Chapter 18
My Mother: Early Years

My mother was born in Nemirov in the Spring of 1890, the firstborn. She was never told exactly when she was born and so never knew the exact date of her birth. Birthdays were unimportant among Jews and were even shunned. It was not advisable to count one's years. To do so was to question one's destiny and run the risk of angering the "Mawlekh ha Moovis," the Angel of Death, who might conclude that you are not content with the lot of years the Almighty has granted you, and so will attempt to shorten them. "Meh toor zikh nit tseylen dee yooren," One must not count one's years, is a refrain I heard during all my childhood. I remember seeing the year of her birth on her citizenship papers as 1889. I concluded this to be incorrect on the basis of the fact that she and my grandfather Shaiyeh arrived in New York in 1903 when she was said to be in her thirteenth year, "...in doos drahtseteh yoor."

It was customary among Yiddish-speaking East European Jews to include in one's age the year *before* the date of one's birthday. For example, I turned 83 last month (I am writing this on November 8, 1994) on October 10. According to the East European Jewish custom I am "in my 84th year," but in America I am 83 years old and will continue to be 83 years old all year until my next birthday.

Therefore, if my mother was in her thirteenth year in 1903, according to the East European method of reckoning, she had already had her birthday implying she had been born in 1891 and was eighteen years old when she and my father married in 1909. On then other hand, if she was thirteen years old by our way of reckoning in 1903, this would imply that she was born in 1890 and nineteen years old when she married my father in 1909. I believe she frequently said she was married when she was nineteen years old. The date of 1889 on her citizenship papers adds to the confusion as to which year she was born.

The same confusion also exists in the case of my father's year of birth, 1885 or 1886. He always jested that the difference in their age got greater as the years went by. When they married she was only three years younger than him, but in the course of time he became four years older. I do not know if the difference in their ages was due to the fact that his date of birth was sometimes set back to 1885 and hers advanced to 1890.

It is more likely than not that the confusion concerning their ages may due to the fact that he was born in the Fall and she was born in the Spring. If he was born in October 1885 and she about April of 1889, the difference in their ages would be about 3-1/2 years. Or if she was born in the Spring of 1890 and he is the Fall of 1885, then the difference would be 4-1/2 years.

If he was born in 1886 and she in 1890, the difference would be 3-1/2 years. The arithmetic based on the variables 1885, 1886, 1889 and 1890 make for a

number of permutations as to the difference in ages between them and explains how it turned out that my father was sometimes more than four years older than my mother.

I just recalled a fact, as I am writing this, that may point to my father's year of birth. He left Russia and, after a short interlude in London, came to the United States in 1905. He was most likely under twenty-one years old, the Russian army draft age. He once told me that not long after his arrival in America, his mother wrote him that the military or draft officials came by looking for him. He did not tell me the date when he received this letter from his mother, but it must have been his twenty-first birthday. So here we are again at a dilemma. Did he turn twenty-one in 1906 or in 1907? Was he born in 1885 or 1886?

I heard very little from my mother herself about her childhood in Nemirov. This was probably because she was still a child, just about thirteen years old when she left, and so the remembrances of her childhood are fragmentary. She was born in 1889 or 1890 and was named for her father's mother, Khava in Hebrew, Khawveh in Yiddish and eventually Eva in English.

My grandfather Shaiyeh's mother died while still a young woman leaving four little children. He never related any stories about his mother. This leads me to conclude that he was still a very young child when his mother died. My grandfather had two younger sisters, Oodyeh and Boonyeh, both of whom eventually emigrated with my great grandfather Elyeh to London. My sister Esther tells me that there was a third sister, Shayveh. I vaguely remember the name, but nothing else about her. I believe I already mentioned William Black, the Saville Row tailor, my mother's first cousin and the son of Boonyeh.

My great grandmother's maiden family name was Marinsky. She was a first cousin of her husband, my great grandfather Elyeh, Eli, Oobawgoo. The family name was changed to Bodie after emigration to England. My paternal grandmother, Sooreh Dintsyeh had a very negative opinion of Elyeh to whose name she always appended the epithet, mehrder, murderer. She always refereed to him as Elyeh, Mehrder. I never found out why, but he must have caused her some grief after she married my grandfather. He was a very stern and strict man, always impeccably dressed, as a ladies's tailor should be, whose second wife, Bayleh, the mother of my mother's uncle Shmeel, Sam Bodie. He often related how his mother waited on his father and even had to shine his father's shoes, among other duties he required of her to fulfill. My grandmother Sooreh also did not have a very high opinion of Bayleh, her step-mother-in-law. There is no point in relating what my grandmother thought of her father-in-law's wife. I never heard a word about her from my grandfather.

At any rate, my mother was named for her father's mother Khava Marinsky. She was also given a second name, Bahtyah in Hebrew and Bahsyeh in Yiddish, the name which caused my father's mother, also named Bahsyeh, much anguish because she knew that her name would die not ever be borne by my father's children

or by his descendants in the generations to follow. I have already related something of this story about my grandmother's concern that her name would die with her and not live on in her son's progeny.

I do not know who was the Bahsyeh for whom my mother was named. She must have been a member of my maternal great grandmother Eedis's family (the wife of Shmeel Libes, the man for whom I am named) and quite possibly her mother, that is my mother's maternal great grandmother. The reason I make this conclusion is that Libeh, for whom my mother's sister, my aunt Libeh was named, was my great grandfather Shmeel's mother and probably the one who told my grandmother Sooreh Dintsyeh the stories about the kidnapping of little boys, sending them to be raised by a peasant before being obliged to serve in the army of Tsar Nicholas I (1825 - 1855). Bahsyeh very likely was his mother-in-law, that is his wife Eedis' mother, and thus my mother's great grandmother for whom she was also named.

This Bahsyeh for whom my mother was named must have been a sharp tongued woman. This is a deduction I come to because of an unexpected argument between my grandfather Yahnkel Balaboos and my mother I witnessed in our kitchen in the house in Essex Street in East New York during one of his weekly visits when I was still a child.

My grandfather Yahnkel Bahlaboos and my mother had some words. I still remember, not without some disquiet and even embarrassment, my mother's strong negative reaction to what he had said and to which she responded in a disrespectful manner. I had never before heard her address her father-in-law, my grandfather, with such sharp words.

I was embarrassed and even ashamed that she had spoken so disrespectfully to him. She always taught me that younger people always deferred to their elders. Respect for one's parents and grandparents and all one's elders fulfilled the Biblical commandment, "mitzvah," of "kibid'tov," respect for one's elders, and earned one a place in "ha olam habah," the World to Come. Respect for one's elders, regardless of all and any circumstances, was not to be questioned, and yet here she spoke disrespectfully to my grandfather taking umbrage at what she considered wrong instead of remaining silent even though she so vehemently disagreed with what he had said.

My grandfather Yahnkel did not earn the sobriquet Bahlaboos because he was a wishy-washy character. He was accustomed to have the unquestioning respect of his children. In his dealings with the local gentry and landowners for whom he built many houses, and even village churches, he was dignified and had a great deal of self-respect. He always dealt honestly and fairly earning their trust. He came from a world where the young respected the old, and so was really astonished when my mother answered him so sharply.

For example, though my father had many disagreements with his father, and never forgot the beating he once gave him with a slat with a nail in one end, my

father never ever even once expressed himself negatively to his father face to face. My father was always quiet and respectful keeping his contrary opinions to himself. On the other hand, my mother had a more volatile character and was always outspoken. She was absolutely incapable of guile or deceptive behavior or hiding her true feelings. She would voice her opinions even if it meant losing favor with the hearer.

But my grandfather was old fashioned in this respect and expected his children, and I suppose his daughter-in-law also, to defer to him. For some reason, of which I was not aware, my mother flared up and, to his utter astonishment, said something he regarded disrespectful. And for the first and only time in my life, did I see him respond also flaring up and pointing a finger at my mother accusingly and saying in a loud voice, "Dee Bahsyeh Yahnkeles," you Bahsyeh the daughter of Yahnkel, almost as a derogatory epithet. He was referring to her great grandmother for whom she was named and who apparently had a reputation in Nemirov for a sharp tongue.

My mother, I distantly remember, was left totally speechless and puzzled. She did not know to whom he was referring. She had no idea who was Bahsyeh Yahnkeles. When this unfortunate incident took place, in the early 1920s, my grandfather was already a man probably in his late seventies and was recalling a woman who had lived at least as far back as the 1880s or earlier, a person who had died before my mother was born and for whom she was named. So, in his opinion my mother had the same reputed sharp tongue as her great grandmother.

Among my mother's recollections of her childhood in Nemirov are of the frequent visits to her paternal grandparents house, Shmeel Libes and Eedis Pilch. My great grandfather, of whom I believe I already related some facts when I wrote something of his life in a previous chapter, had once been fairly well-off and had owned a pastry bakery. I never really learned if he was a baker himself. I somehow have some vague memories of my mother saying he had been a "kawndeeterskeh behkehr" of the sort common in Warsaw. My memory is vague about this detail and I may have it all wrong. At any rate, his bakery burned to the ground leaving him without a "parnooseh," an income, a living. Having lost all his capital, he had to turn to being a meykler, broker. He booked passengers travelling to towns and villages in the vicinity for the coachmen stationed in the marketplace of Nemirov. I already related the story of his role in the trial of the "Nemirover gahnooven," the thieves of Nemirov.

My mother's grandfather Shmeel Libes lived on the outskirts of Nemirov town in a "goyish steebl mit ah shtroyenem dahkh," a peasant house with a straw thatched roof. The house was fronted with a "prizbeh," a built-in bench attached to the lower part of the wall where one could sit and enjoy the outdoors when the weather permitted.

Peasant houses were built of logs and plastered. I described their construction in the chapter dealing with my paternal grandfather Yahnkel Bahlaboos. Upright logs

with rabbets were rammed into the ground at short intervals. Next, undressed short sections of thinner logs were inserted horizontally into the rabbets with a mortar made of clay and some aggregate like straw or even horse manure, "vahlkyes." The mortar extruded from the joints and enveloped the horizontal log inserts completely. The whole of the exterior was also plastered with the same material and whitewashed. The prizbeh was typical of the Ukrainian peasant houses and was built of the same materials, clay or mud mortar and logs. The "prizbeh" probably also served as a buffer at the bottom of the exterior wall to keep out the cold keep the interior warm.

I saw a comparable method of insulating houses against the winter cold in the 1930s in the Adirondack Mountains of New York. A temporary low wood wall or fence was built around the perimeter of the house and filled with hay or earth during the winter months. In the Spring of the year these temporary low walls and insulating material was removed. The prizbeh, however, was a permanent construction and usually confined only to one side of the house, that facing the street or the road.

At any rate, after this digression in this anecdotal history of our family, a history replete with of digressions, on Sabbaths when all were free of the mundane weekday cares, my mother used to visit her grandparents in their little "goyish shteebl" on the outskirts of Nemirov in a neighborhood inhabited mainly by Ukrainians. It is interesting that my mother never told me any stories about visiting her paternal grandfather Elyeh. This may be due to the fact that my grandmother Sooreh Dintsyeh had less than a high opinion of him or his wife Bayleh. My mother related many stories about her grandfather Shmeel Libes, the man I am named for, but nothing whatsoever of her other grandfather, her father's father. Nor do I recall any stories specifically about her grandmother, Eedis (Judith), Shmeel Libes' wife.

As I have already said, the neighborhood where Shmeel Libes lived in his humble peasant house, apparently all that he could afford when he was left penniless after the destruction of his bakery, was mainly a gentile peasant neighborhood. Livestock – chickens and ducks and pigs – roamed freely foraging for food. According to one of the many humorous tales my father often recounted, pigs served a very important sanitation function in those outlying areas of Nemirov where they were scavengers roaming freely eating whatever they could find.

In nineteenth-century Russia, and even during the first part of the twentieth century, outhouses were hardly known in most villages and small towns. The few people in town who had outhouses, had to have them cleaned periodically. There was one Jew of whom my father told me but whose name I do not remember, whose specialty was emptying the cesspools under the outhouses. He had a wagon drawn by a horse and also carried a long measuring stick. When called to empty the cesspool under an outhouse, he would give an estimate of what he would charge by inserting the stick into the mess to measure its depth and then announce the price

for the job. Sometimes the customers would bargain with him wishing to lower his charge. Whereupon, he would reject the offer angrily wiping the mess off his measuring stick with his finger and drive off in a huff only to be called back because he was the only one in town who did this type of work.

Most people did not have outhouses, especially those who lived on the perimeter of the town. People would relieve themselves in the open fields surrounding the built-up areas. Open fields were never at too great a distance from the houses so people would go there to relieve themselves, usually behind a fence or some other obstruction. According to my father, it was not uncommon for the pigs which were ever about to appear as one was relieving oneself and eat the mess up almost instantly. Aside from the Biblical prohibition concerning the eating of the flesh of swine, the eating habits of the pigs were an even greater deterrent to the Jews to ever be tempted to eat pig meat.

The peasant neighbors of my great grandfather kept pigs, and as I said above, were allowed to roam about freely and forage for whatever they could find. My mother, perhaps when she was about five or six years old, was fascinated by the pigs roving about the neighborhood. One day she decided to get on the back of a pig and ride him as if he were a horse – piggyback. The beast threw her off his back and then bit her on the thigh. I do not remember if it was the right or the left thigh.

She fell deathly ill and was attended by whom I believe was the only physician in Nemirov, a Dr. Shapiro. The gossip was that he was a Jew who had converted to Christianity. This may have been so, because one could not gain admission to the university except under the reduced Jewish quota, *numerus clausus*. Many Jewish young men converted to Christianity in order to gain admission to the university. My father always used to say how wonderful it was here in America where one did not have to convert, "zikh shmawden," to become a doctor or a lawyer or anything else.

Dr. Shapiro probably was not a convert, just someone who kept himself aloof from the Jewish community in the town whose total population was about 5,000 people at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries. A little more than fifty percent of the population were Jews. The Jews of Nemirov, not unlike those in the hundreds of other little towns in the Russian Pale of Settlement, lived in a world absolutely separate from the gentile world, except for those whose craft or business required them to deal with non-Jews, like my grandfather Yahnkel Bahlaboos who worked for landowners or my grandfather Shaiyeh who sewed for the gentry.

The reason the Jews judged Dr. Shapiro to be a convert was that he did not attend any synagogue, say his daily prayers and put on tefillin, phylacteries. He also did not come to the synagogue on the Sabbath or even on Rosh ha Shonah or Yom Kippur. He doubtlessly was a secular university-trained Jew who felt superior, and certainly was in matters of the wide world outside Nemirov, to the rest of the Jewish population. But, according to what my father told me, Dr. Shapiro was charitable and contributed to Jewish causes.

In the late nineteenth-century Russian shteytelekh, anyone who did not keep the Sabbath, pray daily, eat kosher food, and adhere to all 513 Biblical commandments was considered an Apikoires. an Epicurean, a non-believer, not quite an apostate which would have been equated with treason to the Jewish people. Jews had the obligation of brotherhood to all Jews and also that of "tikun olam," working for the good of humanity. To convert to Christianity was not only to betray the Jewish people, but also to reject the obligation of working for the betterment of mankind.

Well, Dr. Shapiro, though he did not keep all the commandments, did not shun his obligation of "tikun olam" and cured my mother of her illness after being bitten by a pig. But all her life she bore the mark of that encounter on her thigh. When we went to the beach, I remember seeing the scar, the vestige of the healed gash on her thigh, just below the skirt of her bathing suit.

My mother did have some memories of my grandfather's "rahbawtsheh," workshop where he employed a number of tailors among whom were my grandmother's youngest brother Elkooneh or Elekooneh, Elkahnah in Hebrew. Like many of the Jews of Nemirov, he never learned to speak "goyish," Ukrainian, let alone Russian. My mother always joked about Elekooneh's ignorance. She spoke Ukrainian as well as Russian and Yiddish. She often told the story of a customer who once came to the workshop and asked for the "krahvyets," tailor, that is my grandfather. Elelkooneh did not quite understand what the man was saying and sent him to a "shvets," shoemaker.

It was not unusual for some Jews never to have learned Ukrainian, sometimes also referred to as Khakhslahtsky, that is "goyish," let alone Russian. A knowledge of Russian was useful only in dealing with government officials whom one avoided. It was best to stay as far away as possible from the Tsarist officials who frequently extracted money, graft, for services they were supposed to give as part of their duties in the first place. Graft was a way of life expected as part of official transactions.

Only those Jews who had dealings with peasants or the local gentry or government officials might have a need to speak Ukrainian and Russian. The Jews lived mainly in a world of their own, the home, the market place, the synagogue, the Jewish tavern or "sheynk," the bathhouse where the "mikveh," ritual bath was also located. Men went to the bath house at least once a week on Fridays before the Sabbath. Women went to the mikveh at least once a month to purify themselves both spiritually and bodily, that is perform the necessary purification ritual after each menstrual period.

There was one goy who knew of this custom of the women going to the mikveh to cleanse themselves both in body and soul after each menses and thus once again be permitted to cohabit with their husbands after the prescribed period of abstinence. But if a woman on leaving the bath were to come face to face with a goy

before reaching her house, she would be considered unclean and would then be obliged to go back to the bathhouse and go through the ritual all over again of submerging herself three times and saying the proper prayers in the presence of witnesses. Well here was this young goy, I believe it was the same Vahskyeh who used to yell "Bahreh Zhidi," Kill Jews, when he got drunk. He was also reputed to have gone off as a volunteer "pogromtchik" in the pogroms organized by the Tsarist officials at the beginning of this century. He would wait outside the bathhouse and when a woman emerged he would walk toward her so he would be the first one she saw on her way home thereby forcing her to go back and go through the whole ritual once again. He sometimes would drive the women to distraction with this tactic until one day one of the town's "shtahrker," strong man literally but better translated as tough guy or roughneck, gave him the trouncing of his life. I do not remember if my father said it was the same Boorikh Yakhets who beat Vahskyeh up for yelling "Kill Jews."

But there were many other Jews who had dealings with the non-Jewish population and so, not only knew Khahkhlahtsky, Ukrainian, but also Russian and Polish and could also make themselves understood to Germans in Yiddish; as for example, my grandfather Yahnkel Bahlaboos who was a general contractor, "pawdrahtshik," or my grandfather Shaiyeh who was a ladies' tailor and whose clientele was the landed gentry and upper class gentiles in general. The craft of ladies' tailor is not to be confused with seamstress or dressmaker, naytooren. The ladies' tailor cut and sewed women's suits of worsted and other woolen materials, fitting jackets and skirts and riding habits for women. Seamstresses sewed dresses of lighter materials such as cotton and silk.

My mother's memories of her childhood in Nemirov were scant indeed, at least she related very little to me in contrast to the many stories of her life as an immigrant child in New York. This is not surprising for she left Nemirov when she was about thirteen years old or so. She did relate in very vivid fashion how she and her father stole across the frontier in the dead of night in a small boat rowed by a cross-eyed peasant boatman, as well as her stay in Rotterdam while waiting for a ship to take her and her father to America. She also remembered the missionaries who tried to convert Russian Jews, and also of the horrible voyage in steerage on the ship, the name of which I believe was The Rotterdam. This was in 1903, and she never forgot the journey from Nemirov to New York, a momentous event for a child, the experience of which remained ever in her memory.

Chapter 19
My Mother: Immigrant Years, 1903 - 1909

My mother and my grandfather Shaiyeh came to the United States, specifically New York's Lower East Side, in 1903. I never learned where or how they lived for the two years until 1905 when my grandmother Sooreh Dintsyeh arrived with the rest of the children – Libeh, Benny (Benyeh in Yiddish, Bentsion in Hebrew), Davie (Doodyeh in Yiddish, David in Hebrew, and Dan which he chose to be called when he was old enough to go to work), Becky (Brahneh in Yiddish and Ray in English after she graduated from grade school and business school and went to work). Julie (Eedel in Yiddish, Yehudah in Hebrew) was born in 1907 and Ida (Eedis in Yiddish, which I learned very late in life was the Yiddish pronunciation of the Hebrew name Judith) was born in 1908/1909.

Though my mother was just about thirteen years old at the time, my grandfather did not send her to school. Her life-long perception was that this omission was one of the gravest tragedies she ever suffered. Because she had never been sent to school in America, she always felt that she was incomplete and that she had to recoup her losses in formal education in one way or another. But no matter how much she tried, she could never make up this loss and achieve the education she strived for.

My grandfather is not to be faulted with any ill will on his part, or be blamed for keeping my mother out of school. He himself became a tragic figure in America. He was unwittingly forced into a way of life which robbed him of his personal dignity and belittled him and made redundant his talents as a fine craftsman who took pride in his work.

I do not recall my mother ever saying that my grandfather ever even thought of renting a flat and setting up housekeeping for himself and my mother. Instead, as all immigrants, they lived in a furnished room. This arrangement was feasible for bachelors or married men whose families were still back in Russia. But in my grandfather's case, he was not alone and had a child, a thirteen-year old girl with him. Yet, I assume, until my grandmother and the other children arrived two years later, he was forced to live with my mother in a furnished room in some flat on the Lower East Side.

I believe I already related the story how they lodged for a short while in the flat of my grandmother's younger sister Temeh. My mother slept on a makeshift bed made by pushing some chairs together in the kitchen each night. They were less than welcome there. Temeh complained that my mother had lice in her hair and would

foul up the flat. "Zee vet meer fahrlahzigen di shteeb" [she will louse up the house], was her daily complaint. Apparently my grandfather and mother did not stay very long in Temah's flat but went to live elsewhere in furnished room. Living among strangers, resulted in a situation where there was no one in whose care my grandfather could leave my mother while he was at work. Had they continued lodging with Temeh, my mother would have remained at home all day and, more likely than not, would have been enrolled in school. Instead, she had to accompany my grandfather to the shop where he worked so that she would not be left alone all day.

I believe I already related the story how she used to be hidden among the bolts of cloth and bundles of finished work whenever an inspector would come to the shop. It is too bad that she was never found, for then my grandfather would have been fined for keeping her out of school and he would have been forced to make some other arrangement than keeping her near him all day while he was at work. Child labor laws had only recently been enacted only to be declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1918.

My grandfather went to work in a factory where clothes were produced in mass. The only skill required was knowing how to run a sewing machine requiring no special skill as a craftsman. This type of mindless work was very painful for him, to do such demeaning work where one's craftsmanship was of no importance at all. He had been a "bespoke tailor" in Nemirov and had designed, cut and sewed garments for a high class and refined clientele who appreciated his skill. He had a workshop of his own where he also employed a number of tailors. In New York his skills were entirely superfluous. He had to spend his work days hunched over a sewing machine putting together repeated numbers of the same garment over and over again. And on top of that, he had a young teenage daughter to take care of, no permanent home, only a furnished room, and no one he could rely on to leave her with while he was at work.

My mother always sorrowfully remembered the devastating effect these burdens had on his state of mind. She always told the story of how "He made the sidewalk wet with his tears," bemoaning the destiny of having fallen into a dark pit in America from which he could not escape. Yet, despite these troubles – his finding it almost impossible to adjust to the harsh living and working conditions in America, actually the Lower East Side of New York, and the discontinuities engendered by his separation from his family – he never thought of ever returning to Russia and the life he had left behind. Instead, within two years he had saved enough to send for the rest of the family.

So, it is understandable why my grandfather did not send my mother to school. But apparently she was not allowed to idle the day away while she was in the sweatshop with her father. She was given some sort of work to do, I think she said something about sewing on buttons or the like. I imagine that within a year or so, perhaps when she was already fourteen, she was set to work at a sewing machine.

This conclusion is an assumption on my part because I never heard any specific details about just what she was doing in the shop where she was hidden among the bundles so the labor inspector would not see her.

I did learn, inadvertently, exactly where she worked on the Lower East Side. Many years later when my father was already driving a Packard sedan and we would go down Delancey Street to cross the Williamsburg Bridge on our way home, she once pointed out that Delancey Street was once a rather narrow street and not the wide thoroughfare it was then.

When she was a young girl she said she worked in a sweat shop located in a low building, one of many occupying the street, that stood in what was now the right of way of the street. These miserable buildings, I suppose they were of frame construction, were torn down in perhaps in the 1910s to widen Delancey Street as it still is today. She worked in a shop for twelve hours a day and earned $1.50 a week. This must have been in 1904 and probably the same shop where my grandfather also worked and where he took her with him each day to be near him.

The two years between 1903 and 1905 were crucial years in her early teens. Though still a child in age, she became an adult almost over night. She did not attend school and spend carefree days in play. In addition to the drudgery of work in a sweat shop, she also shared her father's anxieties and miseries in not having a home of their own and, instead lived in lodgings in a strange land in a sort of exile far from the family. Like my father, my mother also never really had a childhood.

It is no wonder then that my mother placed so much importance on my school work. I still remember with dread and uncontrollable fear going home with my report card. I was never an "A A A" student and was frequently a C C C student – C in effort, C in work and sometimes even C in conduct though I was never an unruly or disruptive or disrespectful boy in school. My bad grade in conduct was often the result of sitting at my desk and day dreaming rather than actively doing anything other than perhaps whispering to the boy in the next desk.

But, for my mother, a C grade was not to be taken lightly. I still remember the whipping and scolding she meted out to me when I came home with a bad report card. She had a rolling pin shaped like a cudgel which she would use on me, when she caught me while chasing me around the dinning room table. And, worst of all, if the teacher sent a note home with me requesting that she come to school to talk with her, that was no different than being condemned to death in the electric chair. The whipping would start the moment I handed her the teacher's note, for she was certain that I was guilty even though I had not yet been indicted. The teacher's word was even more sacred than the Bible. Just to be called to appear before the teacher was a humiliation which she could hardly bear, but alleviated somewhat by her beating me every time she thought of the shame I had brought on her.

I suppose that had she been subjected to a school regimen as a child, she would have known the terror of teachers who rapped your knuckles with the flat side

of a ruler when you got a wrong answer for an arithmetic problem or misspelled a word. My mother could not understand how one could take school for granted and not strive to do well and learn. To be given a C in effort was even worse than getting C in the work itself. Not to try to do well was worse than not doing well. Now that I am an old man and think about these things, I now understand that perhaps her whipping me for not doing well was, in sense, reflective of her outrage that I was wasting and thoughtlessly squandering a gift which she herself had been denied as a child.

It is no wonder, then, that she placed so much emphasis on learning. Education for my mother was not just going to school itself, rather what one learned there – to read, to write was taken for granted– but school meant the world of books and literature. Becoming a doctor or an engineer was what one learned at school. But in addition, school was where one learned how to live, to be a "mentch." School was learning about life from Leon Tolstoy and Maxim Gorky, from Shakespeare.

It was from my mother that I first heard of Leon Tolstoy and Maxim Gorky and William Shakespeare. In fact, she provided me with idols of Tolstoy and Shakespeare to worship, so to speak. She bought two little plaster-of-paris statuettes or busts – one of Tolstoy and the other of Shakespeare which she placed on the dresser in my bedroom so long ago I no longer remember when, probably before I was eight or nine years old.

I no longer have the Shakespeare bust, though I vaguely do remember having it here in Durham. It may have been misplaced or even broken. I do not remember its fate. But I still have the bust of Tolstoy. There it is now perched up on top of the bookcase on the south wall of the study where I am writing this. I almost lost this bust too and with it a large part of my early life. Mama by accident knocked it down while cleaning the top of my desk. The back of the head was shattered and with it my heart also. But I was able to glue some of the pieces together leaving only a small hole when the plaster-of-paris had been pulverized. Since the bust is backed up against the wall, the missing parts of Tolstoy's head are not noticed. It is as if a great and good friend had met with an accident disfiguring him, but whom one loves just the same.

It is from my mother that I learned to enjoy reading and my love of books. I suppose she viewed me as her surrogate to fill the vacuum of education, an emptiness to which she never resigned herself. I do not remember a time when she did not go to some night school or special school or other at least to learn to read and write English. Fortunately, like my father, she did read Yiddish. During the years when she was a working girl before she was married she attended lectures, mainly those organized by the Socialist party or the labor union. I have a picture of her when she was perhaps sixteen years old sitting at a rug-covered table with a friend. Both are dressed in a long skirt and shirtwaist. In one hand she holds a book. The other

arm is bent at the elbow resting on the table and her hand is raised with fingers extended touching her forehead, the typical pose of the Russian intelligentsia.

It was from her that I learned of Shakespeare, but in Yiddish long before I had read him in English in high school. And it was in Yiddish that I saw some of Shakespeare's plays, long before I ever knew that they had been written English in the first place. I recall that my sister and I used to occupy a single seat when we were taken to the theater. I recall some of the plays among others. principally "The Merchant of Venice" titled "Shylock" in Yiddish and "King Lear" known as "Der Yiddisher Keynig Leer," The Jewish King Lear, which turned out to be a "tear jerker," a tragedy about children who were ingrates to their parents. We were also taken to a play, probably based on Christopher Marlowe's "Dr. Faustus," dubbed in Yiddish "Gawt, Mentsh in Taivel," God, Man and Devil. I do not know from which of the many versions of Marlowe's play, including Goethe's, the Yiddish play was adapted.

At the time my grandmother and the other children arrived in 1905, my mother was about fifteen years old and already burdened with adult responsibilities though still a child in age. She and my grandfather were the breadwinners for the family. The other children were still very young, except Libeh who was about three years younger than my mother. My mother recalled that at one time, because she was such an excellent worker and entrusted with very complicated and delicate sewing tasks at a high class ladies dress factory, that she actually earned more each week than my grandfather who worked in a sweat shop. Yet she never opened her pay envelope always bringing it home to her father who needed the money for the expenses of the family as a whole.

She assumed the role of "mother's helper" almost immediately after the arrival of the rest of the family in 1905. She cared for the younger children and also helped with the housekeeping every day on her return from work. She worked full time as a seamstress in a ladies' garment shop which she often mentioned, "bai Bawmvig."

I do not know what the actual pronunciation of the name was in English. But judging from my mother's Yiddish pronunciation, I conclude that the name was probably a German one, perhaps "Baumweg," originally which had possibly been changed to Bonwit, that is the Bonwit of the Bonwit Teller exclusive Fifth Avenue ladies' clothing store. Or it could be that she pronounced the name Bonwit as Bumvig, the "w" unpronounceable in Yiddish naturally came out as a "v." But she always spoke of "Bumvig" as if there was an actual Mr. Bumvig for whom she worked. The shop did in fact sew the garments sold exclusively in a retail store connected with the shop. It was not unusual in those days for the exclusive and expensive ladies' clothing stores to manufacture the garments they had for sale in their own workshops. That being the case, it seems that my mother worked for the ladies's clothing store which was to become the famous, high quality, exclusive and high priced Bonwit Teller on Fifth Avenue. I am deducing all of this on the basis of my

mother's pronunciation of the name of the man or the firm for whom she worked. Most of the fashionable and expensive ladies' clothing shops and department stores too were originally owned and operated by German Jews who had come to the United States soon after the Civil War and for whom the more recently arrived Russian immigrants worked – Bergdorff Goodman, Bonwit Teller, Abraham and Strauss in Brooklyn, Gimbel's among others.

At any rate, after a long day's work at the sewing machine, she had to help out in the house especially with the younger children. Libeh was about twelve years old in 1905 and was sent to school. Benny and Davey were about five and six years old respectively and Becky was just about three. Benny and Davey were sent to school, I imagine, about a year or so after their arrival. There were four children in the house and so it was natural for my mother to help out in taking care of them.

My mother sometimes spoke of her difficult situation, having to go to work and also having to work at home, not without some bitterness and negative feelings. She would come home and find her mother all worn out and unable to cope with the household. My grandmother was always sickly. It seems she had high blood pressure which worsened over the years so that at one time she and my aunt Ida had to come and live with us for a while. This was when we were still living in Essex Street.

I already related how Julie contracted whooping cough while he was still an infant. My mother would take him and ride the Staten Island ferry all day in order for him to get some fresh air and relief from the cough. She used to carry him in her arms on the ferry causing onlookers frequently to remark she was such a young mother. She was perhaps all of sixteen years old at the time and a full-time factory worker. She took those ferry rides probably on her one day off from work, days when she should have been resting and taking care of her own personal needs.

In many ways she assumed more than the responsibility for the physical care of the other children. It was she who enrolled Libeh in school and later on the two boys as well. Libeh, it seems, was a reluctant student who would cajole the janitor's son to do her homework for her, to my mother's disfavor who always felt cheated in life because she was never sent to school.

My mother sometimes assumed responsibilities for other members of the family as if she were the parent not the older sister. She realized that Benny had some talent for art. He would draw pictures on his own. She told me that she took him to Cooper Union to enroll him in art classes. To her great and never-forgotten disappointment, he was turned down when it was discovered that he was color blind. Now in retrospect, I feel that it was unfair to keep a child who had talent for drawing out of art classes because he was color blind. Benny probably would have developed into an illustrator or even gone to architectural school had the world been opened up for him in the classes for children at Cooper Union. I believe I already related this in the section dealing with my mother's siblings.

A great change came in my mother's life when she and my father were engaged to be married in 1907. There on the wall in front of me as I write this, 15 November 1994, there is a photograph taken in 1907 on the occasion of their betrothal. My father is sitting in a high backed chair elegantly dressed in a well-cut suit and wearing a bow tie. There is a slight smile on his face. He has his hand behind her on her waist and is probably holding her right hand which she has behind her back. She has a really stately look about her though she was about seventeen years old at the time. She is wearing a long sleeveless, narrow-waisted, and hour-glass shaped, bodice dress of corduroy adorned with two broad silk bands near the hem and very elegant folds reaching down to her toes. She is wearing a silk waist with mutton chop sleeves and a high collar like a turtle neck collar. The look on her face is almost imperial. Once she told me that she was holding my father's hand behind her back while they were posing for the picture because he was pinching her, probably explaining her lofty regal look to disguise what she was really feeling!

During the two years of their engagement, she sewed her own trousseau, including not only her own clothes, but also bed linens and towels and tablecloths and napkins needed to start a household. Some of the dishes, especially the fine china tea set and the fish plates and the large blue Wedgewood platter, I believe my father acquired during that time. She told me that she even sewed the clothes for her brothers and sisters in preparation for the wedding. And finally, after two years, my mother and father were married in July of 1909.

And though she left her parents' house, my mother never left off her feelings of filial obligation and responsibilities to her mother and father and to her sister and brothers. I often remember that when any problem arose, they always sent for Eva. When somebody got sick, it was Eva who came and set cups, bahnykes, to relieve the fever. When Julie ran off and joined the army at the age of fourteen, it was Eva who accompanied my grandfather going to "Fawrtslokel," Fort Slocum, to have him discharged and not sent to Panama. When my grandmother got very sick with high blood pressure, she and Ida who was still a child, came to live with us so that my mother could take care of her. When Libeh's husband, my uncle Looyeh, Louis, came down with tuberculosis, Libeh stored her furniture in the parlor of our flat on Alabama Avenue. And much later on, when Libeh and her family decided to return from California, they came to live with us and Louie was even given a paying job working for my father. She was the "tower of strength" for her family and continued to be so all the years of life until she herself lost her health, and my father his capital.

When she became infirm and needed help herself, she never asked those whom she had helped all her life to help her. She did not because she still possessed the one treasure she never lost – her dignity and self-respect to the end of her life, January 1, 1960.