckled, so my sister Esther tells me. Her brother LEEPeh also had eyes of that color, and my uncle Davey also, very striking eyes, the exact color of which I do not remember.

My grandmother was thin of frame and figure all her life. Now that I think of it, she always wore long dresses almost down to her ankles, so I have no idea what was the shape of her legs. She was ailing a good part of the time. I remember that

there were times when her cheeks were sunken and she seemed very frail indeed. All her life she suffered from high blood pressure. It was not unusual for me to see her with a wet compress tied around her head to relieve the pain of the headache. No one ever knew, and I certainly did not know, exactly what was her malady. It may have been chronic migraine she was suffering from all the years of her life since coming to America.

She took a turn for the worse in 1940. I no longer remember the time of year other than that the weather was pleasant enough not to require overcoats. She fell into a coma and was breathing very rapidly and extremely noisily. I left the house and went to a nearby synagogue in time for *minkha* and *ma'ariv* prayers in order to have a *misheberakh* said for her. I remember a small bearded man carrying a burlap sack came in and joined the *minyán*. When the portion of the service in the *siddur* was being said that God has chosen us from all people for his service, and Whom all the world will accept as God, and to Whom every knee must bend, the old man turned to me pointing to the passage and in Yiddish told me that this passage regarding the Jews as God's chosen people is the root of the troubles that the Jews in Germany were experiencing at that time. The fact that God had selected the Jews to be His people was something that Hitler could not abide and so out of envy, jealousy and spiteful malice he began persecuting the Jews. My grandmother had a different view of why Hitler had become the modern Haman, because "*Mihr hawben gezindigt.*" [We have sinned.]

The *misheberakh* the reader intoned for my grandmother's restoration to health, "*refee'eh shloimeh*" [*refuah shelomah*] did not change her agonizing condition. She never regained consciousness and died a day or two later and was buried in the cemetery of the *Nemirover lantslait* - The Independent Benevolent *Nemirover Society* - in *Cyprus Hills, Queens*.

As a child one of the most vivid and ever recurring memory of my grandmother, *dih Bawbeh*, is of seeing her with a woeful look on her face with a cold compress wrapped around her head and complaining of dizziness, "*es dreyt zikh meer der kop,*" and an unbearable painful headache. At one time, while we still lived in *Essex Street* near *New Lots Avenue* in the *Est New York* section of *Brooklyn*, she had been very sick and so she came, bringing my aunt *Ida* who was still a child, to stay with us to recuperate. Somewhere among the hundreds of pictures I have in the bottom section of one of the bookcases in the living room here in *Durham* on *Urban Avenue*, I have a snapshot of her and my aunt *Ida*, or possibly my sister *Esther* (I'll have to find the picture to verify which) standing in our backyard.

She would sometimes tell me stories about *Nemirov*, for example the one of the famous *Nemirover "ganooven"* and *Behrel Kardooner*, and how inhumanely her older brothers, *Moisheh* and *Leepch* treated her old and blind father when he was left alone and blind after her mother died. [I am not certain of the names of the brothers,

nor do I know that Leepch was one of them, he may not have been in Nemirov by that time]

There are a number of Yiddish folk songs from Nemirov she used to sing and which I remember. I will set down the words here, but unfortunately I am unable to record the music other than by singing the melodies. I did record some on tape. The tapes are in the top right hand drawer of my desk in the study, the desk I bought for Charlie when he came home to live on his return from Mexico to write his doctoral dissertation. Most are songs of unrequited love, of lovesick girls and the like.

Feer yoor az ikh strahdai'eh
 In fahr kain mawn tsi nehmen kehn ikh nit
 In mahn hahrtsen brehnt a fai'er
 Az ikh zay deer mit ahtsvayter gayn
 Oi, mayn nit doosheh az'veht deer shtendik gerootn
 Voos di hawhst fin der velt a zah eeng kihnd imgebrakht
 Shpeeln vet'zikh mit deer mahn sootn
 Sai bah toog in sai bah nakht

Translation:

It is four years that I am wandering about
 And to take a husband, can I not
 In my heart there burns a fire
 when I see you going about with another girl
 do not think, o sweetheart [doosheh, a Russian word] that
 everything will turn out well for you
 For my ghost will be hovering over you
 Both by day and by night

Another song.

Oi in droisn mawminyoo gayt a raygn
 Dee shtayner vehren nawsser in nawsser
 Az a maydehle feert a leebch
 Gayt arawf vee boimel ahf vawsser

Translation:

Oh mother outside there falls a rain
 And the stones get wetter and wetter
 When a young girl carries on a love affair
 It rises like oil on water.