

Returning in 1934

I landed in Hamburg when I took a visit back to Latvia in 1934. I came from Le Havre into Hamburg, Germany, where Hitler was in power only a year. From there, I got off, and took the train to Riga. On the way, we passed Lithuania. That's why I had to have four visas. We passed through all this. Then, by train, I came to Latvia. I don't remember how long it took.

In 1934, things had changed. Our town of Rezekne was already sort of shot. There were, maybe, 12,000 people and the Jewish people all left. There was only a few old men. The youngsters all went away. Anybody who can get out went to the big cities. They were all in Riga. Some people had settled in Moscow a lot. It used to be, you weren't allowed to be in Moscow, years ago. But after the Revolution, you could go to Moscow. Who in the world would have dreamt that it will be so bad? When I was there, it was very interesting because from Latvia, to go to Leningrad, that meant you had to have a visa and a passport check. It was already different, two different countries.

When I came to Riga, I saw a lot of people that had lived in our town. See, they all went to the big cities, as much as they could. The government had built some hospitals, which we didn't have it before. They had built some schools, which we didn't have it. But the Jewish people still didn't have no entry. See, the Latvians were anti-Semites. They were oppressed for so long, and yet, when they became independent, they oppressed the Jews just the same. That's the way it is. Like they say, when the English people came to America, they came here because they were oppressed. Then they oppressed the other people.

Sylvia Berman, immigrant

Getting married

When I came here, I was in Philadelphia three months with the whole family—Lena and Edith— They weren't married. Papa was the second one, Lena was the oldest. And Jacov came as a Buchmuz, but he changed his name. And I'll tell you how he changed. Lena worked in a shop, in a shirt factory, and some fellow was sort of sweet on her. So the fellow workers named her—his name was Berman. They used to call her Mrs. Berman. It used to kill her, that they called her that. So when Pop came in, so they said, "Ahh, Berman's brother is here!" So the family thought, "Berman", that's pretty good, so they'll take it.

Jacov was here twice. Didn't like it. He went back, not because he was religious. I think he was very—he couldn't acclimatize himself. You see, a father in Europe is a king. And here he was nothing. The kids made the living. Now, do you know that at our table, we weren't rich or stylish or anything, but the table was set nice. And we would never touch anything before the father ate, before he started. I mean, the respect of the father. He missed it. And beside this, he couldn't make a living. So then, Papa tried to make him a business man. He used to sell pretzels in Gimbels, in the door. They did a lot of things, these immigrants, after all, to make a living. But that's what happens to all the fathers, that they became nothing in America. Because the children were the breadwinners, and they were it!

Now, so Pop came here and we got married. And we went to live in Houtzdale. Houtzdale, there is a place with flies and with cows, the whole population was very funny. I'll tell you why Houtzdale. At that time he was already a good watchmaker and he had a good job, and he could decorate windows. He could do a lot of things, I mean, Pop could do a lot of things that you wouldn't expect

him to. So, the reason why we went to Houtzdale, he asked the salesmen there, the wholesalers, if they know of a place where he can go, in a small town because I am coming, and get married. And he must live in a small town where he can live very thrifty, and he must save up a few dollars for the future. So that's why we lived in Houtzdale. We got married in Altoona. Altoona's a big city—at that time it was about 100,000, and it's still big but people live on the outskirts now, you know. To me it was big, because I love the big city, I came from Riga. So, but Altoona was very big to me after Houtzdale.

And to get to Altoona, I had to meet Papa in Tyrone. You know Tyrone? So when the train came to Tyrone, I couldn't tell the conductor where I'm going, because I said "Tayrone", and he didn't understand me—that *goyisha kopf!* Papa wrote to me in Yiddish, and in Yiddish, it's spelled "tess" "tsvey yudin" "res" "aleph" "nun". I read it "Tayrone". It was "Ty"rone. They couldn't understand it. They took me all the way to Harrisburg and there was a fella—they looked in my pocketbook and my bag and couldn't find anything to identify where I want to go. Finally, one fella, the conductor, thought it must be Tyrone. I says, "Yes, yes, Tyrone." So he took me back with another train that left me off, finally, in Tyrone. And there the train had to come in from Houtzdale and Papa was supposed to be on it to meet me. So, I asked a fella, "Train? Houtzdale?" So the man already understood. He said, "There it is. Right here." So the train came in and Pop came. And we came to Altoona and we got married.

Getting married—at Phillip Troop's in Altoona—they had herring and some schnaps and some cake. That was our wedding. I wore a black dress. That's the only dress I had and it was a pretty dress, because I brought material and, in Philadelphia, some dressmaker made me a dress. The only thing, there was a little pink piping. But he was so sophisticated that he didn't care for anything—who cares! A black dress is fine. Who would ever, what

girl would ever think of getting married in a black dress?! So that's it.

Our first night

The train ride to Houtzdale was something. Oh boy! A little train like you see in the movies. What would you call it? They have, in the old movies, you can see it, the little train. Choo-choo train, but there's a name for it. Well anyway, it's not important. The train ride to Houtzdale—I thought it would shake my guts out. But it was only a few miles.

Then we had dinner at the Luxemburgs. That was the people that Grandpa worked for two years. And the first night in our apartment, that I'll have to tell you. But it wouldn't be so exciting as X-rated. You see a lot more now.

The first night in our apartment was really something—the things that they did. Papa got the apartment and it was three rooms downstairs and two rooms upstairs. So upstairs we didn't do anything, but we bought the furniture—a living room, a kitchen and sort of a dining room, I don't remember already. So what did they do? They hanged the curtains, they helped in the store where he worked. And also the lady for whom he worked. They fixed up the apartment. Everything was beautiful. I walked in, I have a home.

So, then, we had dinner at Mrs. Luxemburg's house. They told me how dinner is served. You know, they serve by passing around. Very formal, to me, anyway. So, we went to bed, and we were just getting cozy—and an alarm clock rings, and we don't know where it is! And the house is dark, and we don't know where the switches are. And the alarm clock kills us! See, they were in the jewelry business and they made an alarm clock ring. Where was the alarm clock? I told you, we had no furniture upstairs. There was a hole where a chimney was supposed to be because there was the hole