Grandmother

BY SUSAN BERLIN

She clutched at me with cold, thick-nailed fingers as she lay dying in the hospital, tubes stuck in and out of her, begging me to take her home because she was afraid. My grandmother was born in a village which had not changed since the fifteenth century. She grew up only a little more articulate than the geese she drove to the fields. She was taught to take a ritual bath; to cook the foods her family had always eaten; to embroider the linens that would be her dowry; and to sound out enough letters to say the women's prayers in the synagogue.

Around her, people married, had children, grew old and died. Her older sister married a young man home on leave from the Czar's army. He went back to his post, and nine months later she died giving birth to a boy. There was no one else to look after the child, so at thirteen my grandmother became his mother. She fed him, took him with her while she guarded the geese, re-cut her brother's clothes to fit him, washed him on Friday nights.

When the child was three and she had turned sixteen, her sister's widower returned to the town. She heard that he had gone to the matchmaker to find a new wife. After Sabbath services were over, she left the women's section and walked boldly into the crowd of men coming out the main door. She fell into step beside him... "I am Sarah, your wife's sister. I have raised your son since he was born. I've come to tell you that you can marry whoever you like, but you won't take your son from me. He is mine." Then she went back among the women.

My grandfather had been in the army long enough to recognize a winning strategy — and besides, my grandmother had blue eyes. They were married in the summer; I don't know whether he had to pay the matchmaker.

You might as well have asked my grandmother if the number seven was red, as ask her if she had a happy marriage; she wouldn't have known what you meant in either case. But she had a child of her own — another son— and then a daughter. Her husband was a clever tailor, and had customers enough to keep them. However, the times were disturbed, and my grandfather brooded.

"There is a report of a terrible pogrom in Poland."

My grandmother was silent.

"The boy does well at school, but so few Jews are permitted into the Gymnasium."

My grandmother kneaded her dough.

"America!"

My grandmother said, "I will not go. My mother is buried here and so I will be. Go! Be a gypsy if you like, follow your will-o'-the-wisp. My father will look after us."

I don't know how long they argued, or whether either of them wanted what they said they wanted. In any case, my grandmother moved back to her father's house with the three children, and my grandfather travelled to a place called Newyork, from where he sent them money. He also sent my grandmother a gold ring.

Everything was placid for four years. Then my great-grandfather died suddenly. My grandmother had no choice: she hired a scribe to write to her husband. Several weeks later, a package arrived: four tickets, steerage, to Newyork.

Some things were simple, some difficult. Her brother took her father's house. There wasn't much to pack, though it was bulky: feather beds, her embroidered linens, the sabbath candlesticks. The oldest child — her sister's boy — had been protected against being drafted into the army: his birth, like that of most oldest sons, had not been registered. Consequently, he would have to travel without a passport. There were ways — agents who arranged such matters, told you where to get off the train, met you at the train station, took you across the border at night. It all took time.

One day the old woman Faigy came to the door. She was the witchwoman; she knew ways to fatten up the consumptive, spells to restore fertility. "My mother was a witchwoman, and she taught me what she knew because I was her eldest daughter. If I had a daughter I would teach her, but I have none. You are going far away. I will teach you what I know so that you can protect your children in America." So my grandmother became a witchwoman.

Finally, it was time to leave. My grandmother's brother hired a wagon-driver to take her, the children, and the featherbeds fifteen kilometers to Bobroisk, where the train stopped. She had never been so far from home. The train had to come an immense distance, and consequently the time of its arrival was uncertain. One made sure to get to the station by Tuesday afternoon, and camped there until the train appeared on Wednesday or Thursday.

My grandmother established her family on two benches. They had brought bread with them, and tea could be bought from the old woman with the samovar. They fell asleep that night watching the stars brighten. My grandmother told me — her voice still filled with the memory of fear — how in the morning she was tempted to abort the journey, afraid of the evil eye: a row of little square houses, facing them across the railroad tracks the night before, had disappeared by morning. She had never seen a freight

Grandmother Riiva Chaiken, with husband, Zalmon Plotkin (seated), son, David Plotkin and Riiva's brother, A. Chaiken (standing) *courtesy* **SUSAN BERLIN**

train. But as there was in fact no way to return, they went on. The train, a great gash of metal and steam and noise, arrived and in a panic she and the children loaded their possessions into the car and then spent indistinguishable days surviving the long passage across the country they had never known and were now leaving. Toward the fifth evening, they arrived at the last station before the border; she had had the name printed, in meaningless Cyrillic letters, on a piece of paper so that she could match them to the sign on the platform.

And there the train left them. It was nearly dark, and they waited for the agent to appear. The few travellers who had got off with them hired carts and drove off. The woman selling tea, the men hauling baggage wagons, finished their work and disappeared. The stationmaster came out on the platform. Yawning, he hung out a red lantern; then he crossed the tracks and went into his house. Time settled in, and the agent did not come. My grandmother, twenty-three years old, stood with her three children among her belongings at night in an unknown place, part way to an unimaginable future.

She thought perhaps she had gotten off a station too soon; she mustn't have matched the letters correctly, and the conductor she had hurriedly consulted didn't care, he would have thought it a joke to put a Jewish woman and her children off at the wrong place. She apportioned the luggage among herself and the children, and led them off along the railroad track that would guide them to the proper station if they followed it long enough.

The children, obedient and frightened, walked quietly, only crying out when they stumbled over the wooden ties. They hadn't gone far when she became aware of a glow of light, and thought the moon must be rising. The ground began to tremble under them, but it was only when she heard the high whine of the train whistle that she realized, and dragged the children off the track. The huge shadow and rush of the train passed them seconds later. Soon after that, shouts came from behind them, blessedly in Yiddish. The agent had belatedly come to collect them.

He led them back into the village, to an inn where they were to be fed and to spend the night, and left them there. A huge dinner was being served — a feast, with a tablecloth and tall candles. They had been cramped on a train for five days eating bread and onions, and they stood there, brought in from the night, watching while others ate meat and potatoes in the glow of candleflames.

After a while, my grandmother walked over to the innkeeper and asked when she and her children would be fed. "Soon, soon, don't worry." She went back to the children standing against the wall. The waiters rushed back and forth, the innkeeper drank with his guests. My grandmother spoke to the innkeeper's wife: "Give me some food for the children, they're hungry." The innkeeper's wife threw her a harried look and turned back to the kitchen. She did not come out.

Suddenly my grandmother had her hand wrapped around the corner of the white tablecloth, and her voice rose above the other voices. "Innkeeper, I want food for me and my children now, or I'll pull the cloth off the table with all the food, and the wine, and the candlesticks. Now!"

The next morning the agent returned, took them over the border into Germany and put them on the train to Bremerhaven. In Bremerhaven they became part of a stream of people drifting in halting stages toward the docks. They gave themselves up to the current, carrying their bundles, clutching the four tickets, trying to imagine a ship.

When they reached the quay, navvies swung them down into small open boats — too small. My grandmother, afraid they wouldn't cross safely, was trying to arrange the bundles to shelter the children on the journey. Suddenly a wall loomed up in front of them and they were made to scramble up a rope-ladder swinging above the open sea. They couldn't see anything beyond the wall, for all she knew they would get to the top and be pitched over to fall headfirst into the black water, she tried to get back down the ladder but they shoved her, and then they were all on the deck, their bundles heaved up after them. It was only after the small boat drew away that she realized the unsteady floor they stood on was part of a ship, that this great barn in the middle of the ocean, the houses of the harbour now far away and very small, was to take them to Newyork.

She had heard stories, even in Pohost, about steerage, and they were not wrong: it was crowded, unclean, with no privacy. The food they had left would not be enough; but they were all sick, so it went to waste anyway. The oldest child, deathly ill, lay on the bunk and didn't move. Finally someone told her there was a doctor on the ship, and in desperation she picked the boy up and carried him to the upper levels, asking in Yiddish and being answered in German, the way to the hospital.

The doctors were strange but gentile, telling her the boy would get better, they wanted to keep him in one of their beds to cure him; she was reluctant to leave him, but the air was so much better, the beds were clean and he was so ill. She went back to the other children. The next day, a woman whose family was quartered in a nearby bunk asked her where her son was and she told her, proud that he was being cared for by real doctors. The woman was horrified: "Don't you know that gentile doctors murder Jewish boys and throw them overboard?"

She ran up the numberless stairways, lost. Too frightened to ask her way, she finally burst into the hospital, past the doctors and into the room where she had left the boy. The bed was empty. She was hysterical, afraid that they would kill her too and the other children, the doctors had to hold her down, and it took her a long time to understand their German. Finally they took her to another room, where the boy was sitting up in bed, already looking healthier. She cried with relief.

The sea turned oily, the fog parted, and the boat edged into the Newyork harbour. After the humiliation and bewilderment of the medical inspection, they were let out onto the dock to look for her husband. The children didn't know him, and it was true he had become a foreigner: his beard was trimmed short, he wore a hat with a brim. He took them in a horse-tram through a city she couldn't have imagined, wouldn't have suspected, didn't believe. She dismissed it from her consciousness, and sat perfectly calm holding the candlesticks.

After a long time, they got off the tram and walked up a high flight of steps, and then another. A door opened and it was her sister-in-law, Dvora, transformed in a silk blouse. They walked into a room with painted walls, gaslights, upholstered furniture. She couldn't focus on anything. There was a big meal, and then a family conference.

Her brother, sitting at the head of the

table, thundered that her husband had been having an affair with a woman who worked in the factory with him. (She didn't know what a factory was, nor an affair.) He would have to break it off before his wife could go back to him, said her brother, and to make sure of this, he was to go to Montreal for a year. "Here are the train tickets. Your wife will stay with us, we'll teach her how to get along in Newyork."

Her husband said nothing, but he took the tickets. Her sister-in-law showed her where she and the children were to sleep, and she spent her first night in Newyork.

When the year was up, her husband returned. By then she had worked in a factory, and she knew what an affair was. They found an apartment with a front room that would be her husband's workshop, a kitchen where cold water ran directly out of the wall into an iron sink, and a bedroom. The children slept in the workshop at night; for three dollars a week, a boarder slept in the kitchen.

It was hard at first. For five years she had needed to consult only herself — and her father, but she had always been his favourite. Now there was her husband to please, the needs of his workshop to be given precedence, the children to be kept silent so as not to bother him. But they all came to know his moods and pleasures, and learned that it was best to accommodate them. A second daughter was born.

The children spoke English in the street now, her husband had customers, and she had mastered the tram system. When she looked up from her work, instead of the muddy yards of her Pohost neighbours, she saw the close brick walls of the next tenement, screened by washtubsful of laundry hung out to dry on the backyard lines. Night and day, she was aware that she was surrounded by the breath of thousands: millions of people, gentile and Jew, who panted and snored and coughed to the left and right of her, above her and below her. Buildings crowded the ground and the skies; people raced among them, making a living doing she knew not what.

As for herself, she cooked the dishes her family had always eaten, washed and ironed the linens that had been her dowry, said the woman's prayer over the candlesticks on Friday night, raised her children. She was determined: she would admit only so much of Newyork into her life.

Other women, in all the tenements on all the streets, also struggled not to submit too much to where they were, especially at times when there was no work, and no money; when a birth was imminent; when a child was ill. At those times, desperate for forms of safety they could recognize, they would knock on her door, make sure her husband wasn't around, and whisper for her to come help them.

Her husband muttered. Although he had cut his beard, and no longer went to synagogue, witching was against the rabbis. If he had dared, he would have forbidden it, but, in fact, he was afraid of women's magic. So my grandmother would go with the women, and cure with witchcraft in Newyork in the 20th century.

"If someone has a stomach ache," she told me, a lifetime later, "you need to buy a loaf of white bread, very fresh and soft. You pull off the crust, and then you roll the inside into a ball. Take it and put it on the person's stomach. Roll it up and down, sideways, all around. After a while, pull the ball of dough apart. Nothing? Roll again. Pull apart again. Sooner or later, you find a long hair in the dough, and this you burn. The hair is the worm that's making the pain.

"Or if a person has a sore that won't heal, you have to wait until someone has died. When they have the body laid out with candles at the four corners, then the person with the sore goes into the room, backward, so they don't look at the corpse, and you pick up the dead person's arm and touch the first finger to the sore. It will heal in a week."

People wrote from Pohost. Troubles continued, pogroms. Sometimes a cousin, sometimes an uncle-in-law wanted to come to America, but didn't have landing-money: $25 for each person. Would my grandfather claim the wife as his sister — it always had to be the wife, to account for the different name — so that they could land without a fee? Yes, he would write back; and he would send the cousin, or the uncle-in-law, a studio photo of his family, stiff cardboard, so that the newcomers would recognize them on the dock. In the photo, they were always dressed up, they looked like aristocrats did back home. They knew how impressed the village would be, and they smiled a little at what had once been their own provincialism.

There was another child, born late and a surprise to them. The little girl was fair and blue-eyed, a laughing child; my grandmother always thought of her as her American child. But in fact, all the children were growing up into Americans, and my grandmother was glad, though terrified of them.

She was afraid of their dreams, of the enormity of their dreams. But she understood that they knew some secret, some American secret, about dreams, and so she would acquiesce to them. It was not good, they told her, to live and sleep in the same room; you had to have one room for the daytime, another for the night. Water could be made to come out of the pipe already hot. Rooms could be kept warm without fire: they moved to an apartment with central heating. My grandmother was appalled: "To pay a dollar for every night we sleep here!"

The oldest boy studied hard, did well at school; he won scholarships, went to university with the gentiles, told her that one day he would buy her a house! The second boy ran in the streets. She didn't know which one of them stoked her fear more.

The oldest girl helped with the house and the cooking and the younger children, all the time whispering to her mother. "There has to be a tablecloth for the table... you mustn't use a cup without a handle... we need a china cabinet for the front room... "

One night in the new apartment, the baby woke with a wild fever. They called a doctor, who said it was diphtheria, accepted his fee, and left.

The child grew worse. My grandmother grimly collected the black candle and the rendered fat, as old Faigy had taught her, and witched for her daughter's life. Her husband turned his back and pretended not to see. The golden American child died.

Afterwards, my uncle — the first son — became an engineer and married a teacher. The second son, who had played hookey from school, made money during the war in textiles. The oldest girl married my father and devoted herself to making an American home. The other sister turned out very beautiful and hysterical and lived on Long Island.

When my grandmother died, they pulled the tubes out and closed her eyelids, and at the funeral the rabbi, who had never known her, uttered sentimentalities. They buried her among a veritable Manhattan of gravestones.

In Pohost, where she had meant to be buried, her mother's grave has long ago disappeared.

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