

Chapter 3

Over the Border

As Maishele lay on the smelly floor, waiting and waiting for the darkness to thicken, he tried to distract himself from his present predicament by thinking back on the events which had brought him to this moment. He had no notion of what had caused the raid by the Cossacks, but he knew that betrayal was easy: The government spies were everywhere. A whisper, a nod at the wrong moment, and someone would take advantage of the indiscretion and buy a favor from the authorities with his knowledge.

Time passed slowly, and his limbs ached from the cold and the inactivity. The chickens stirred from time to time, and the stench was hideous. He had fallen into an uneasy doze from which he awoke with a cry, but he stifled himself immediately as he came awake. A dark figure stood over him, and a voice he recognized as his mother's whispered, "Maishele, they are here to help you. Come quickly."

She led him hastily out of the chicken coop, across the Sorensons' yard, and into their cellar. A small candle was burning, there was hurried breathing, and as his eyes became accustomed to the light, he saw his mother's anxious face and the face of a strange man. His mother urged him hastily out of his filthy clothes and into his only other clothes, his holiday finery, topping it with the new overcoat which was his pride. As she helped him into his things, his mother spoke to him, softly and urgently. "You will be helped onto a ship—you are going to America. The ship docks in Baltimore. I have put your Uncle Simon Edlavitch's name and address on a paper, in your right-hand jacket pocket. Show the writing to a policeman. In America, my brother Simon once wrote me, a policeman will help you. The policeman will help you to find Uncle Simon. Feel in your left-hand

pocket; there is something to eat. Don't worry, Uncle Simon will know how to send you to your father. Tell Papa and Meyer that we are well, and they should write and let me know when you arrive. Write to me, Maishele. We will be coming to America soon. Go with God's help."

After her convulsive kiss, her arms dragged from him, and the stranger took his hand and they started off. To his amazement, there were a number of dark cloaked figures around the doorway, and whispers of "good luck," and "Go with God." The neighbors vanished into the darkness one by one, and he was on his way.



The journey, laden with anxiety and the fear of discovery, took a path through the woods behind the small *shtetl*. These were the same woods in which he had been playing with his friends, his *chaverim*, only the other day. He knew the fringe of it well, but he and his guide plunged deeper and deeper into the forest, where the slowly rising moon did not cast its light through the overhanging trees.

And then there were more cloaked figures, lined up and waiting. He was placed at the end of the line, and his guide left him standing there and went to confer with a tall, burly man. There seemed to be an argument, carried on in muted tones, and an exchange of money clinking in the dark. His guide returned, and whispered, "Your coat is too light a color; they are afraid that it will be spotted at the border. Give it to me. I'll try to return it when we get across." Shivering with the cold, Maishele took off his coat and gave it to his guide.

Meanwhile, the line of people began to move slowly, each one huddling close to the one ahead, one guiding the other in the dark. There was no voice, only the darkness of shadows moving forward. He felt that the border must be near, by the tenseness of the bodies, and by the actions of his guide, who helped each one with his footing, as they walked through the dried bed of a stream. The going was rough, and a turned stone might bring discovery and disaster.

The line of marchers stopped abruptly, so that he bumped into the man in front of him. The man grabbed him and threw him to the ground. There was complete silence, except for the sharp twitter of a bird, beginning its salute to the new day which was at its dawning. The dark bundles of individuals on the ground began to thin out as, one at a time, they crossed under a barbed wire held over their heads by their guide. The waiting grew excruciating, for he was the last in line to cross. It grew lighter, almost dawn, and thus more dangerous. Finally, he was alone, and it was his turn.

He crawled under the wire, got hurriedly to his feet, and without the time for a backward glance, he ran out of Czarist Russia, onto the free soil of Germany. Over the small hill, still huddling but now more animated, he found the other refugees. Along with them, he lay flat and kissed the ground, then joined them as they recited the prayer praising God for having brought them all safely so far along on their journey. “Imagine,” he would say during the Holocaust years, “I kissed the free soil of Germany.”



Details of the rest of the journey were faint and disjointed in his memory. The men traveled in carts and were brought to a seaport, where he had his first glimpse of the vastness of the ocean. That view made him realize his predicament more than any other thing which had happened up to then. They went aboard a ship and commenced their journey. They were on their way to America, the Golden.

Later, as he told the tales of his journey, he always recalled the loss of his overcoat. He never got it back—it was too new, and therefore too valuable.

The sea voyage was a nightmare. Even when he could borrow a cloak and go out on the deck, the seasickness went with him, and he heaved uncontrollably. He hated the cramped quarters, the misery of the passengers, the illness and the stench, and he could not conquer the seasickness. It

was so severe that, ever after, he suffered from motion sickness; riding in a car, taking a train, and in later years, flying on a plane were acts of heroism for him. We used to tease him and say that even looking at a picture of waves made him seasick, and he would acknowledge it ruefully.



It was on his thirteenth birthday that the boat docked in Baltimore. It was his Bar Mitzvah day. The port was a busy place, with fishing craft, ocean liners, and boats carrying transport and immigrants. On the dock, he saw strange fruits and vegetables being unloaded. The variety and the profusion amazed him. As his feet finally touched land, he was seized with a mad desire for fruit. Fortunately, before he had lost his coat, he had found his mother's few coins twisted into a kerchief and had put them into an inside pocket. He watched as a vendor sliced a juicy pineapple; he paid for it and ate it as he stood there, bewildered by the activity and wondering how he would ever gain the courage to approach a policeman for directions, to find Uncle Simon.

He was spared the necessity for such action. A letter had preceded him, and he found a tall, stately Jew with a long beard staring alternately at him and at a photograph in his hand. The approach was made, identification established, and he was safely encased in Uncle Simon's embrace. "You look like your blessed mother, my sister Leibele—how did you leave her? I would have known you even without the picture. Come, we'll go home." For the first time since the night of the Cossack raid, the boy broke down and cried, tears of sorrow, tears of relief, and tears of overwhelming joy. He was in America, that shining land of his dreams.

Waiting with the horse and carriage near the dock were his Aunt Raisl and several of the small cousins whose names he would have to learn. There was an embrace from the aunt, more tears, and small jokes, and then his uncle picked up the reins and Maishele was off to his new world.