

An Oral History of One
Family's Depression

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Age of Depression
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With a thick accent, and a remarkable way of inverting grammatical structures, in some topsy turvy jumble of Russian, Yiddish, Spanish, and English, my grandmother (Bubbe') began to recount her version of our family in the Depression. Forty years of other memories clouded her ability to recall accurately, but what evolved was a fascinating story of a family so poor and new to America, the Depression seemed slight and temporary in comparison with where they had been and what they had experienced. Slowly, the entire family assembled around the kitchen table as they have been doing since their arrival in this country. Together they drew a picture of that era so vivid that I instantly gained new insights as to my roots and "the stuff I was made of".

Born at the ^{end} ~~turn~~ of the ^{19th} century, in small towns along the ^{Dnieper} Neiper River in Russia, both my maternal grandparents were forced to flee their country due to the intensity of the pogroms waged against Jewish citizens. Feigning illness, disguised as women, or merely stowing away, their families began to leave their prosperous land in Russia and begin a long, treacherous flight by foot and ship to America. Many of the brothers, sisters, and relatives who started together died along the way. As both my grandparents were young and strong and more flexible in their ways than the elders they survived. They temporarily abandoned their religious codes concerning the Sabbath, concerning dietary laws, and other observances in order that they might reach a land free from oppression. *Not all were prosperous.*

Anxiously, my grandfather awaited his arrival by ship into New York's port. After many months of hunger, running, and waiting aboard ship they arrived. Due to the severity of the quota systems, and his inability to pay port entrance fees he was sent away from Ellis Island. He found himself safe passage to Cuba, where he remained and worked for two long years. Likewise, my grandmother found herself in Cuba when her father was denied entry into New York due to illness. It was in Cuba they met. Both held numerous jobs in stores and lived with a minimum of discomfort.

In 1924 the family finally secured admission into New York's port of entry. They settled as a large family (4 brothers and 1 sister) in

a number of separate dwellings. Immediately they began planning ways to make enough money to send for the other members of the family still living in Russia. They settled in small apartments in the Bronx's Crotona Park area; an area ladden with immigrant Jews. The family was a close knit one. They did not care too much for politics; they did not care to become rich quick. In Russia they would not serve in the Russian army because it hindered them from practicing Judaism. Their hopes and dreams were simple. They wanted to have enough to eat, have the freedom to live as they believed, and be able to save the rest of the family from the tyranny of the Russian Czar.

My grandfather then began a long train of jobs and occupations that would cause him to worry about meeting ends until the day he died. It would cause him to travel all over the New York area attempting new ways to earn a living. It would cause him to become a stranger to his own family due to the long hard hours he had to put in each day. It would cause his brothers to turn violently "socialist" and hold meetings advocating a more equal distribution of wealth, more government control, stronger unions, stricter wage control and better working conditions.

Grandfather worked as an egg candler examining eggs for blood and vein imperfections within them by the light of a candle. The hours were long, the pay was poor, and the sanitary conditions worse. Often they were told to immerse the eggs in water which made the veins impossible to see and then sell them to the public for consumption. The strain on his eyes was permanent. The long hours, poor pay, and poor conditions caused him to strongly advocate the formation of unions and participate in a number of meetings helping thier formation. Never would he break a strike line of any kind, always would he support the worker in his plight.

On the other hand, his wife was not quite so idealistic. Her concerns were of a much more practical nature. Concerned about her families very survival she broke a strike line during the I.L.G.^{W.}U._n strikes. When my grandfather found out about what she had done he forced her to give up her job immediately.

The Jewish ghetto did not seem to ^{be} awful a place to live. ~~for them.~~ The city excited them. The action and life of the city was a drastic change from the rural farming life they had known. They felt there was opportunity in the city. Most residents were restricted (either by language barriers or skills, or education) in the type of employment they could have but they attempted to keep the ghetto ^a self-contained, self-suffice^{nt} unit. They had their own social clubs to participate in and spent most of their time socializing with their own kind. The synagogue was a strong center of social activity as well as a place of worship. It was the court of law, the charitable organization, the mens' club, the womens' auxiliary, and center of relocation all rolled into one. There were fraternal organizations whose prime duty was to attempt to bring the rest of the family to America and away from slaughter. "The Jews were never on relief", insists my grandmother. "They took care of each other. They helped each other."

This is, of course, not accurate for all Jewish families

After his job as an egg candler, grandfather decided his calling was to be a businessman. A Jews' opportunities elsewhere were few, and his family was growing in leaps and bounds. There were many now in America, and more still waiting to recieve money to join them in America. He wanted very much to be his own boss and thought that America was the place it could be done. His brothers had by this time joined the Communist party, but grandfather could not be bothered to join with them. He owed allegiance only to his family and his people, no one else.

Grandmother grew angry and upset because of her husbands' absence as a father. She was left to raise and discipline her children alone. She was left to love and enjoy her children alone. Grandfather would look for business oppotunities all day. He would come in after the family was sleeping and leave long before they awakened. The children almost forgot his existence except for the Sabbath. Then they would have to tiptoe around all afternoon so as not to wake him. Many nights during the week the rest of his family would come over and ask for food or money to tide them over. They would sit around the kitchen table discussing and waiting to be fed. Bubbe' would grow

angry and want more than anything to throw them out of her house, but family bond was of the utmost importance under my grandfather's roof. She had to obey his rules.

Grandfather's desire to have his own business obsessed him. He never care much for school, and disliked factory and labor jobs immensely. He enjoyed being with people and talking to them. A store owner was a position that demanded respect. His father had been a dairy farmer; he had had very little formal schooling other than the essential Jewish education. Finally, in 1928 he borrowed some money from the bank and paid a downpayment on his own grocery store. His luck and hard work combined allowed him to prosper. He even managed to send a bit of money back to Europe. Americas' prospects were looking good until the Depression hit with its fullest force.

In 1930 the store was lost; gone bankrupt. There was simply not enough money being made to make ends meet. Times were tight; people stopped buying. Grandfather owed money. All the family remembered the hardship 1930 brought. No longer was there always an overabundance of groceries on the table. Yet, only grandmother held fast to the only American ideal she held any faith in. Her children would not be allowed to work and help support the family, not even parttime. They must attend school! This was their job. They must attend Jewish school as well as public school! They must take piano lessons as well as Jewish school as well as public school! My grandfather was an infuriated angry man in those days. He never put much stock in a lot of schooling, but was forced to comply with my grandmother's demands. Grandmother says she remembers his relatives coming over and threatening her, "You'd better divorce Dave", they'd say "You're no good for him. You'll kill him with hard work. You've got four children, let them help out!" She remembers the constables who would come banging at the door "Your husband owes people money. He'd best pay up quickly. If we find him he's in trouble." She'd "shoo" them all away so that her home would not lose its sense of order. The house must stay clean. The children must stay well fed. Yet, even the children remember this bossy matriarch with a certain amount of distaste.

For awhile Grandpa Dave worked for his brothers who were trying to set up a furniture business, but their business was met with what seemed to be an endless number of failures. Finally he put the downpayment down on another grocery store. In 1936 that store also went bankrupt. He attributes this to the opening of supermarkets. They were becoming so popular the small storeowner could not attempt to cope. The old order was changing drastically. People enjoyed supermarkets that offered a wide variety of produce at an inexpensive prices. People were in a rush for what food they could afford to buy. Prepackaging and preprocessing were becoming the American way of life. Once again relatives bailed grandfather out of debt so that his family might enjoy a nights peace without the constables banging on the door to awaken them.

It seems that those in the Jewish ghetto can hardly remember the W.P.A., the C.C.C., the N.R.A., or any other major program of the New Deal. It seems they didn't feel it was the governments responsibility to help them out. (Although they had heard of the programs none affected them directly). They had made a commitment to help their own people by looking after one another. Relief might have been a good thing for the rest of the country, but they wanted no part of it. They would take no charity except from their own. They were proud to be Americans. In comparison with life in Russia the Depression was just "another hard time". They were used to suffering.

They may not have been affected with

Never did they trust the banking system in America. Furthermore, they had little need for it. I don't believe Grandfather ever envisioned a time that he would have extra money to begin saving. They can remember Roosevelt, and his captivating saint of wife, Eleanor. They remember them as being wonderful people and wonderful leaders. They remember lining the street for hours on the hottest of Bronx days to catch a glimpse of the Roosevelt limosine passing through the street. They remember anxiously awaiting his medical reports and praying for a speedy recovery from that crippling disease. They remember mourning his death as an extreme personal and national loss. Mostly, they remember a man and woman whose charisma and vitality moved an entire

ep.

nation when their spirit had been wiped out from underneath them. A man whose voice soothed them and gave them hope. A man who unlike the Russian Czar or President Hoover seemed genuinely concerned about his people's suffering. A man who took a troubled nation under his wing and gave them a sense of purpose once more.

They remember the Roosevelt Administration and all its good deeds, however they seem to feel particularly untouched by them. Relief and unemployment were never their major concerns. Wages and hour regulations were somewhat more important to them. Yet, they have this ambivalent attitude to the way the New Deal programs specifically affected them. Roosevelt helped the nation; the Jews helped themselves.

Later their love and admiration for Roosevelt would undergo a drastic change. It was not until after his death that the full truth of his foreign policy came out. When Roosevelt's silence and apathy towards the genocide of millions of European Jews became evident his image amongst the Jewish people was drastically altered. No longer was he loved and revered. (He had been cold and callous by refusing immigrants entrance.) Grandmother and Grandfather will not easily forget the number of people who might have lived if Roosevelt had allowed it. By not allowing them into the country, by keeping silent about what was going on he too was a murderer.. Rumors had persisted throughout the tail end of the Roosevelt era concerning conditions in Germany. Yet, no rumor seemed as horrifying as the truth.

By 1938, Grandfather had gone bankrupt with yet another grocery store, this time due to illness and the fact that while he was ill a partner he had thought could be trusted was stealing from him. Grandpa had swallowed a fish bone and needed an operation. Abandoning the idea of grocery stores he moved into the retail textile business, and finally achieved some degree of success at the tail end of the decade. From then until the day he died he would remain in the textile business, locating and relocating his stores throughout the New York City area. He managed to make a modest income from that point on.

At any rate, Grandfather never thought he had it too bad in

This is really a transcription of memory into myth. Events really began about 1940. Persecution shifted before that, and U.S. policy was almost by the time F.D.R. was not really apathetic on this question.

- Jews prevented much immigration

? F.D.R. was the war hero against Nazis or the Jewish population votes for him overwhelmingly in 1946

in America. While he remembered the depression, strikes, and relief, it seemed a far more bearable situation than the pogroms, hunger, poverty, and fear of death they had emigrated from. Things were difficult, but Grandfather perceived that America was in a state of dynamic change. Grandmother knew her four children would someday go to college. They were clean, well behaved, proper children, trained in the strict "old country" fashion. They were good Jewish children who only mingled socially with other Jews. In America they did not have to fear because they practiced their faith.

The memories of those years of struggling, years of bankruptcy, long hours and bare minimums have left their toll in many ways. Grandfather's eyesight grew poorer and poorer. All four children had dental problems due to improper health care. The children remember sleeping four in a bed. They remember being taught to stifle their cries and move quietly and in an adult fashion amidst the serious talk of the grownups assembled at their kitchen table.

All the children knew they had responsibilities. They must all rise above the poverty and unskilled labor of their parents. They must attend college and make something of themselves. They owed this to their parents.

I remember the house where they lived during those years, for they kept it for years more. I remember marvelling at the gas jets that had been transformed into electric outlets, and the steam radiators hissing and dripping away. I remember the ancient radio they listened to night after night. The house was always impeccably clean, but shabby. It was so small I couldn't imagine an entire family living in it. Moreso, I couldn't imagine there ever being any room for the guests they were always feeding.

Grandmother tells me the kitchen was the hub and center of the house. Many a night Grandpa and his brothers would scheme and figure out ways to make ends meet and bring the rest of the family from Russia. The conversation would go on through the night as Grandmother let them "knash" on herring, dark bread, and glasses of

hot tea.

All seem to remeber Fiorello LaGuardia with a great passion. "Now ther's a man that understood the urban situation." They seem to feel he was personally responsible for the cities survival. Grandfather became a U.S. citizen and voted in elections. He would always vote Democratic. Bubbe' is not a citizen of this country to this day. She had only one preoccupation that filled her head day and night.....her childrens' education. Grandpa was too busy to really care for his children. Though he loved them dearly he was distant from them. She was distant in a different way. She pushed them and bullied them to attend classes and do well in school. Both grandparents lived long enough to see all four of their children graduate from college on scholarships. Grandfather knew his children would never have to struggle as he did and felt his job was accomplished.

The children remeber different incidents. They remember Con Edison's lay away plan, which allowed them to purchase a radio. They remeber being isolated from many of their friends because they were not Jewish. They remember feeling like foreigners in the plain clothes and cotton stockings they had to wear. They remember being treated like children for far too long. They remembered having to help out with the myriad of chores at home and still do their schoolwork. Often they wanted to go out and get jobs but it was forbidden. All the children admired the Roosevelts. Roosevelt elected women to important positions and this enthralled the three daughters. The girls can remember wanting to be social workers.

The Depression years most certainly helped reshape their lives. The family had barely begun to figure America out when the Depression struck. Most important to the Jewish ghetto were bills like the Wagner Act. They were bright enough to understand they were living through a period in American history that was rapidly rearranging and redefining. Although much of it was incomphrensible to them, they knew it was good. Roosevelt was insuring the country's economic success and making America a country that would adhere to the principles it was founded upon. A country where education was free and public, and where a poor man could stand a chance of being

his own boss someday.

The Depression was not half so difficult as the pogroms. Its impact seems to have been not much more than a minor setback. They never thought the conditions would be permanent. They never lost faith in the ability of the family to survive the Depression, or in the ability of the country to survive the Depression. It was difficult, but mild compared to what they had known. Even the Depression facing Americans today does not disturb them terribly. They believe this one will be worse but not irreversible with the right leadership.

Appendix

Time spent in interviews:

Grandmother: I spent three hours interviewing my grandmother alone. Her speech and accent made some of this rather difficult and tedious. Although she remembered most of the events that took place she did not remember the chronological order. She remembered events occurring in the "old country" more easily than those in this country. It led me to believe that life was so new and shocking in America she never could truly assimilate its complexities. She could remember little anecdotes about how they lived in the house but very little about the Roosevelt Administration. She was not even certain about the details of my grandfather's working history, which led me to believe she was never totally informed of his endeavors.

interesting insight

Uncle Louie: Because of my Grandmother's lack of information concerning anything but the home life I contacted my Grandfather's brother who is currently hospitalized with cancer. Although his illness and discomfort did not allow for a long interview I spoke with him for about 45 minutes. He managed to give me a more realistic idea of my Grandfather's working history. He threw light on the subject of unions, socialism and communism as well as the social organizations the men belonged to. He gave me some further insight into the role of the synagogues for the newly arrived immigrants.

Mom, Aunt Rose, Uncle Irwin, Aunt Bernice:

Luckily I was able to assemble with all four children and gained a great deal of information on the "second generation" felt throughout the Depression. Although they were very young at the time certain images stuck clear in their minds. They remembered the atmosphere of the house and the severity of the conditions during the Depression even