

# IMMIGRANT GIRL

WITH COMMENTARY AND ORIGINAL DRAWINGS

BY **ROBBIN LÉGÈRE HENDERSON**

\*

AFTERWORD BY **ILEEN A. DEVAULT**



# RADICAL WOMAN

A MEMOIR FROM THE EARLY  
TWENTIETH CENTURY

\*

**MATILDA RABINOWITZ**

**ILR PRESS** • AN IMPRINT OF **CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS**  
ITHACA AND LONDON

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from the publisher. For information, address Cornell  
University Press, Sage House, 512 East State Street,  
Ithaca, New York 14850.  
First published 2017 by Cornell University Press  
Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Names: Rabinowitz, Matilda, 1887–1963, author.  
| Henderson, Robbin, commentator, illustrator. |  
DeVault, Ileen A., writer of afterword.  
Title: Immigrant girl, radical woman : a memoir from  
the early twentieth century / Matilda Rabinowitz ;  
with commentary and original drawings by Robbin  
Légère Henderson ; afterword by Ileen A. DeVault.  
Description: Ithaca : ILR Press, an imprint of Cornell  
University Press, 2017. | Includes bibliographical  
references and index.  
Identifiers: LCCN 2017006130 | ISBN 9781501709845  
(pbk. : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781501709487 (pdf)  
Subjects: LCSH: Rabinowitz, Matilda, 1887–1963. |  
Women in the labor movement—United States—  
Biography. | Women immigrants—United States—  
Biography. | Jewish women—United States—  
Biography. | Labor unions—Organizing—United  
States—History—20th century. | Industrial Workers  
of the World—Biography. | Socialist Party (U.S.)—  
Biography.  
Classification: LCC HD8073.R33 R33 2017 | DDC  
331.88/6092 [B] —dc23  
LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017006130>

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fibers. For further information, visit our website at  
[cornellpress.cornell.edu](http://cornellpress.cornell.edu).

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## 1 THESE WERE PIONEERS, TOO

When my mother left the Ukraine with her five children to join my father in New York it was her third trip away from the small town of Litin where she and many generations of her forebears were born. Her first trip was to her husband's town, Shargorod, about 20 miles away, when she was a young bride. Her second trip was to a nearby town to which the family thought of moving, but didn't. And now to America.

The year was 1900. My father had been gone five years. He had spent a year in London. Then he moved on to New York and what he hoped was more opportunity to earn money and bring his family over. It took four years to scrape together enough to pay down one-half of the fare for one full and four half tickets (the youngest child being only five went free) from Russia to New York by fourth-class railroad and ship steerage. The other half, guaranteed by his lodge members, was to be met in weekly installments out of his future wages.

Naturally my mother was terrified at the prospect of traveling. The whole world was alien, and she was going to an alien land. But go she must. And so the day of departure arrived, a day of mourning. The family, the little town, the associations, for all the poverty and the cruelty of the Pale, had been all she had in life. Here she had been a young bride in a yellow silk dress, standing under the marriage canopy with her handsome groom. Here her children had been born.



Many were the lean years. Great had often been her terror of persecution and pogrom, but it was the only home she knew. The only home we knew.

I was 12, the eldest. And once I, too, had made the journey to Shargorod to see for the first time my paternal grandfather and my step-grandmother. My father's mother died when he was born.

I remember the springless wagon and the clumsy lean horses. Three boards, slightly above the floor of the wagon, were fitted to its sides for seats. There was straw on the floor, and on the seats strips of old gray felt. I was the smallest passenger and in the charge of an adult acquaintance who was traveling somewhere beyond Shargorod. The wagon bumped over the rutty roads at about two miles an hour, and it took almost a day to make the journey.

It was just such a wagon that gathered us up to start the journey to America. There were six of us and two young men who were going the 30 odd miles with us to the nearest railroad at the town of Vinnitsa. Our baggage, packed in sacking, was squeezed into the rear of the wagon and tied with ropes. My mother carried a basket of food, and there was also an especially heavy linen sack with slices of rye bread, soaked in beer and dried. Eaten with tea this would often make a meal on our long journey. There were also goose cracklings, very dry, in an earthen crock wrapped securely in sacking and packed in a basket. How we later appreciated this delicacy when food was scarce on board ship! Lemons were each carefully wrapped in sacking and put in with apples in a coarse linen bag. This was all the food we took; it was only intended to supplement the other food we would get on the way. Little did my mother dream how basic and precious it all would turn out to be, as our journey stretched into many weeks.





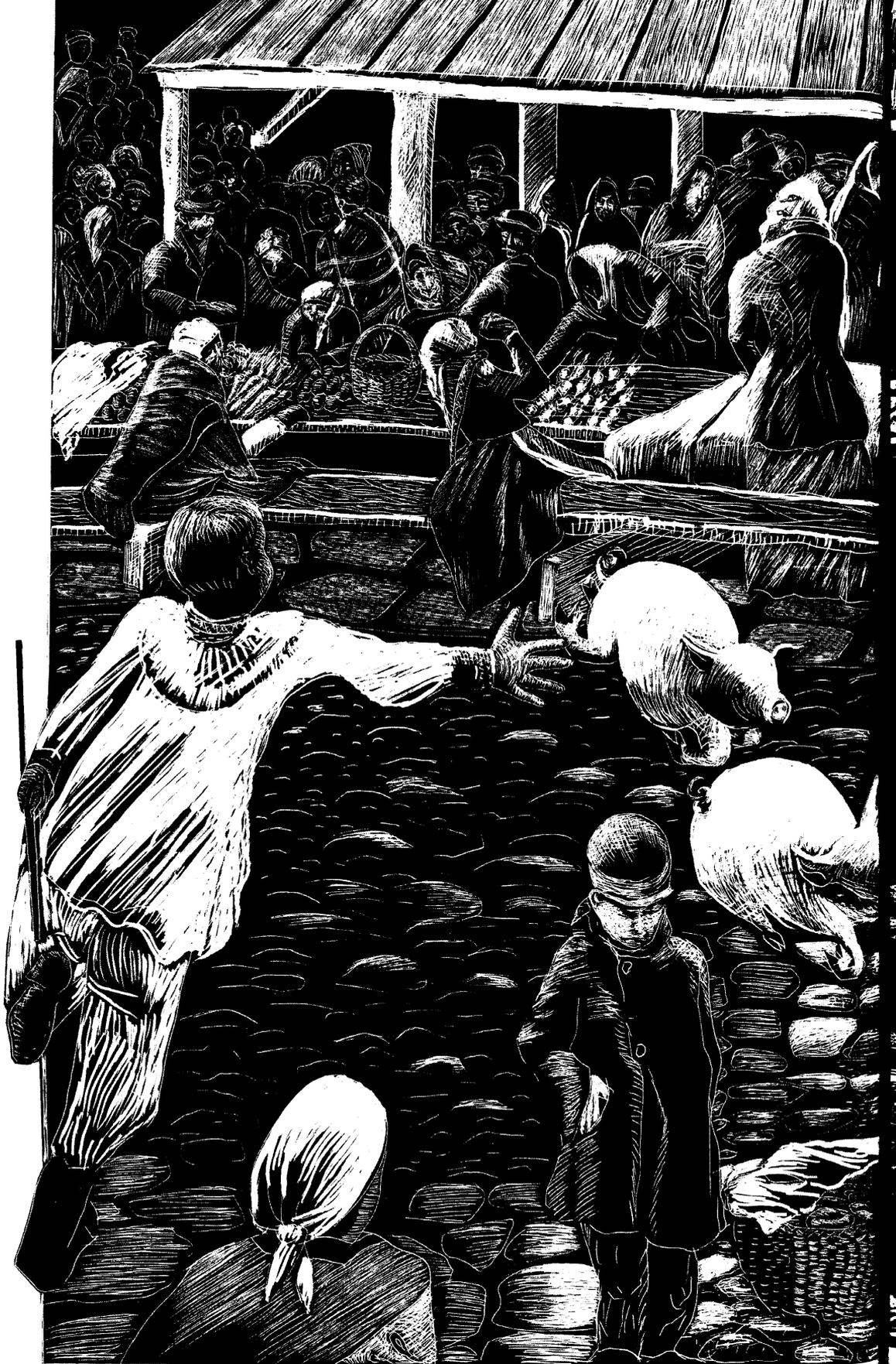
The wagon stood in front of my grandfather's house on what was the main street of the town. The street was wide, unpaved, rutty. In the spring it was a stream of mud, in the summer inches of dust, in the fall mud again, and in the winter covered by snow and sleet. It was lined with ugly one-story wooden houses, set close to each other, without gardens or shade trees. There was a kind of a boardwalk that ran along the front of the houses the length of the street for about 300 yards and then ended abruptly in ragged bushes and weeds. And beyond was the river, a small, sluggish, but rather clear, stream.

The opposite side of the street had fewer houses, unpainted, rickety. The spaces between were wider, and in them were set up crude stalls where women sold flour, herring, dried fish, apples, and other fruit in season. Some of the houses had cellars that were occupied by shoemakers, tinsmiths, coopers, carpenters, and other craftsmen. There was always activity on that side: the tap-tap of the shoemakers; the distinct hammer of the carpenter; the clang of copper and tin.

On warm days the women dozed at their wares. Sometimes there was a sad awakening as a dog snatched a fish, or a pig on the loose would upset a trough. Then several women would jump up and take after the animal. The craftsmen would pop out of their doors in commiseration and sympathy, and I would hear imprecations and doleful comments. "Sad, how sad life is! How hard it is to make a living! So much struggle for a piece of bread!"



My maternal grandparents ran a kind of combination liquor store and tearoom. The large front room of their house contained shelves where the bottled vodka with its government seal was displayed. The stock was meager, and my uncles, young men in their twenties, were always running out for more stock. The tearoom part was in the hands of my grandmother and my two aunts, both younger than their





brothers. They served mostly fish, both hot and cold, and tea. Ordinarily there were rarely more than four people, usually peasants in from the country, eating at the long pine table. But on days when a company of soldiers was going through the town, or when recruiting was going on, the place was full. The liquor could be opened and drunk outside only. But there was quite a bit of swigging going on at the table from a small bottle.

How could that family of seven, all adults except the youngest, live on the small proceeds of the business? There was no other income. My uncles were fairly well educated, but trained for nothing useful. They gave lessons in reading and writing, one in Yiddish, the other in Russian, at 50 kopeks a lesson. There were, however, few lessons. Most educated Jewish young men and women tried to give lessons,





and too few could afford them. One of my aunts, the younger one, not quite twenty, was well versed in Hebrew. Whatever her aspirations were, teaching could not have been one of them. For women did not teach Hebrew in that little town—Russian, yes, but not Hebrew. That was restricted to men, regardless of how ill equipped they may have been for it. There was nothing for women to do outside the home; the scant business of the tearoom was the only work there was. The girls just waited to be married.

My grandfather was short, but well formed, with rather handsome features, prematurely gray, and an almost white beard. Years

later when he came to the United States and I was grown, I remember thinking how much like a Goya portrait he looked. The family name was Schpanier (Spaniards). He seemed to do the least in the way of making a living. He attended to his prayers morning and evening. He slept a lot after the midday dinner and went to bed early after the evening meal. The hours between he just sat—outside in fine weather, inside near the clay stove when it was cold. There were long hours in the synagogue on the Sabbath, which started with sundown Friday and ended with sundown Saturday, and longer hours of sleep. He lived to be 90.

My grandmother was somewhat taller than my grandfather, also rather good-looking, but with a Slavic cast of feature. She was more energetic than my grandfather. With the two girls she did all the managing of the food business: baking all the bread and cooking and salting and freezing of fish. They also made their own clothes, except those for important occasions such as weddings, when more professional service was called for. The girls and my grandmother, too, indeed the whole family was always decently dressed. And for holidays there were usually new outfits for all. And again I wondered in later years how they managed on such pittance of an income.

The Russian Orthodox Church stood opposite my grandfather's house. It was surrounded by a high fence made of birch logs, the bark left natural. It all but hid the structure below the dome, which was painted blue and gold and was topped by three gilded crosses. The yard had trees in it, birch and aspen, and lilac bushes that were lovely in the spring. From the roof of my grandfather's house I could look right into the churchyard and watch the religious processions with the ikons and banners and censors as they went round and round, the priest and acolytes chanting. On the awesome Friday I could see the whole ritual of burying the crucified figure, and I continued to watch in fascination the whole three-day vigil with the chanting and praying. Then early Easter Sunday I could hear the paean and singing of Christ has Risen! Christ has Risen! The peasants would pour in







from the country for the day-long services. There would be no stalls on that day on the street, but the next day would be a busy one of trade, barter, and drinking. Trade for the artisans was brisk as the peasants brought their boots to be mended, their tin samovars to be soldered, their saws and other tools to be sharpened. Easter week was a great trading week in the town. The peasants brought their winter produce to town: homespun, sheepskins, flax, woodenware to

exchange for tea, sugar, hardware, calico, crude oil, whatever they could afford for their primitive household and farm needs. They slept wrapped in their sheepskins in their wagons on the outskirts of the town, and sometimes during the night I could hear their singing. My grandparents' business was more brisk during these days, and my grandmother would be more short-tempered from overwork.

When my father left Russia in search of a living in foreign lands, I was about eight. He slipped out without a passport and made his way to London. There he worked for over a year in a candy factory at a weekly wage of a pound. Out of this he sent something home. How little it must have been! In the United States he worked at various semiskilled jobs in the metal trade in New York. His earnings were still low and the contribution to the family no greater, as he was saving toward the expenses of bringing us over.

We lived on the edge of poverty. Bread, potatoes, cabbage, and beet soup were our staple diet all winter. There was little meat. In the summer there was the variety of fresh vegetables, cucumbers, peas, corn, squash. Cherries and plums were in abundance. Jam was made and plum butter for the winter. Apples and pears came in the fall, and apples lasted all winter; we ate them frozen, as well. It was a meager living.

Our housing as far back as I could remember was poor. My earliest recollection is of a basement apartment, adjacent to an inn. I was probably five then. My father had been an agent for some years for liquor dealers who provisioned the military, but was squeezed out by another. He then engaged in retail beer selling, and the front room of our home was the salesroom. My mother tried to run the business after my father left Russia but found it too strenuous and unsafe for a woman. During the early years of their marriage, however, my parents must have been in better circumstances. For they were able to employ a nurse for the three of us older children. Of course, a peasant nurse in those days in Russia probably received a meager sum—three rubles a month, or something like that, and her room and board. But



even so, it meant that they had been better off at one time. I remember our nurse as a gentle little body who was devoted to us. I still remember some of the songs she sang to us.

Although the family lived in the rear of the salesroom, I do not remember crowding or discomfort. It was after my father left that I was aware of the smallness of our quarters. My mother and the children, now five of us, usually occupied two rented rooms, one larger that was both a living and a sleeping room and a kitchen where cooking and eating and washing would go on during the day and where one of the three boys slept. The two younger boys had a bed in the living room. My mother, my little sister, and I occupied the other bed. It was crowded living, and I resented the lack of privacy as a child and always. It was from this dwelling that we set out for America.

I was sent to school at an early age, officially at seven, as one could not enter before. But from remarks that I recall here and there by members of the family it would seem that I had gone earlier. At any rate, I graduated from what would be the equivalent of an American grade school at 12.

The schools in Russia were government subsidized and controlled,



under the strict supervision of local authorities. There was a small yearly fee, as near as I can remember around six rubles a year. I had the same teacher in the Russian and ancient Slavonic language for the five years that I was at the school. The Slavonic, the language of the Russian Orthodox Church as Latin is of the Catholic Church, was a great bore. It was apparently taught us only for the purpose of reading religious texts. At any rate, I don't remember reading anything else in it. But we had to make a passing grade in it along with the other subjects: history, geography, arithmetic, and penmanship.

The sexes were segregated with a tall board fence between the play yards. The language teacher was also the girls' supervisor. She was a harsh old maid and a bitter anti-Semite. To the usual punishments for infractions imposed on all the Jewish children she added slurs and insults. There was no redress and no alternative to this school. It was only recently that girls were even considered fit to be educated by their families. Traditionally they were maintained in ignorance, since the duties of a wife did not include any necessity for education. It was the only public school, and private tutors were not for people in our economic condition.

There was no high school in Litin, although it was a town of around 10,000 and the county seat. So after graduation there was nothing for me to do but wait until we were ready to leave for America, which was not to be for almost a year. So I read, and I read, and I tried to learn German in a desultory way. I spent much time with a chum, who graduated with me although she was two years older. She was preparing herself to go to the gymnasium in a larger town. We read a lot of poetry together and walked and yearned, as adolescents will. Her father and mother were both hatters who turned out modes for the gentry in their shop at home. I admired their beautiful craft, but my friend and her older sister were bent on intellectual pursuits. The education Jewish children were able to obtain under the restrictions imposed on them—only a small number could enter the gymnasia and fewer still the universities—brought little social or financial gain. They were excluded from civil service, restricted in the professions, and there was too little industry to offer any appreciable opportunities to the six million Jewish subjects of the czar. Petty business and general huckstering was the lot of most. The artisans, even the best, were considered low caste by their brethren, those who tormented their brains in an effort to eke out a living.

There was absolutely nothing in which the children of the petty tradesmen or artisans who had gotten any sort of education could engage in my town. Some few went on to larger places to struggle for more education; a few, not many, learned the trades of their fathers. But most just lived on the parents, as my uncles did, growing into manhood and deteriorating, feeling superior to the tailors and shoemakers and tinsmiths.

The more adventurous emigrated, some to Germany or to England, but mostly to the United States. In the 1880s began that trek of the Russian, Polish, Romanian, and Galician Jews that brought millions out of these benighted lands, that created new ghettos in the large American cities, that enslaved tens of thousands in sweatshops, and that led, three or four decades later, to the unionization of the needle trades and clothing industry.

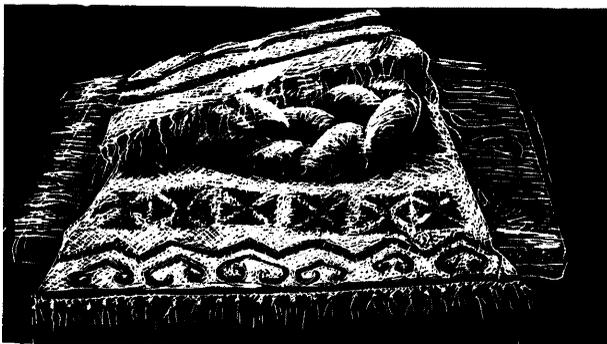


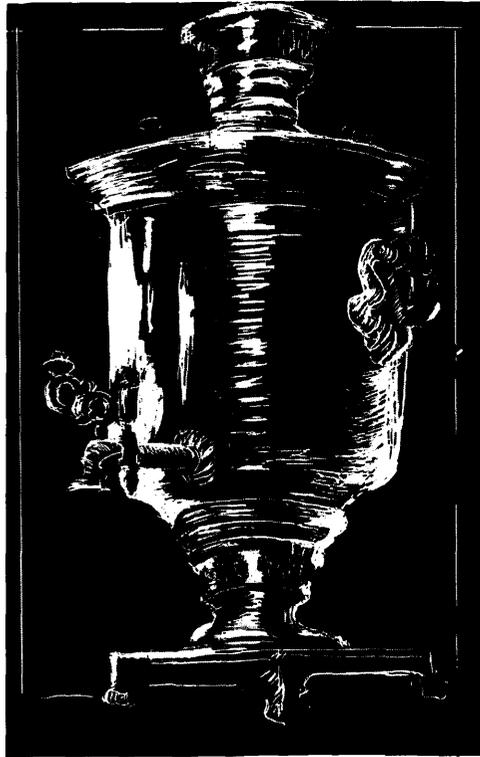


My father came from a family of artisans. His father had been a harness maker, and the uncle in whose home he grew up was a famed coppersmith in his province. As a boy my father wanted to follow the trade of his uncle, but his aunt, who adored him, wanted him to be a Hebrew scholar. The son of her only sister, who had died in childbirth, was just too good to be a craftsman. But for all the interference, my father did gain considerable skill in metalwork, and he had a real appreciation of fine handicraft. The dowry that my mother brought him was in recognition of his Hebrew scholarship, not of his potential as a craftsman. Since he married into a family with a petty liquor business though, my father perforce participated in the business. He never had ambition for it, however, and my mother resented his ineptitude. To the end of his life he remained inept as a businessman.

The government's increasing control of the liquor trade, which had been largely in the hands of Jews living in the Pale, further curtailed my family's means of livelihood. The government required that all liquor must be bottled, and a heavier tax was now imposed on its sale. Naturally sales fell. Little hostelrys, like those of my grandparents, that sold food along with vodka were hard pressed. The struggle to eke out a living became ever more intense. There were two grown sons and two marriageable daughters. The sons looked for wives, hoping to marry into families that would set them up at some means of making a living. The two girls, both very good-looking, and one of them very bright, saw little future for themselves without dowries. My third uncle, only two years older than I, was still in school. Yet the family was decently clad, there was white bread for the Sabbath and special

food and sweetmeats and raisin wine. How was it done from the little profit on the bottled vodka, the jellied fish, which my grandmother prepared and sold, the cheese and chopped liver turnovers that the peasants bought on weekly market days? Millions of Jews lived thus, and even more poorly, under the czars.





My father, with the advent of the liquor monopoly, lost his commission to supply liquor to the military club and left for America sometime in 1895. He had a distant relative in London, and he had no money to go on. So there he remained for a year, cutting candy at a pound a week.

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**MATILDA LOVED TO TELL HER GRANDCHILDREN BED-** time stories; a favorite was about two children, Hannah and Dan, just the ages of my brother Dal and me. The fictional children lived in New Hampshire on a farm—exotic tales for children who were reared in urban Los Angeles. My brother and I liked the stories, especially the winter tales of tapping maple trees for the sweet sap and eating snowballs dredged in their syrup. “Now tell us about when you were a little girl in Russia, Nana,” we begged, but she deflected our curiosity,



preferring to tell us about these happy American children living a healthy, rural life. These stories were based on her memory of the scant year she spent in East Alstead, New Hampshire, following the birth of our mother.

Over the years, I have come to realize that in spite of her childhood curiosity, love of language, and deep affection for the natural world, most of Matilda's memories of her early years involved feelings of anxiety, loss, privation, and alienation. She wanted to spare us sad stories deemed unsuitable bedtime stories for young children. Ever careful to protect our sensitivities, she even changed the lyrics of "Three Blind Mice." The farmer's wife didn't "cut off their tails with a carving knife"; she "cut them some cheese."

When I learned about the May Laws, I began to understand the reasons for the family's increasingly difficult livelihood. Enacted by Czar Alexander III, five years before Matilda was born, these laws designed to regulate the lives of Jews were said to be temporary measures, but they remained in effect for more than thirty years. These provisions affected the family's ability to thrive and gravely restricted their freedom.

The May Laws read as follows:

(1) As a temporary measure, and until a general revision is made of their legal status, it is decreed that the Jews be forbidden to settle anew outside of towns and boroughs, exceptions being admitted only in the case of existing Jewish agricultural colonies.

(2) Temporarily forbidden are the issuing of mortgages and other deeds to Jews, as well as the registration of Jews as lessees of real property situated outside of towns and boroughs; and also the issuing to Jews of powers of attorney to manage and dispose of such real property.

(3) Jews are forbidden to transact business on Sundays and on the principal Christian holy days; the existing regulations concerning the closing of places of business belonging to Christians on such days to apply to Jews also.

(4) The measures laid down in paragraphs 1, 2, and 3 shall apply only to the governments within the Pale of Jewish Settlement.\*

Further laws were enacted the year Matilda was born, restricting education, imposing quotas on Jewish students within the Pale to 10 percent and then to 5 percent outside the Pale. In Moscow and Kiev, the quota was 3 percent. Doctors in the military were restricted to 5 percent, and lawyers needed consent from the minister of justice to practice at the bar. Nevertheless, Jewish men and boys were conscripted into the czar's armies, often by force.

These laws simply codified the Jewish second-class status that had been informally in place since the reign of Catherine the Great. Jews were not allowed into civil service, and their educational opportunities were always limited.

Matilda vividly describes the "Pale [of Settlement]," that area to which Jews were confined under the May Laws; the next generation would have called the area the "shtetl," a word I never heard her use.

The Pale comprised about 20 percent of Imperial Russia. The restrictions on movement and professions open to Jews, on owning land, and on doing business on Christian holy days diminished the ability to survive for a family dependent on serving snacks, tea, and especially liquor to peasants, the military, and townsmen. Then, in 1891, the Jews' right to sell liquor was completely revoked. Four years after this, his ability to provide for his family further restricted, her father was gone, off to England, then to America where—with his lodge\*\* lending him half the money—he eventually saved enough to send for his family.

\*Herman Rosenthal, "May Laws," *Jewish Encyclopedia* online, <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/10508-may-laws>.

\*\*Almost all Jewish men who immigrated in those years joined lodges, or clubs comprised of "landsmen," men from their region. These brotherhoods were informal lending institutions as well as social clubs where politics, religion, and news of the day would be exchanged.

She loved learning—reading, reciting, knowing—but it was difficult for a serious, diligent student in Matilda’s situation. Being Jewish and a girl, no matter how hard she strove, the rewards of a good education would no doubt have been out of reach. It would have been exceptional, unimaginable even, that she would be one of the 3 percent allowed to study in Kiev or Moscow, even had she been a boy. Still she expected to matriculate to the gymnasium, had she stayed in Russia. For a Jewish girl born in a European backwater in the nineteenth century, the May Laws severely limited educational opportunities.

Matilda complained of her mother’s harshness, but the family’s increase nearly every two years, intensifying the crowding and toil of caring for them while also helping with the family’s declining business, undoubtedly was stressful and frightening for Bertha with her husband an unfathomable distance away. Matilda’s beloved father, gentle and tender, was in America saving enough money to bring the family over. Bertha, caring for five young children, and helping in the family business, did not read or write, since girls of her generation and class were not expected to be educated. She was trained to cook, clean, sew, and piously observe Jewish custom and law. She wore the *sheitel*,\* kept a kosher home, observed the dietary restrictions, and took the *mikva*, the monthly ritual bath required of all Jewish women. Her only expectation for her daughter was that she marry well and become a good housekeeper and a mother to as many children as God bestowed on her. Training Matilda in the domestic arts was meant to help achieve that pinnacle of female aspiration. In spite of her training, Matilda never enjoyed cooking, regarding it as a task to be borne and, if possible, shared with others. Affected by literature and history, yearning for beauty and meaning in her life, even though a good housekeeper and an expert needlewoman, Matilda cast her own hopes and dreams outside the sphere of domesticity.

My mother, Vita, told the story of staying alone in a New York

\*A *sheitel* is a wig worn by Orthodox Jewish women who cut or shaved their hair upon marriage.

apartment one cold Friday evening as dusk was drawing near with Matilda's mother, a grandmother she rarely saw. Matilda may have been at work, or out and delayed for some reason. Vita was about five years old. Bertha spoke only Yiddish, which her grandchild didn't understand, but it was getting cold, the sun had set, and she made Vita understand that she wanted her to strike a match for the gas-fired heater. The little girl was shocked and frightened. She had been taught not to play with matches, and she had never lit a fire before. The only thing Bertha really understood about her daughter was that she had turned her back on the faith and traditions of her parents. Since the old woman was prohibited from lighting fires or even turning on a light once the sun set on Sabbath eve, her granddaughter, though a very young child, was designated the "Shabbos goy."\*

Matilda's earliest memories speak of genteel poverty and the alienation suffered by members of a despised minority, but she also took pride in her intellectual accomplishments and felt connection to the sights and sounds of home. She was fascinated with the Easter rituals she watched from the roof of her grandparents' house in the same way her anthropologist grandsons and great-grandson became students of the rites and rituals of the people in the societies they observe. Despite the structural discrimination and the anti-Semitism the family experienced, Matilda showed little judgment of, only interest in, the Christian rituals.

When we children were growing up in Los Angeles, we had a neighbor, Daria Ivanovna, who spoke only Russian. My brother Dal and I were amazed one day to hear Matilda conversing with Daria Ivanovna in a language we had never heard our grandmother use before. What was she saying? "I was speaking to her in Russian," Matilda told us. When our grandmother sang a Russian lullaby to us and later to our younger brothers, the lyrics were always in English.

\*A Shabbos goy was a gentile, usually a boy, hired by Orthodox Jews, to perform tasks forbidden on the Sabbath, like lighting fires or candles (later, turning on electric lights, driving a car, etc.).