EXPERIENCES IN COMING TO AMERICA (last chapter, pp. 105-147)
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Part 1 - Crossing Europe

After the death of my parents the idea of coming to America was constantly in my mind because of the education opportunities such a change would offer the younger members of the family.

Father had often spoken of the advantages, educational and otherwise, for young people coming to America. He also prophesied emphatically the coming of bad times for the Jewish People in Russia.¹

My brother Mendel and Abe, who were already in America, wrote frequent encouraging letters urging us to come to America and thus re-unite the family.

[...]

Our uncles and aunts strongly opposed the plan of us going to America. They expressed great anxiety about the breaking up of our home and feared that the younger children might be neglected in the far away, strange, land. Their attitude made it still harder for me to make the decision. There were numerous other complications to consider. Some of us were in poor health and might not pass the strict entrance requirement. [...] But we finally managed to overcome all the drawbacks and the many difficulties and had everything arranged for the trip.

Our uncle Alter had agreed to become the legal trustee of the family, not including myself, as I was not allowed to leave the country unless I paid the fine of three-hundred rubles, as a penalty for Mendell’s absence to leave the country for military service. This was considered a very large sum then [...] So I was faced with the probability of not being able to travel with the rest, as I should have “skip” the country and cross the border by illegal means, and try to join the rest of the family somewhere across the border in Germany.

[...]

After obtaining all the legal papers with Uncle Alter as trustee for the family, we made ready to leave Slutsk.² I was happy in the knowledge that I should be traveling with the family. I next sold our house and disposed of our personal belongings, with the exception of the things that we could take with us to America [...] due to all sorts of legal tangles [...] we were delayed for about six months longer than we anticipated.

From Slutsk we traveled by bus to the nearest railroad station, about six hours ride.³ There we boarded the train and traveled straight through until we crossed over into

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¹ The Boonin siblings left their hometown before the outbreak of the World War I.
² Slutsk is a small town located in present-day Belarus. The region was part of the Russian empire until it declared independency by 1917, when WWI ended.
³ The nearest railroad station was Urech’e, located approximately 18 miles from Slutsk.
Here we were detained twenty-four hours for quarantine or, as it was then called, THE BATH. The men and women were separated and placed in different quarters. Our clothes were fumigated and we were inspected by a doctor [...] We were stationed in a very large, barrack-like, room with all the men.

[...]

From here we traveled by rail to Hamburg where we stopped for four days while we waited for a steamer to cross the English channel to Hill, England. We did not experience any difficulty with the German language and were able to make ourselves understood whenever we tried to buy things etc.

Although we were eager to leave Russia and felt a sense of relief when we had crossed its border, in traveling through [Germany] we felt quite at home. We rode in regular passenger coaches and could purchase tea and other times at the railroad stations in the same manner as all the other passengers. But in Germany we were made to ride in freight cars marked “for immigrants only.” We had to sit on our baggage as there were no benches and no other passenger facilities. From Hamburg, we were made to walk about two miles carrying some of our light luggage with us from the immigrant station to the wharf to get aboard the ship. We were marched in single file together with many women and children. The youngsters continued asking how much farther they would have to walk. Many children had to be carried. I remember having to carry my sister Jean for about a mile. The anxiety of not being told how far we were to walk added much to our discomfort.

We were greatly relieved when we reached our destination and boarded the small steamer which was to take us across the channel. We all felt tired and hungry and ate heartily when the meal was served. The crossing was very rough and we soon got sea sick and regretted that we had eaten the hearty meal as we made quick work of it over the deck’s rail.

We reached Hull, England, and traveled by train to Liverpool. There were obliged to load our own baggage into large express wagons because of a strike of the longshoremen. Some of our baggage was very heavy. We had two large sacks each of which required two men to handle, and also a number of heavy suitcases. We were all taken, together with our baggage, and brought to a poor section of the city and deposited in a large courtyard shaped like a horseshoe with only one large entrance gate. The large yard was paved with cobble stones (sic), the buildings were old and had corrugated iron awnings in front of them, which

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4 In order to get to Hamburg, the family had to pass through present-day Poland, which was previously part of the Russian empire. Due to the distance between Urech’e and Hamburgh (815 miles approximately), it is possible the Boonin family had to take more than one train to get to their destination.

5 Hull is a city located at the northeast of England, in the United Kingdom. The distance from the Port of Hamburg (in Germany) to the Port of Hull is 365 nautical miles. Liverpool is a maritime city located at the northwest of England. The distance from Hull to Liverpool by train is 110 miles approximately.

6 Leon refers to the Liverpool General Transport Strike. In the summer of 1911. Dockers, seamen, railway workers, tram workers united in a major movement to secure improvements in wages, working conditions and trade union recognition which employers, particularly the shipowners, were determined to resist with all means at their disposal. Mulhearn, Tony.” The Liverpool General Transport Strike of 1911.” LSHG Newsletter, 43 (Autumn, 2011) 
gave the whole place a dreary and shabby appearance. Under those awnings they put our baggage and we were placed inside the building. Our beds consisted on iron cots fixed in three tiers, one above the other. The food was also very poor, but we paid little attention to all the inconveniences as we expect to remain there only the customary few days while awaiting the boat. However, we very soon learned that the sailors and longshoremen were on strike and began to get uneasy about the possible delay in our sailing.

There were a couple hundred of us immigrants in the courtyard, the majority of whom were women and children. The men formed a group and managed to locate the office of the ship company, and promptly went there for information regarding our sailing date. The officials of the company at first gave evasive answers, but as we continue to come in groups everyday to bother them, they informed us that we might leave soon, if we were to travel to the port of New York. This we positively refused to do and resolved to remain there until the strike should be over. We feared to go by way of New York as there were more strictly enforced there. I was specially concerned not to have to travel via New York because all of our arrangements with Mendell and Abe and the legal papers prepared by them with Uncle Goldberg, who was to sign our bond as our trustee, all lived in Philadelphia and might not be valid in New York.

We were then slowly beginning to get used to our surroundings and located a Jewish grocer where we bought some food to supplement the poor meals served to us by the company. We also became frequent visitors in a museum of arts and science which we found very interesting. We next discovered a subway which crossed a river and greatly enjoyed the novelty of crossing the river and returning by surface car or ferry boat, as such wonders could hardly be grasped by our small town folks. We experienced the novelty of having to learn the different monetary values. Everywhere people constantly offered to exchange our money for English or American sumplu as a favor or courtesy. But their eagerness put me on guard against them. My brother Sam was very quick to learn the different rates of exchange and could not easily be cheated.

One morning right after our breakfast, six large express wagons with two rough looking express men on each wagon drove into our courtyard, scattered to different sections of the yard, and began loading the people’s belongings onto the wagons. We immediately became suspicious and demanded to know where they were trying to take our luggage. After some difficulty in understanding the English language, we learned that the company had sent them to take our baggage by force, if necessary, in order to force us to agree to it. Their plan was that we would surely follow our precious belongings and this be compelled to agree to it.

[...]

After this incident we were afraid to leave our courtyard, and organized in groups who remained on watch while the rest might be out. However, we were not bothered again.

[Several days later after the incident], we were notified that the strike had been settled, and we were ordered to report to the official doctor for the examination of our eyes, which usually meant that the we were to sail within three days. The eye disease called
-trachoma- was then prevalent and considered contagious, and one with any symptoms of trachoma was barred from entering the country of the United States. **The ship companies were held responsible for passengers who could not pass the entrance examinations and were compelled, by law, to return them to their places of embarkation free for charge.**

This caused the official of the company to be very strict with their examinations. We were all cheered by the good news of our prospective final journey and very soon appeared at the office of the ship company’s doctor for the examination. **Everyone felt in holiday mood as they came out from the office waiving their steamship tickets containing the doctor’s red stamp of approval.**

The **six of us** were in line with the rest shared the happy atmosphere. We were admitted together as a family, but the doctor seems to care little that we remain together as a family, as he examined us all and passed only three of us, stamping only three cards. If I remember correctly, Jan, Jean and Sam were the ones rejected.

**This rejection by the doctor took me completely by surprise because we had seen to it that our eyes were in good condition when we left Slutzk and had twice since been examined and passed by eye doctors (once in Germany and on Entering England).**

[The doctor] was very sympathetic as he listened to my troubles and advised me to take the family to a local eye doctor for examination, and also to get the eye doctor’s personal advice as to what course to follow. The grocer gave me an address and explained me how to get there [...]  

This small incident of the sympathetic grocer and his simple advice can be really appreciated only by those who have at one time or another found themselves stranded in a foreign land, unable to speak a strange language, and faced with the prospect of a possible forced return to a country where they were grossly mis-treated (sic) and abused when they had felt themselves to be well on their way to a place of liberty. [...]  

**We followed our doctor’s instructions and were all shove aboard ship together with the others as the ship company’s doctor could not possibly be very strict because of the great crown, and at last, we found ourselves on board ship and on the last lap of our journey to America.**

We were very happy when the ship raised anchor and got under way.7 We were beginning to settle in our new quarters while all the steerage passengers were excitedly running (sic) about their quarters and on deck making new acquaintances and renewing acquaintances made earlier on the trip.

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7 The family sailed from Liverpool in a Steamer named S.S. Dominion, on September 1, 1911.
Part 2: Coming to the United States

The following day we began to notice the poor food served us and also that many people had brought with them bundles of all kinds of fruits and other edibles to supplement the diet. We had not brought with us anything extra in the way of food because we feared that we might again be rejected and thus prevented from sailing. But our steamer stopped at Cobh, Ireland to take on more passengers. The tender also brought vendors with fruit and bakings to sell. A large crowd -myself among them- flocked to that side of the boat to purchase the precious wares.

The extra delicacies did not last us very long, and we were soon compelled to make the best of the matter and to subsist on the regular ship’s meals. Certain food items, such as sugar and fruits, were served in miserly quantities, and those who were a little slower in their eating habits very often failed to receive their due share. This very soon developed into a rush for the scarce foods, and everyone tried to grab them when served.

This state of affairs put us at a great disadvantage because our family was not used to such rough methods of behavior. We tried to complain, but our difficulty with the language and the general treatment we had been receiving were convincing enough proof that we could not expect much consideration for any improvement in matters.

Most of the young people among the immigrants came from small towns and villages where they lived under very strict moral codes in their social relationships. Boys and girls were kept apart from socializing with each other (with the knowledge of one’s parent) was unthinkable. And the idea of a girl bringing or inviting a “boy” friend to her home was unheard of and would have brought shame to her family.

The young immigrants found themselves on their way to a new home enjoying for the first time complete freedom of action in their relationship with each other. We spent most of our time together on one if the ship’s decks in which only steerage passengers were permitted. At nine o’clock in the evening we would be chased off the deck and ordered to retire. We were not allowed to assemble in any other place on board ship.

The Steamer’s name was DOMINION. It was an old crate. I can still remember how uneasy we all felt as we listened to its squeeky (sic) sound when the ocean became rough and rocked the ship madly. This ship was later sunk by enemy action in World War I.

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8 Cobh is a maritime city located in the county of Cork, Ireland. The distance from Port of Liverpool to Cobh Harbor is approximately 329 nautical miles.
We also had experienced certain difficulties with the children’s eating habits as they had been trained at home to the strict observance of our dietary laws and did not readily take to the lax ways of mixing “milchika and fleishka” (milk and meat products). Jack was especially persistent in not eating at the table without having his cap on at meal time and he followed it through until we arrived at Philadelphia. Leo proved very easy-going and adaptable to prevailing conditions. Jean was rather delicate and required special attention.

[Resnik was] cheerful and in high spirits. But as we neared our destination, I began to notice that his easy-going ways had taken on a more serious turn and that at time he appeared to be worried [...] Resnik’s reference to me that he also might be worried about some involvement with the immigration laws, and I told him that surely with his apparent excellent physic had no cause to worry about being barred from landing in America.

But Resnik reminded me that there were also other restrictions besides having good health and eyes from trachoma. He called my attention to the fact each adult passenger was required to have twenty-five dollars in his possession upon entering America.

[...]

We entered the Delaware River early in the morning and were sailing up it all day. Everyone was on deck and all were in good spirits. The sight of land and the realization that we were, at last, approaching to our goal, served as a tonic to our strained nerves. We were now in a holiday mood and all very talkative. My own knowledge of the geographic location of Philadelphia was very poor and I kept wondering why were travelling so long in sight of land and had not yet reached port. This, together with my subdued anxiety of our approaching final contact with the immigration authorities, somewhat dampened my spirits. However, I concealed my personal feelings and maintained the spirit of the day.

We docked in the late afternoon and the passengers began to dis-embar. Those immigrants with unquestionable entrance requirements were promptly admitted, Resnik was one of these. But others were separated and made to wait, our family was in this group. We were thrilled when we sighted brothers Mendell and Abe accompanied by Uncle Goldberg in the crowd of people who had come to welcome the new arrivals. We were kept at a distance from them and were barred by a glass partition and not permitted to communicate with them.

[...]

But very soon we learned that our monetary expectation and long cherished desire for a speedy reunion with our brothers was to be again delayed temporarily. Because, as soon as darkness fell, the entrance examination were suddenly interrupted, the ship raised anchor, and with all of us on board, left the port, made for the open river, and remained there for the night.

Again we felt greatly disturbed and disappointed. The fact that many of our immigrant passengers were already admitted gave those of us who now remained on board feeling of sadness and jealousy mixed with fear; and no matter how we all tried to maintain our

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9 The distance from Cobh Harbor to the Port of Philadelphia is approximately 3267 nautical miles.
composure, that sullen feeling prevailed. I was especially disturbed at the thought that the
day’s excitement might affect the children’s sleep and cause them to appear tired, and in
particular that their eyes might not be fully rested when confronted with the immigration
examiners.

The next morning our ship again entered the port and resumed the discharge of the
passengers. Together with the other immigrant we were all on deck early. I felt much cheered
as I was contacted by a certain person who introduced himself to me by name and told me that
he was the person delegated by Mendell and Abe. to rehearse with us the full details of the list
of examiner’s questions and answers. The man was very friendly and helpful. [...]  
The personal contact with the man and his assurance that everything would be all right
plus the knowledge that we were now in direct contact with Abe and Mendell, served to
revitalize our hopes and to regain the stability necessary for our final appearance before the
immigration officials.

[...] our turn soon came and we were questioned while still separated from Mendell,
Abe, and Uncle Goldberg. I was spokesman for the family, but each one was individually asked
to state his name and age, and everyone answered in turn.

[...
We dis-embarked at Front and Washington avenues and joined Mendell, Abe, Uncle
Goldberg and Fanny who were awaiting for us.  
After the exchange of greetings we all marched on foot up Washington avenue to Fifth
street, and up Fifth Street to Carpenter Street where Uncle Goldberg and his family lived.
There we spent part of the afternoon and proceeded by street car to our new residence at
Seventh and Snyder Avenues, were brother Abe had his drugstore.

Everything appeared strange in our new environment. However, the many experiences I
had during the trip to America, and the number of stops over we had made in the principal
cities of the different countries we had traversed, served as a kind of introduction and guide
as to what I might expect to find in Philadelphia, and gave me the proper prospective for
judging and evaluating the wonders of an American metropolis.

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10 Leon refers to the Washington Avenue Immigration Station. This port of entry functioned between 1873 and 1915.