Chapter 4

'I am a Greenhorn'

As they clumped along on their way to his uncle's house, the motion of the horse's rump revived the *mal de mer* which Maishe had nearly forgotten in his excitement. In addition, he was aware of a queasiness resulting from his gluttony of the pineapple, and the soreness of his mouth which had resulted. These physical problems were momentarily shunted aside as he gazed at the bustling city of Baltimore through which they were passing. He felt that he would never be able to find his way through so many streets and side streets. In his *shtetl*, there had been one main road with a few small lanes meandering away from it. He knew the geography of the little place thoroughly, he knew where he could walk and where walking was forbidden. His wildest dreams had not prepared him for the numbers of people, for the size of the city, and for the noise. The horse dung which he saw being swept away from the roads did not surprise him, but he noticed that occasionally small streams of water flowed out of pipes leading from each of the red-fronted brick homes to the gutters, through small curved depressions obviously prepared for them. He had heard that the streets of America were paved—with gold, some had said—but the reality of sidewalks and roads paved with cobblestones or red brick was in itself a great wonder to him. So many streets, so many sidewalks, and all paved!

At home, in the "old country," the houses had been detached, albeit small, and in many instances in poor repair. Here, the houses huddled together, row houses sharing common dividing walls, so that only the corner houses had light from three sides. The front stoops were of white marble, and here and there he saw women scrubbing them industriously. People walking on the streets were well clad, and to his untutored eyes, the men and women possessed an assurance which would seem to come only from rank and wealth. America was certainly a wonderful country.

Once inside his Uncle's house, he was surprised to find that it was small and dark. The elegant marble stoop and the red brick front had promised more. His faith in America was restored, however, when he discovered that the house had running water and an inside toilet located off the kitchen. And his first impression of darkness was dissipated when he walked into the Victorian parlor, with its deep red plush chairs, highly polished table, and the "whatnot" filled with small china ornaments. This room had a window which fronted on the street, and he soon found that there was also a window in the kitchen, which looked out over the "alley."

His two cousins, both girls, shared a bedroom, and his aunt and uncle occupied the only other one. The rooms were reached by a steep flight of stairs which was lighted by a skylight. The stairs went up the middle of the hall, boxlike in their appearance, and they ended in the larger bedroom. The smaller room occupied by the girls could be reached only through the parents' room.

That night, Maishele's first in America, he slept on a cot put up in the kitchen. He slept very little, and was grateful for the inside plumbing, for his indiscretion with the pineapple was exacting its toll.

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It was not until the next day that he discovered that the inside plumbing went only as far as the drain in the front of the house. All of the wastes of each household ran down into the gutters, waiting to be washed away by the drains and then finally to be disposed of by the gutter sweepers in their white coats. The trick for a pedestrian was to move quickly when the water appeared and gushed from the pipes. Maishele adopted the skip-and-hop technique of the Baltimorians while he remained in the city. (It was not until much later that underground sewers were installed on South

Pulaski Street, for I, too, watched in childish wonder, while the drains ran on the streets of Baltimore.)

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Mail communications were sketchy, but it was understood that the boy was to remain in his uncle's household until his father sent enough money for the train ride to Connecticut. A letter had been sent, and the reply was awaited. Meanwhile, he was to earn his room and board by helping in his uncle's shop.

He learned that his uncle was a men's hatter. The felts were imported, and then cut and shaped to order in the shop. Uncle Simon greeted customers, measured their head sizes, took the order, and then turned them over to his one workman for manufacture. It became Maishele's job to sweep the workroom, trim the kerosene lamp which was needed for dark days in the small and dingy shop, and care for his uncle's horse.

This last chore was his nightmare, for he had an ingrained fear of all animals and no understanding of how to deal with a horse. The menial aspects of the work disturbed him, as did the constant busyness, for it gave him no opportunity to explore the city, or to learn the language.

Given his uncertainty concerning the time when his father would send his train fare, it was difficult for him to adjust to his new surroundings. His aunt tried to be kind; she looked after his needs and cooked dishes which he felt called upon to praise. Her cooking, however, was in many ways strange to him, since she had come from Hungary and had learned the recipes there. He was desperately homesick and lay awake long nights thinking of his mother and what she was doing without him. He missed their discussions, and the intellectual interchange with his *chaverim*—his friends—and he looked forward very little to joining his father, whom he scarcely remembered. It was a trying time, one which he rarely discussed in later years.

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One day, he returned to the house from work, and found his aunt excited. A stranger had come and delivered a letter for him. He was to open it immediately. The long-awaited money had come, and the next part of his journey was to commence. His father's message was that he was to come on the train, that when Maishele left Baltimore, the uncle was to send a telegram informing them of the time of the train's arrival, and that he would meet his son at the train station in Berlin. "Get off in Berlin" were the instructions.

It did not occur to him to question anyone about this strange manner of travel, when one left Baltimore to go to New Britain, and was instructed to get off in Berlin. He later joked about his secret fears, and about the trip itself, but at the time his apprehension was very pressing.

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When he told the story of the journey to me, he said, "I thought that this was the most wonderful country in the whole world, and also the friendliest. Uncle Simon had given me one of his own hats, as proper equipment for the train trip. It was not a new hat, but one which Uncle was ready to discard. His head size was larger than mine, so it fitted rather tightly over my ears. A kindly neighbor of theirs who could write English had made a tag for the band of this hat, and I wore it with the sure knowledge that everyone could read the address for which I was headed. It was not until after I reached my father's house that I learned that the tag read, "I AM A GREENHORN. Please HELP me to get to my father, Michael Dunn, who lives in New Britain, Connecticut." Now I had the explanation of why everyone who saw me on the train had smiled at me—I was a greenhorn!"

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When Michael left his wife, Liebele, and their sons in Yanevah to prepare the way for them to come to America, Liebele's brother, Louis Edelson, was already living in Berlin, Connecticut, with his family. He had a brother, Harry, whose wife's name was Sadie. They were childless, and I remember visiting them once in Philadelphia, because Uncle Harry bought Naomi and me a gift of roller skates. Another brother, who also lived in Philadelphia, had a son, Leon, who became a patent attorney. Liebele's sisters married men from Baltimore, one family named Shpritz, one Sonkin, and a third, Kirsch. The Kirsches had a daughter also named Libbie. She and I met at Uncle Louie's farm, when we were youngsters, and we corresponded for some time.

When Michael and his oldest son, Meyer, came to New Britain, his brother-in-law, Louis Edlavitch, gave him a job working on his farm, and for a short time Michael and his son, Meyer lived with the Edlavitch family. By that time, the family had already changed its name to Edelson, which sounded less foreign in America. It is my speculation that many immigrant families shortened or changed their names because they wanted to forget their experiences in the "old country," where anti-Semitism had been a great problem.

Therefore, the Edlavitch family has several names—in some cases the "vitch" was dropped and the English translation "son" was substituted, and in others the suffix was dropped entirely, and the name became "Edlow."

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Maishe's father and brother Meyer were on the train station platform when the train pulled in to Berlin, and to his relief, he recognized both of them. Meyer was already a grown man, clean-shaven and handsome. His father still wore the small beard and mustache of the period; he had piercing black eyes and very dark hair. Meyer's coloring was similar, and they made a sharp contrast with Maishele as they embraced him. Their greeting was warm and affectionate, and he rejoiced in the feeling of having once more come home.

To Maishele's great surprise, he found that his father and brother were living in a house which they had just

A young Morris Dunn, circa 1905.

bought. It was fully furnished and up-to-date, located on Hartford Avenue, which was the heart of the Jewish community. To his delight, he heard that his mother had safely delivered another son, and that the passage money for her and the two younger children was already on its way to Yanevah. This had all come about while Maishe was making the interminable trip from Lithuania to Baltimore, and indeed the baby had been born during the time when his father had been waiting for a trustworthy messenger with whom to send the train fare for Maishele.

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At this time, with his son's assistance, my *zadie*—grandfather—was already selling meat directly from the slaughterhouse to his customers. The sales were made from a small horse-drawn wagon. When he had sold a side of beef, he would sling it over his shoulder and bring it into the customer's shed. (Most of the customers were kosher butchers, which meant that the slaughtering process had to be done under the supervision of a trained man, a *shochet.*) At a later period, Meyer took over the responsibility and brought his brother Eddie into the business.

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After the initial teasing concerning the episode with the sign on his hat, Maishele determined that he would become a good American and lose the title of "greenhorn." He enrolled in a night class and went to school faithfully to learn the language. His mother's words had become a guide for him, and he was anxious to be able to show her his progress, when she was able to travel with the young baby. Although he was an ardent student, he found some of the pronunciations very difficult, and he was never able to completely master a few of the sounds, such as "ch" which he always pronounced "tz."

It was during these months, however, that he met Miss Coholan, who was teaching night school. Miss Coholan took an interest in her students, and we shall see that she had a special role in influencing Maishele to further his education. Her first effort, however, was to translate his name into an acceptable form for an American student. Since it started with the letter "M," she began to call him "Morris" instead of Maishele. He accepted her choice gratefully and retained it throughout his life. He was now Morris Dunn of Hartford Avenue, New Britain, Connecticut, United States of America.