

Chapter 5

The Immigrant Family

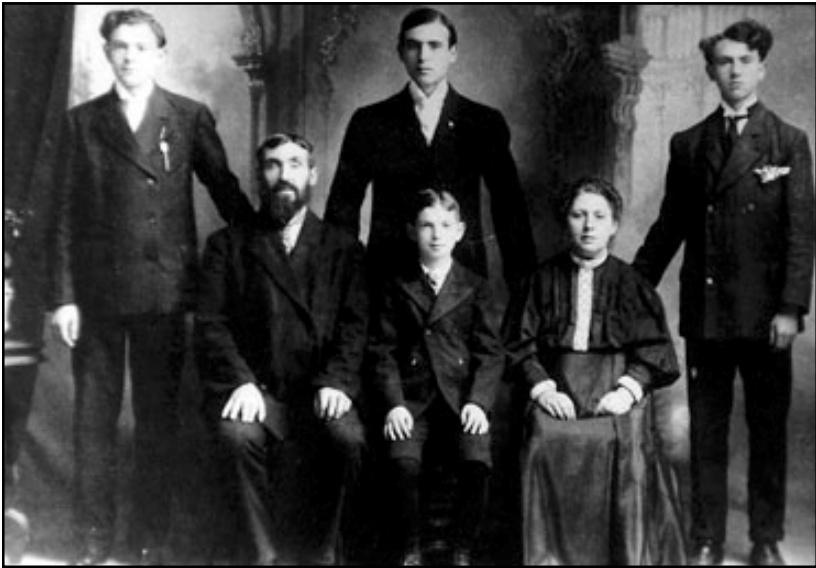
We have a picture of the family, taken a few years after the arrival in America of my grandmother, Leibele Edlavitch Dunn, and her two younger sons. My Bubie was a stern-looking woman, her hair combed carefully back from her brow. She had fine features and a direct gaze which speaks out of the frame even today.

Leibele and the two younger children, Eddie and Max, arrived at the Port of New York, at Ellis Island, where Zadie and the two older boys met them. Maishele remembered the terrible anxiety of those hours while they waited for the immigration papers to be processed and for his mother and the two children to be declared free of disease. Who can retell the emotions of such a reunion, glistening in memory throughout the lifetime of each of these immigrant families? The Dunn family followed the classic pattern, from tears to laughter, then tears and laughter, and then the practical considerations of transportation, arrival, and finally being at home, the family reunited, at rest once more.

The tales of the ships are a chapter not yet told. The stories are of cold, of sickness, of crowding, of lack of food and air. But they also contain stories of neighborliness, of concern, of adults sacrificing for the children, of sharing, of matchmaking, and of loving. They were told and retold in each family and became part of the inner core, the family experience.



It was through his mother's quiet intercession that Maishele was excused from working alongside his father and brother and was sent instead to work at the "Screw Machine," which was the local name for the Corbin Screw and Lock Com-



The Dunn family (top, l-r: Morris, Meyer, Eddie; bottom: Michael, Max, Rosa)

pany. Work began at 7 a.m., and it was strange and tedious, but the pay was as good as any afforded to a 14-year-old boy. It also relieved him of the too-heavy labor of lugging the animal carcasses, which he loathed with the ingrained fastidiousness he inherited from his mother. He hated the smell of the blood-soaked garments which his mother washed with her own inward shrinking from day to day. Despite his loathing, he relieved her at the scrubbing board when he was able to do so, and while he scrubbed, they talked.

The talk was in Yiddish, that tender and exotic tongue which united the Jews of Eastern Europe. It had its ancient overtones of Hebrew, and the mother and son, speaking of the people and their needs, spoke in the tradition of the Jews: concern for all Jews, and the hopes of a time when their ancient homeland would be restored.

“In their search for peace, my son, our people have wandered over the face of the earth. We are truly the Wandering Jews. Until this generation, we have waited and waited for the Messiah. But I believe that the Messiah will only come

when boys like you rise up and demand that the Messiah come! When we have our homeland, then the lives of the Jews in strange lands will be softened. Each of our Gentile neighbors comes from his own homeland to this America, and he is accepted here. We Jews come from lands that are not our own, and we are not accepted in the same way. I do not believe that old story, that Jews are born to suffer. Why us? All we want is peace, to be left alone, to live our lives. Think what we lived through in Russia—and there are Jews all over the world who are living like that still, with fear in their every moment. We must help them—not all of us can come to this blessed land; there is not a place for them all. We must have our homeland.”



Every Thursday night, she and Meyer and Maishele went to the Americanization classes at the local school. She was determined to become a citizen, and to have her sons attain that goal as well. Laboriously they learned to speak English and to read it. Both boys learned quickly, but she had trouble with the language, found the strange inflections difficult, and the memorization of vocabulary even worse. On Wednesday evenings, after supper, the table in the kitchen was cleared, and the homework came out. In her unaccustomed role of student rather than teacher, the mother found pride in the quick minds of her sons, but she was impatient with herself and their efforts to help her. “I know, I know,” she would cry out. “Just give me a minute.”



The communal life of the Jewish people of New Britain centered about the synagogue, as it had done in Europe. The congregation had rented a large room in a house on Willow Street, and it conducted its services and its community life from that room. During the week, the men ran to the synagogue before their day’s labor, said the morning prayers, and then rushed off to work. Only the older men, who could no

longer work, remained behind, studying and talking, discussing a page of the Gemorrah or just gossiping. Because he had to be at work at seven o'clock, Maishele could not attend these morning sessions, but the evening services were different.

In that small community room, the men's talk ranged over the events of the day, the stories from the Yiddish newspapers, highly colored with their own flavor of political outlook—"Is it good for the Jews?" It was there that the endless debates over the course of human events sharpened Maishele's mind and ingrained in him a lifetime habit of reading everything which came into his hands, both in Yiddish and in English. He read the *Jewish Forward*, and he read the *Jewish Day*, late at night, because he waited until the newspapers were abandoned by the older men as they left the synagogue and went to their homes. Since the political bias of each Yiddish newspaper was different, he had much food for thought. He saved his questions for discussion with his mother—stored them up for those precious moments which they found alone together.

It was not until she was gone, and in fact many years after her death, that he began to realize what an extraordinary woman she had been. Although born in a *shtetl*, living under Czarist rule, her mind had remained free to roam the world. Without formal education except the simple learning of letters which was afforded the girls of her generation, she had listened and learned. When he came to her, excited by an idea new to him, she always tempered it with common sense, and at the same time encouraged his creative imagination.



"Imagine a world, Mammele, where everyone is at peace," went the conversation one day.

"The Bible got ahead of you, my son."

"What do you mean, Mammele—the Bible?"

"What do you think will happen in the time of the Messiah?"

“Oh! Oh! I see. Yes, the Messiah . . . But how long do we Jews have to wait for the Messiah?”

“We’ve got to stop waiting, we can no longer wait. We must provide the Messiah. We’ve got to do it ourselves. The Jews must get Palestine returned to them as their homeland.”

“Mammele, the Turks rule Palestine. It is a land of stones. There is no friendly hand for Jews in all the land. The only Jews who live there are old men, waiting to die. What kind of a place is it for Jews?”

“It is a land that once flowed with milk and honey. It is the only homeland for the Jews. There are thousands of Godforsaken places in the world, but this is the only place for the Jewish people. It is ours by right, and some day the world will see that our claim is just.”

“Mammele, there is a letter in the Jewish paper—a rabbi who writes that it is a desecration of God’s name to hope that Jews can change such events before the Messiah comes.”

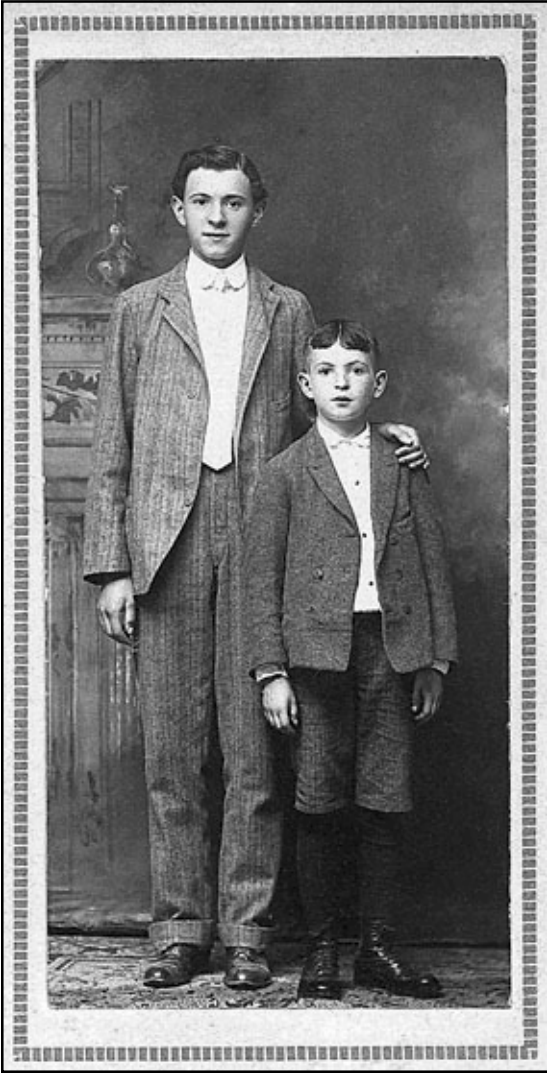
“I can’t believe that God is so impractical, Maishele. Jews need Palestine now, when they are fleeing by the thousands from Russia. Even this blessed land cannot absorb them all.”

And so the dialogue went, as Bubie inspired her son to sharpen his mind and to begin practical measures for regaining Palestine for the Jews. “It is a dream, but we must dream and bring the dream to reality,” she said.



Reality meant the early beginnings of the Zionist movement, proclaimed by Theodor Herzl. It had emerged before Herzl and had been kept alive by the *pogroms* in Russia and the threat to Jewish lives in all of the Russian dominated countries. Many Jews, Maishele amongst them, bore the marks of the Cossacks’ *nagykas*—whips—on their bodies, and their deep kinship with their less fortunate brethren who had not yet been able to come to America made it imperative that they do something to alleviate their suffering.

Disturbed by the news reports, and by the loud discussions he heard so often amongst the men, Maishele tried to



Morris and Max,
circa 1905.

calm troubled waters and at the same time to retain his own equanimity of belief which would satisfy his active mind and his emotional reactions to the threats upon the very lives of his people. New winds were blowing through the Jewish world, and he reached for those ideas which would best satisfy his youthful desire for action, along with his intellectual need for balance and common sense.

It was not considered common sense to be a Zionist. It

was against all common sense. He knew this. But the ideas planted by his mother, and nurtured by his widespread reading, retained their staying power. Before he was sixteen, he was an active Zionist, moving from small beginnings along with other visionaries who saw that they had no other choices.

Morris went from home to home in the local community, explaining and debating his ideas, and attempting to collect funds for the Jewish National Fund and for the Zionist Organization of America. He carried his persuasive words to other small groups of Jews in surrounding communities throughout Connecticut. I recall that in 1965, at the King David Hotel, when a gentleman learned that I was Morris Dunn's daughter, he cried and kissed me as we stood in line to enter the dining room. "Your father came to our house in New London when I was a little boy and explained Zionism to my father. And now look at us! Look at us! Waiting for a table to have dinner in Israel, at the King David Hotel!"