

Chapter 6

Romance

In the summer of 1908, Morris met Rosa. She came as a visitor to his uncle's farm in Berlin, Connecticut, which had become the gathering place for the young people of the family. Uncle Louis had a large family, and their young friends liked the freedom of the piazza which surrounded the farmhouse, the stretches of farmland and woods behind, and the hospitality and joyous abandon which emanated from the whole. In long summer evenings they courted, sang together, played games, and regarded the farm as the focal point of all of their social activities. Rosa came with a friend who was a relative of the family, Dora Edlavitch.

At the time, Rosa Kallinsky was an "old maid" of 22 years. She had earned her own way from the time she left high school at 15. She had worked at trimming women's hats, after a one-year attempt to be a salesgirl in New York. She was petite, with a mass of black curly hair which she wore in the style of the times, piled high on her head, without the necessity for using the "rats" of artificial hair by which many others enhanced their own coiffeurs.



Mother was the oldest daughter of a large family. It was not until the 1930s that we learned that she had not in fact been born in the United States, but was brought here as an infant when her parents immigrated to America from Russia. The feelings and cultural striving of the Jews who came here at the turn of the twentieth century included the strong desire to be 100 percent American. The label of "greenhorn" was an insult to be avoided.

However, as Hitler rose to power in Germany, and rumors of his edicts against the Jews began to filter into our conscious-

ness, many immigrant Jews started to worry about their citizenship status in this country. The laws regarding such status were complicated by a series of rulings made over the passage of years by the U.S. government in regard to how such immigrants attained citizenship. At one time, if the father of a family was naturalized, all of his minor children and his wife were given citizenship. At other times, only a wife was able to attain it. (In the late 1930s, my husband, Sidney, launched a search and found that her citizenship was assured.)

Rosa was able to finish eight grades of school before the family finances required that she go to work. Her brother, Isaac, had been earning “good money”—enough to buy his sister Rosa a sewing machine, as well as bring a piano into the house. Rosa learned to play the piano from Isaac, who was playing the musical accompaniments for the silent movies of the time.



During their visit to the farm, it would appear that Maishele and Rosa had their opportunities to exchange views. One of her earliest letters to him refers to a conversation in which she had expressed her admiration for a man who would be ambitious and willing to rise in society through his own efforts. His letter in reply expressed his loneliness in having no one with whom to share his ambitions, and his hope that he would not disappoint her expectations.

When I see the stereotyped figures of the couple in the horse-drawn carriage, the lady with her plumed hat and long skirts, the gentleman in top hat carelessly holding the reins, I remember always that these are idealized figures. In fact, lovers had their own difficulties as well as their joys. For my parents, money was a limiting factor in their early days, and a train trip to Baltimore from New Britain was a major expedition. Lovers separated by those three hundred miles were lost indeed, and only the postman could keep them together. Separated lovers either developed a real trust in one another, or they drifted apart.

So there are letters, written daily from New Britain to Baltimore, and from Baltimore to New Britain. They remain in a shoebox, stored in my home. They are very private, but in reading them I could trace the growing love and concern which these two people had developed for each other. Finally, I came upon a letter in which Rosa writes.



“Your letter,” it says in essence, “makes me feel that I must tell you more about myself than you already know. I hope that you will understand my story, but at the same time I will not blame you if you do not wish to continue our friendship. You speak in your letter of wondering why I am hesitant to believe all that you are telling me of your affection for me, but I have had a very difficult experience which explains it. Before you and I met, about a year ago, I was engaged, and I broke the engagement. I was not in love with the man, but my parents urged the *shiddach* [betrothal] on me, and I did not want to become an old maid. After we announced our engagement, I discovered that he was a hard drinker, and then he began to borrow money from me and bought liquor with my money. It was a very hard decision for me, but I told him I never wanted to see him again and broke the engagement.”

The reply to this news is not extant. Instead, there was a trip to Baltimore, and the letters which follow deal with plans for a wedding, what relatives to invite, and where to have the ceremony. Maishele had turned into a very persuasive salesman, and their love for each other remained the central core of their life together.



My sister and I never knew about Mother’s broken engagement until we read her letter, preserved with all the others. We did know, however, that Father had owned a horse named Frank, which was a source of private amusement for our parents. I remember asking why the horse had such a pecu-

Thanks to summers on his uncle's farm, Morris met his future bride, Rosa.

Here, circa 1920, is the Dunn family: Morris, Rosa, Libbie, and Naomi.



liar name, and I received a giggle from my mother, a smile from my father, but no explanation. I strongly suspect, however, that the horse's name, and the name of Mother's drunken suitor, were the same.