

Journey to America

(first place, 2017 AHSGR Storytelling Contest)

By James Spady

When I was in the eighth grade in 1948, I was given an assignment -- Write an essay about someone you admire. That's easy, my grandparents lived next door and I was captivated by Grandfather's story. At 17 years old he journeyed alone from Norka, Russia to Omaha, Nebraska. That was my first attempt to share his story, now repeated here, much as he told it.

By September 1889 I had lost hope. At the end of the year I would be conscripted into the Russian Army. My father Lukjan, had a plan. He explained, "When you were two years old, your grandfather's younger brother moved to America. Pastor Starkel found where his son lives. He wrote him, requesting a letter inviting you to America. With that letter, we may get an exit permit for you."

In October, father and I were summoned by Pastor Starkel, who informed us that he had a ship ticket to America and an \$8.00 train ticket from New York to Omaha. "You have a short time to act", he said. He placed my exit application with my tickets and a letter to the Russian authorities explaining that the required letter from the Spadys in America had not yet arrived.

Pastor Starkel warned of the risk of my traveling alone and winter sea travel. He explained, "You will have four difficult hurdles. Getting permission to exit Russia, is likely impossible. The second hurdle is the Russian border-- if they determine you are leaving to avoid the army you may be sent home. The third hurdle will be securing ship passage. Last, will be finding your way in America." Pastor rose from his chair, "Lukjan, this is a massive mantle for the shoulder of a seventeen-year-old." Then he prayed, "May the Lord bless you and keep you, May he cause his face to shine on you."

Father spoke some Russian, but not enough to carry on a conversation. He depended on me to handle the discussion as we arrived at the Saratov, government office. I explained to the officer that I had an exit application.

The Magistrate was a pleasant man. I quickly engage him in casual conversation. I showed him my documents which he read carefully. Then looking at me he asked, "where is the letter from your family in America?" I pointed out that Pastor Starkel had addressed that in his letter. He smiled and said, "Adam, you express yourself very well in Russian. Can you read Russian?" I responded, "Yes, I have been reading the poet Zhukovsky, with my Russian teacher." The Magistrate raised his thick eyebrows and smiled approvingly.

The Magistrate was enjoying talking to me. He called his clerk to prepare an exit permit. On the trip home, we laughed in disbelief. But, my stomach hurt realizing the challenge ahead. We went directly to Pastor Starkel. His response, "God has shined his face on you."

The next few days were a bustle of activity. Mother packed a leather knapsack with clothing, my leather cap, and food. Before daylight friends gathered to wish me safe travels as my parents and siblings huddled in our wagon for Saratov.

On our way Mother was sobbing, my brother Ludwig sat close to me. As I was ready to board the train I gave hugs to my parents and each sibling, except Ludwig. He couldn't face saying goodbye. I held my tears until I turned to enter the train.

Enjoying my first train experience, I kept busy visiting with fellow passengers. Days later, arriving at the border, the Russian officer looked intimidating. Unsuccessfully, I tried to engage in small talk. Then, looking at me he said, "You may go." *God's face had shined on me again.* I anticipated the next hurdles to be as easy, but that was not to be.

In Lübeck I had difficulty finding Pastor Starkels' contact. I waited another 13 days before the next ship was to leave. My time in Lubeck was discouraging with endless delays.

The lower deck accommodations on the ship were shameful. We were locked away from the ships' crew and first class passengers. Families huddled together in a large inside room with no windows. Men without families were separated in another room. The odor in our room was foul. It was a frightening experience as I was the youngest among the men. When the weather permitted, I spent as much time as possible outside.

From the railing above me I could see passengers looking down at us. A couple and their daughter greeted me one day. They were from the Netherlands and spoke low German. When I told them I had no food, their daughter dropped an apple. I caught it and ate it including the core, seeds, and stem. The day after Christmas I saw them again. This time their daughter dropped a bread roll and a hard-boiled egg, wishing me happy birthday. I never saw them again.

When we arrived in New York we waited hours for passengers to disembark. We were led from the ship to a nearby building. At an immigration table I was asked to print my name. I spent my first night in America in the train depot.

The interior of the American train was impressive. I had no money for food. That evening a conductor gave me a coconut. I tried to drill a hole in it. The next morning, in the caboose car. I kept smashing it until the water poured out. There was no nut inside! The white fiber seemed uneatable, I threw it away thinking the conductor had played a cruel joke.

I arrived in Omaha at night. The wood-framed station was cold, but there were potbelly stoves where passengers huddled till daylight. Snowflakes were falling as I left the station. As I walked, I showed people my uncle's home address, and they would point the direction. I was excited to meet my distant cousins. I felt relieved that all the hurdles were behind me, unaware the next day I would face a new one.

Reaching the address, I retrieved the letter from Pastor Starkel from my cap. I stood at the door calling. A short woman answered. "I'm from Norka, are you my auntie?" Her eyes widened. In High German, she said, "You can't come in, go to the back door." Coming out of the back door she locked it behind her. "I must find someone to fetch my husband," she said. I asked if I might use the outhouse. She didn't want to approve, or couldn't understand my language. In frustration, I blurted out "fligel, nushnick". She was offended that I spoke to her in Russian.

I shivered in the shelter of the outhouse till she returned. “You wait here, you are so dirty and smelly”, she said. “You may not cross the threshold of my house until you leave all of your clothing outside. Then wrap-up in this blanket and come to the kitchen.” I felt humiliated, but I had no choice but to follow instructions.

In her kitchen, she gave me a bowl of hot porridge, then bread to help me feel satisfied.

When Uncle John arrived, he brought a galvanized tub into the kitchen by the stove. He placed warm water in the tub, for me. The lye soap burned my skin. Uncle John washed my hair and rinsed it with warm water. Then he rubbed foul smelling liniment on my head to kill the lice.

Auntie brought me wool socks and some of Uncle John’s clothing. She instructed me on which coat and boots I should use for going to the outhouse. Late that afternoon, Auntie set the table with abundant food, determined to satisfy my hunger. After the meal, I immediately went to bed for the best sleep in weeks.

When I awakened, it was daylight. Uncle John had left for work. As I rushed downstairs heading for the outhouse, I noted that breakfast was ready. On my way, I saw smoke from a nearby fire pit, and paused to examine it as I returned to the house. My heart dropped! Part of my knapsack, shoes, and cap smoldered in ashes. Anger welded up, as I marched back to the house. “Why didn’t you ask me first? It should have been my decision,” I blurted out to Auntie. “You are treating me like a child. You have destroyed who I am!” I knew, Auntie couldn’t understand a word of what I was saying.

I thanked Auntie for the breakfast, went to my room, and dropped on the bed. The events of the morning overcame me. I sobbed for the first time since leaving Russia. By the time Uncle John returned home, I had sorted out an important lesson, my identity was not vested in my possessions or heritage, but in who I was as a person. I was reminded of Pastor Snarkel’s words, “God has shined his face on you.” Another hurdle was behind me.