

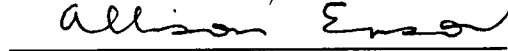
To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Ruth Leah Harp entitled "Sea of Black Hats." I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.



Allen Wier, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and
recommend its acceptance:

Accepted for the Council:



Associate Vice Chancellor and
Dean of The Graduate School

Sea of Black Hats

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Ruth Leah Harp

August 1995

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am indebted to the three wonderful instructors on my Thesis Committee. Allen Wier has been more kind and patient than could be expected. He has given much time to my project and his insight has been invaluable. Richard Kelly has been gracious and optimistic. His encouragement is certainly appreciated. Allison Ensor has lent his knowledge, his ear, and his support over the years. In short, he is a good friend.

My son, Wesley, and my husband, Joel have been incredible. Joel has taken the role of single parent for the past several months and Wesley has spent much time at his "grandparent's" house. Joel and Wesley are the loves of my life.

ABSTRACT

"Sea of Black Hats" is a story based on my grandmother, Beatrice May Rabinowitz. It is about her immigration from White Russia to New York in 1910. The 12 year old protagonist writes in her journal and in letters. She is learning English as the story progresses. The childish spelling and frequent grammatical missteps lessen through time and her voice improves as shown by word choice and spelling. "Sea of Black Hats" speaks to the geographic as well as the psychological isolation and dislocation of immigrants coming to America at the turn of the century.

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INTRODUCTION

Between 1870 and 1914, one-and-a-half million Jews settled into the twenty-block section of New York City's Lower East Side. At that time, it was the highest residential congestion in the world (Kaplan, 1967).

The Lower East Side was divided into five areas with five different groups of Jews in each--Hungarian, Galician, Rumanian, Levantine, and Russian. The Russians came from Poland, Byelorussia, and the Ukraine (Kaplan, 1967). My grandmother came from Byelorussia, the western section of Russia above the Ukraine, also known as White Russia. The protagonist of my story is based on my grandmother and the stories of her immigration. It is amazing that this little woman sailed across the earth to this new world called America.

She came from a *shtetl*, or small village, where family, tradition, centuries-old music, and the synagogue were valued above all else. Sabbath was sacred. The women ran the household; the men ran the synagogue. Because the women shopped in the market square and talked to the peasants and peddlers, they usually had a better command of the language. There are several common Yiddish words in "The Sea of Black Hats." A *mezuzah* is the tiny cast metal parchment holder mounted on the door frame of the Jewish home. It holds twenty-two lines from the Torah. Most of the other Jewish words are in context and are easy to understand. Yiddish, the everyday language of the *shtetl*, was spoken by most Jews of Russia and Central Europe. It is a blend of Medieval German, Slavic, and Hebrew (Hertz, 1926). Yiddish is written

in Hebrew.

My grandmother told me about the crowds and the horrid smells of the Lower East Side. She said these living conditions propelled her father to move up economically and move away. He was a garment laborer, and later became part-owner of a victrola shop. The family eventually moved to a three-bedroom duplex in Brooklyn. There were nine children; my grandmother was the second oldest.

When my grandmother died in 1986, she was eighty-four years old. I never believed that she would die; it seemed the little matriarch (she was four feet, ten inches) with white silky curls and a quick walk was just too stubborn to go. She wore stylish little hats and pointed heels to synagogue. Everyone called her "Busy Bea" because she made it her business to know everyone else's business at Rodef Sholom.

She escaped to America at night with her mother and baby sister, Sadie, a few years before the start of World War One and several years before the Russian Revolution, to reunite with her father and older brother. The men had retreated to New York several months before, to make money to buy passage for the rest of the family.

My grandmother ate her first orange on the ship coming over to America. Wealthy passengers told her she was pretty and gave her ribbons for her hair. When my grandmother was about twelve, a New York City public school teacher replaced my grandmother's name (Rebekah) with the name "Beatrice" because Rebekah was a "greenhorn" name. From then on, my grandmother was known as Beatrice. In this

story it just seemed right to let Rebekah keep her name.

She met Bill Rabinowitz in New York and they moved to Johnstown, Pennsylvania where they raised three children. Their first child, Seymour, was my father.

After the horror of Russia, Johnstown was a safe haven for my grandmother and her family. Peoples with various ethnic heritage socialized easily in this mostly blue-collar town. Together, Catholics and Jews attended Baptisms and Bar Mitzvahs. The Catholic church sponsored lively Sunday afternoon "polka picnics" and bingo in the forests or the church halls of various districts and wards. The community at large was welcomed, and did, attend.

In the late 1970's and early 1980's, Johnstown's unemployment rate rose to 27 percent and remained there, the highest in the country, for several years. The Bethlehem Steel Mill (formerly the Cambria Steel Company) was the main industry in town. The city was almost devastated when the mill began closing its doors in the mid-1970's. The third murderous flood to strike Johnstown was in 1977, but the community (with its strong neighborhood groups, and active churches) rallied in this small valley town that lives up to its nickname "The Friendly City."

My thesis is based on my grandmother's escaping White Russia only seven years before the start of the Russian Revolution. She fled to America in 1910. Many others went to Germany--at that time a safe haven for Jews. How could anyone foresee the German death camps--and the recent rise of anti-Semitic activities in the United States?

"Sea of Black Hats" is not just about war. It is about family and friends who are like family. It is about a girl becoming a woman and her fondness for gardens and secret places and animals and books. It is about my grandmother, Rebekah Owens, and how she sailed across the world to make a new life in Johnstown, Pennsylvania.

The Johnstown Historical Society

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April 12, 1984

Dr. Samuel Stein
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Dear Sam,

It was great to see you at Betty's opening at the art center last week. Betty does beautiful work. Ann and I especially like her water colors, and Ann had to have the painting of the children clutching their red and yellow umbrellas at the bus stop in front of Glossers Department Store. What a nice muted effect, the rain-softened background, the little rays of the bright umbrella dots shining through. Of course, we bought it. Do you know which painting I'm referring to? It's the large, gold-framed one near the reception desk.

It is nice to have this memorial to Glossers hanging in our family room. It really is hard to believe the store has been closed now for four years. What a great old place that was, such a big part of my childhood. I

remember that welcoming-hot smell of peanuts hitting me in the face when I descended into the cluttered and noisy basement, filigree iron banisters skirting me into the cellar, hams and cheeses hanging from the ceiling, cranky lady clerks, hands on hips, standing around in clusters, complaining to one another about their husbands and their kids. Did they ever help any of the customers? I don't think so. The mezzanine between the first and second floors, oak cafe tables and white ice cream chairs looking down on sunglasses and pocketbooks. On the little tables, half-dead plastic daisies jumping out of skinny milk glass vases, always tipping over. Sad that such a Johnstown landmark is gone.

But, we've come up with a plan to resurrect Glossers--at least partially, and that's why I'm writing you. Frankie Savatovich has been kicking around the idea of opening a restaurant in the building. Really, he's more than kicked this around, he's applied for a loan on the building, and Mitch Jenkins at Johnstown Bank and Trust says it'll most likely be approved. Frankie tells me his restaurant would be similar to one of those trendy places in Pittsburgh's Shady Side, the second floor for drinks and deserts, the main floor for meals. Lots of plants and low lights and high prices. Sounds good to me, it would be a nice tribute to Glossers.

I think it's great that towns are reviving. We've had this conversation before. More and more people are beginning to appreciate the old foreign district in Johnstown. Just this year the Historic Society has acquired thirty-

five new members. There are just so many great old buildings, and our park, Central Park where our fathers used to feed the pigeons, the elder statesmen of Johnstown holding court every morning. For almost two years, my mother drove Dad to the park to meet his cronies. Though he forgot who his buddies were, he knew he was right where he was supposed to be. Louie Seigel looked after him-- funny to see this pug-faced cigar-smoker leading him around by the hand. They talked horse races right up to the end. At the funeral, Louie told me that he'd visited Dad at Laurel Manor the day before he died, and Dad asked Louie, "What's your line?" I wish I had a dollar for every time I've heard Dad say that. You can't buy such memories at the mall.

The board of the Johnstown Historical Society is having a meeting to talk with Frankie. It will be held next Thursday, April 20, at noon, in the meeting room of the flood museum. Lunch will be included. We want to be sure that he feels supported in his efforts to reopen Glossers. He's even going to call it "Glosser Brothers." We also want to make sure that he will maintain the guidelines necessary to keep the building on the Historic Register. Since you're involved with downtown redevelopment, I'd appreciate your input at this meeting. Let me know if you can come, I hope you can. Please give Betty my regards.

Sincerely yours,

Tom

The Johnstown Historical Society

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September 6, 1986

Dr. Samuel Stein
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Sam,

Our dream of expanding the Johnstown Historical Society's library is becoming reality. Since the "Sixty Minutes" spot about Johnstown aired several months ago, we've become quite a tourist spot. Floods are good business, even if they are history. The money from the tourist trade and a recent large donation from Miriam Glosser has enabled us to expand our library, hire a part-time librarian, and purchase several new books. Thank you for giving me Rose Kaufman's name as a source. She has sent some wonderful material from New York, especially about Ellis Island that is of particular interest to many of us here in this city of diversity. Please visit us and review our new arrivals; the latest book Rose sent, The Statue of Liberty Revisited, arrived just today.

By far the most important addition to our collection are the Rebekah Owens Rabinowitz letters which your uncle generously contributed, and which you have so skillfully organized for us. I realize that you have spent a great deal of time on this project and it is certainly appreciated.

I have written to your Uncle Dovid and invited him to a reception to be held here, in the museum's red room, in three weeks. Enclosed is your and Betty's invitation. We will be celebrating the opening of our new wing and, of course, will showcase your aunt's letters. I will call Dovid next week and try to impress upon him how important his sister's letters are to the city and how much it would mean to us to have him here. Since Loretto is only forty minutes away, I don't think, even at his age, it will be too much of an ordeal for him to get here. I doubt Louis would mind bringing him. If transportation is a problem, any one of us here at the museum would be happy to help.

A few personal asides: Several years ago, Louis helped Frankie Savatovich obtain the extra financing he needed for Glosser Brothers. Although Louis lives in Loretto, he has been most helpful to the Historical Society. And, coincidentally, Frankie told me that his mother, Mary (Pastorek) lived next to the Owens family on Green Street in the early part of the century. Rebekah Owens attended his parents' wedding, and it is recounted in the letters.

Also, I was a football buddy of your Uncle Seymour's in junior high,

and often visited the Rabinowitz house on Chestnut Street. Seymour and I were always stealing soft sugar cookies from one of the flowered tins in the pantry. I can still see that tin, its tiny gold latch, its nicks and shiny scratches. I knew Rebekah Owens Rabinowitz as a mother of a friend, and now, through her writing, I know her as a young lady coming to America. Everyone really does know everyone else here in Johnstown.

Dovid's work in translating the many Hebrew words in the letters (I say "letters" as all-inclusive, of course, this also refers to the journal entries) has been invaluable. Rebekah wrote in English, and through the progression of the letters, her grammar and word choice improve noticeably. Because Dovid corrected some key English words and phrases, her letters are more accessible to the community.

You explained in your introduction that some entries were not dated and that you pieced sections of letters together. The dates you've inferred seem logical. It was a good idea to set these dates apart with italics. As in real life, there's no perfect fit--events occur and we just have to do the best we can; I don't see how you could have done better.

I agree with you, her next-to-the-last, undated entry was one of the most intriguing. This is another good place to use italics. You're right, she seems to be telling in a dream-like way of her sadness of leaving her village and having to make a new life for herself in Johnstown. In those places where you had to fill in blanks, again, you did an excellent job of making

the letters cohesive. Thank you again for all of your hard work.

Sincerely,

Tom

Dearest Bubbie and Zadie,

Today is October five and must leave right away tonight. Must go NOW and wrap the candlesticks, this papers and quill, and mostly my pearl combs. I hope to see you soon in New Yorks. I wish could kiss and I do not want to have to say this goodbye, but there is no to see you. Will writes. I miss already. Please feed yellow dog.

Love, your granddaughter forever,

Rebby

Journal: entry One

on *Plymouth*

October 6, 1910

We stumble through the night forest my chickens call to us sad melody die in cold night. We whisper following stars to Ventspils. Leaves crunch. I feared Sadie wake or Dovid will pull from me. He angel in shadow halo curls. It calms to see Victor in front, round shoulders tight circle Sadie. Moma behind, bundles bend her. The thunderclap whistle of gunshot woman's laughter. Red bird in the brush. Keep moving. I think of how fox's hair grow on his face, his yellow eyes and pale lashes, how mud squeesh on hot days, my cotton skirt brush cool, white roses and purple berrys and her smooth white nails brushing my hot head when I sick. Clouds of mist, throat scratch, I breath quiet. Hugs to Victor at wood edge. I give him Bubbie letter to carry. Farewell. I love. We splash to boat look like tiny nutshell. Victor melt into woods. Victor, farewell.

Is moist dead smell in crowded boat, and must sit bent. Always is wet freeze. I weary but can not eat, the rocky make me ill. I wish to slip into the waves and float away with fish. I tell to myself I a bird, I a fish.

We drift three long days when in the evening silence sudden come a vision, and as if cloud float from sun, I see a white cottige dot with many window, and a wide porch, the floor green, the color of grass, cows and horses chew in field. The house is so bright white, I quick flicker my eyes, and the animals brown against the

soft blue of the sky, the green porch, and the dark green of the field behind. I sleep.

When I awake, I see a dot that is the German port where is ship *Plymouth*. Wood platforms reach out with Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Polish run from the monster of hate. Their rush of purpose give me hope. We slide up moss plank to *Plymouth* below is pieces of life in, cold tickly water. Dovid's scared fingers dig into Moma's neck. I think will not be long to be in America. I am wrong.

Now, now I am here on ship and can only say in my journal goodbyes that could not in Latvia to Bubbie and to Zadie, goodbye to my best, Sara Bella.

October 7, 1910

Dear Victor,

This I dare not send. Is good sail to be with Papa in the land of the free, to see Aunt Gittle and Uncle Morris but to run with hearth still warm--I close my eyes to forget, and sometimes close to remembers the snow drift animal shapes in field Falik kicking the cold starry powder the sun-scent warm alive on pine trees, Sara Bella's green peeling paint barn, Reb Haduska's tall big-door tavern hiding in the bushes.

Captain tell me when a family escapes, neighbors knock in walls and steal wood for fire or take the stone for shelter and seize what is inside, food, clothing, no matter. He say this is desprite time in Russia, people are like rats to vats. I thinks of Yellow Dog. Him hungry and desprite. Have you seen my chickens? Victor, a plank on last step lifts to secret, I bury bones of dead animals and pearl for luck. I wish you could get this letter to know, but am sending wishes with everything in me.

I remembers our long walks making storys about the rich live on square we give them names, Reb Diamond and Rev Ruby Rings. Their grounds covered with full bright lavendar and sun yellow, blood red, the pale half-color of buds bedded with ivy. The bright flowers they die they will come back. Good and bad.

Shara tell me, "Rebby, you a fine lady to rule the men, you lovely and sweet to all, no matter who. Kind good heart. The men will be fighting over you." Her eyes crinkle, and she look direct when she speak, her fuzzy gold ringlets coming

loose from under her hat. Men stare at Shara who wears dresses snug, the fine silks of red and gold rustle when she walks her slow twisty walk. She wears her sideways hats with feathers pointing up to look like a colorful bird.

She asks me to tea when she see me on the square and together we walk the short lane to her house where is the hat sign with a red bird painted on, here womens have their hats made by Shara. Shara's black pointy boots get dusty, but she does not seem to notice, we gossip she hugging to my arm. She has many shoes, and changes her boots when we get to her cottige, slips on pointy-toe satin slippers covered with black shiny beads, says this is the style in Vilna. I wonder where she get this many shoes and how she know about Vilna.

Victor--her shop! There is much to see, too much to remembers. The hats she busy decorating are thrown everywheres, everywheres! This her workroom: slippery-smooth silks and cardinal bright feathers, buttons shiny, others like pearls in all sizes, look like emeralds, rubys, diamonds, silver and gold sparkles. Clouds of fine organdy and soft cotton, pastels of blue, green and pink float near the brilliant-bright stacks of white, red, gold, black velvet folded, melt together in rows on dark wood shelves. There is course netting and downy felt, heavy scratchy wool. I stare long at her clutter. Her looking glass is framed in silver many wealthy women have hold up the glass, hold it up to the sky praying for beauty.

Shara leaves me to boil tea and I walk through maze to the tall mirror near wide front window, sun make reflection of the workroom more brighter. I stare into the mirror. I look away quick, my own secret game and I see blurs of color--

parchment, bird egg blue and white and black. My skin and eyes and hair. I minikin. Loose, tangly straight hair almost to my hips. I need to braid it. My apron is stained, my boots are dull and muddy. I look like a child.

I twist red velvet about my body to pretend a low-cut tight dress slippery and cool against my arms, I am seventeen and go with Yankle, my boyfriend who own a dry good store, his black eyes embrace me only me. I walk twisty and lower my eyes and we smile our secret smile. He hang pearls from my neck (I will keep these safe in my red velvet box from Bubbie) and call me his beauty girl. His Bubbula. My hair is curly and full piled on my head, held by silver combs. I am zoftig, hips wide good hips to hold babies.

I want to again sip fruity sweet tea from cups with tiny pink flowers painted on, the etched silver spoon warm in my hand as I stir. Tea so hot against my mouth, the white cup so thin, is almost to see through. It was to be a lady to drink tea.

I tell her what nobody else knows, that I am reading the Talmud in the secret of my room, is not for girls. Papa give me English book, and he allow me to look at Reb Haduska's picture books of other places, where is men with black skin and ladies with bare breasts hang flat. Men who wear only a rope down there.

Shara wishes she was more smarts. Papa learns American from your father, I think you know this. Shara grow up very poor near Riga, was sold into marriage to a cruel old man now dead. She will not talk about him much. There is a scar shaped like a half moon on her neck, behind her ear which she touches lightly when she talk about him.

She tells me to laugh at Falik when he whispers that I have beautiful hands, to move away when he tries to pet me and to RUN when he tries to be alone.

From her, I learned about men. She whispers, "Married or no, they are lonely for a woman who listens. Many have very odd secrets about what feels good," she look in the distance. "Yes, I am pretty to look at, is one reason the men court me, the truth is I enjoy to listen to them, and know that they have needs-- Rebby, she say, we ALL want to be heard." That why I write to Dear Diary. I DO like Falik and am scared and odd around him, and want him to touch me, Shara say is normal to want, but she and Moma tell me that men will marry only clean girls. Can I be only a little dirty?

Shara confess about her and Mulik the carpenter he sleep with her many nights. His wife, Kriendl, is the daughter of Starpol the shoemaker who give them a fine house near Reb Haduska's inn. Kriendl drinks vodka, her bright red hair looks like fire that jump from her head she go into the night. Falik say that soldiers visit her when Mulik is away and she go in their camp near water edge at Ventspils. Many think Mulik a fool but how can he fight Tsar men?

Evil comes to Beltsy. Before the horror was our bustly market. Coursely-made brown tattery baskets spilling over with red plums and apples and pomegranates, green peppers and beans, blunt-color vegetables the dirty-clean smell of earth. Crates stuffed with hides of colorless colors--black and white and grey. Fur fly like snow. Splintered bins loaded with foods born from the earth or killed by man.

Was the clouds of insects on the hanging, swinging cows. The sweet scent of death. Herds of peoples pushing along the square making dust clouds. I still can hear the roar at the market. Do you remember how was? The Jewish women wearing long dark dresses covered with aprons of pale spun cotton. White *babushkas* and dark shawls hiding their hair and shoulders. For modesty. The bearded merchants in black caftans, squat sweat-stained caps impatiently pushed back on their heads. Clean-shaven pale peasants wearing blousy muslim shirts and faded linen pants, mud-colored suade knee boots.

I miss. Reb Haduska give me these papers bound with red ribbon, and this curly jay feather quill. Is the best could give. His wife died many years ago giving birth to stillborn son. He gives food and toys and warm clothing to whoever needs, both goy and Jew.

Bubbie's pink head shows through threads of white hair she has few teeth and still a lovely smile. She say Shara is the envy of womans, but is sad to say the other womans do not like her because she have big curves. But Bubbie hurt my feeling, orders me to tie up my hair. I look like a wild animal, that Sara Bella is a sweet but ugly little girl who will not marry well, she tells her friend Molly when I " fall off the roof" this how she say I become a woman this I wanted only Moma and Shara to know. Moma proud of me and tell to Bubbie who tell Molly and Molly tells everything to everyone. Bubbie and Molly, neither have feelings for my feelings. Bubbie can be cruel.

Zadie say that I am a little rabbi in costume of a little girl and not bicker with

Bubbe she always wins her battles, it is more important to know WHO to fight than HOW. This goes against all he has told me and makes me angry. Perhaps I am too much like her. Everyone fears Bubbe. I need to sleep.

Rebekah

October 7, 1910

Dear Diary,

I write a long letter to Victor but was really to ME. There was about Shara.

He will not get letter, I dare not send. Did I do wrong to tell about Shara?

October, first week, 1910

At his inn. I hurry to Reb's room hidden behind the kitchen cluttered with heavy glass mugs and white shiny black-rimmed plates, huge platters of food covering the nicked block table pushed against one wall. I cuddle into his fat brown velvet chair in the tiny pale green room. Here secret stacks of books (Hebrew and American) and important-looking papers and maps on narrow pale oak table and I read for as long as I could get away with. I found America on a map, but Reb warn do not talk about this place even with the gold streets. Twenty years past Prezident Grant in a book scream at Russia leaders about May Laws and said to them be fair to Jews.

Reb Haduska's tavern with a great carved front door had windows in the top and through these windows I see men drinking in the front room before I knock. In this parlor farmers and merchants met and even up to the day we leave Beltsy, was where neighbors mix, no matter who. I wonder if the men still meet.

October, 1910

Victor and his mother, the Rebbetzin, her round pink face, her eyes squinty, from a distance she looks square, like tied hay. Rebbetzin look like a pig, act like a angel says many Cossacks hide Jews, gives them food, sneaks them away, these peasants risk their lives. Say is Jews also who turn in other Jews to General Drotzk.

Rabbi Tabaum squints crouched over scrolls, long beard hang. Pinkus the carpenter say Reb Haduska cheat him, Rabbi listen to both and decide Reb fair with rubles. Still, Pinkus is Reb's friend. Reb hands baskets of beets and potatoes to Simma, carpenter's wife, when he see her and their silent tiny baby girl. I see him do this whenever he spy Simma on square.

At High Holy Days, on Erev Shabbos, Rosh Hashana, Yom Kipper families from Yesvah *Shtetl* come to Rabbi Tabum.

Goodnight.

October 8, 1910

Who will give the beggar his two *kopecks*? He depend on me to meet him at the door Friday before darkness before Sabbath. What will happen to him? Nobody know this little dark man in the dirty white caftan, we do not ask his name for respect I think he is from Yesvah. He look at the ground not at my face and I never knew if was shame or respect to not look directly at a woman (me!). Erev Shabbos, the day to feed the begger. Can we simply leave our lives behind ?

Is three days since Moma throw offering of tiny piece of *challah* dough into the oven and pray for the bread to be eaten at Sabbath, only three days since we left *mezuzah* and my red velvet box. Papa sail to America six months ago, seems longer Sadie but a month old.

Peter will marry Mariska he is very tall, has bright yellow hair and sleepy blue eyes, he tell Moma with a grin, that if I was a few years older, and if there was no Mariska, he would marry me. Mariska Usick bounce up our lane early Fridays swinging her stiff scrub brush, bring kosher soap she and Moma scrub fast, dirty stripes on sweaty faces they not notice. Cook chicken Rabbi declare kosher, no blister on the gizzard, clouds escape the hearth. I a cloud.

She bends over table, hangs on to big wood spoon and stir butter and sugar, little bits of white snow sugar fly the sploosh of eggs and the spoon thumps in the deep pale bowl, the bowl used for making cakes. The Friday bowl.

They run all over, is good to see Moma like a girl they tell same storys each

week. Moma asks how are the children she once hugged and can no longer speak with, what is the news? Mariska, aproned in bright blue, no *babushka*, smiles when she talks about Peter and turns red whenever he comes near her.

At Mariska's is her bird-looking moma, all nose, and her papa with big hugs and he rubs his sharp whiskers on my face and calls me Shana Putum, Mariska told him that this is how we say pretty face, she hear Papa call me many times. Moma allow me to eat with them. Mariska knows we eat either milk or meat, not at same meal. They do not have two sets of dishes, but we forget this times. Mariska's moma make *borscht* with sweet cabbage the beets heavy like meat, fat potatoes, rye bread covered with sweet butter. Her papa does not drink vodka but Molly tell Bubbie that all peasants are drunks that beat their wives and kill Jews. Bubbie tell her she just likes to hear herself complaining, and that ALL righteous peoples enter Heaven and she know plenty Jews not so nice.

The day of our escape Peter frowns, talks low at our table with Moma and Mariska. Marisa sobs. They are holding tight to cups of blackberry tea, staring down as if they have forgotten how to drink it. Peter is a cobbler in Starpol's shoe shop. Starpol talk with General Drotzk under the floor where is a hole cut in workroom, they think nobody will hear. Peter puts his ear to a glass over the floor and makes sure nobody catches him spying on the general and Starpol. The general says that Lithuainian troops are forming in Taurage. Leicher the peddler lived in Taurage, escape to Memel, must flee to Beltsy where he believe he will be safe. He wrong. As if the soldiers are following the peddler, Leicher, the hate is spreading to

Latvia, our neighbors waiting for their chance to kill and rob, Peter say these people who have been like family. General Drotzk say the peasants here will help him "clean the village." General Drotzk tell Starnpol to sew many pairs of soldier boots, that the war will make him a rich man.

Bubbie and Zadie, what will happen to them, so old. I visit them everyday and ask for storys. They hold hands and tell about their wedding that they say it was a unite with joy, it made by the matchmaker. They grew up almost as sister and brother in German village far away, before Jews were sent away by edict. Edict sounds like it means, is a sharp hate word. Now Germany is safe and Russia is not. Wanted by NO country.

October 10, 1910

Dear Sara Bella,

I am on ship and will send this when on American land. It is fine thing that we have talked in case it should happen this way with no farewell, but we will always be sisters only seperated by the distance of land and water, space only. Is nothing really. You know where is my secret step, I left your name and with it gold combs and a surprise, I guess that you knew I would leave the combs you love, I hope the other will please you. I know you will follow the plans to look there in case.

Captain Murrell tells me I am lovely with hair like a black bird, my eyes blue like a jay, and he say twinkles. Early mornings I climb the narrow stairway, making clangs that sound scary and hollow. I can not answer why, maybe it is the empty sound that frightens me.

You tease me because I short is hard to climb, for I must stemp hard to reach each steps my feets pinch in button boots. The stairs are like an ant hill with many tiny holes I ask Captain why are these holes.

This what is my mornings with Captain. The life and death smell of fish and seaweed and ocean-warm smell of salt air and sweat mix with hopeful scent of morning. The queer smell of coffee is moss and leaves and darkness, hot cooking hearth smells. The black coffee looks like it smells. The clouds from Captain's mug soft swirl in the wet air. I breath in the new of damp fog and the galls screech in the sky I can not see birds through the fog and this comforts me. Sleepy waves dance in the splashes.

There is flutter of movement in grey sea air of men swooshing mops across the spotty wood-worn floor dot black with age and use. Spits of foam and treebles of water. Elbows poke out of the mist.

Is the square shadow of Captain behind his coffee cloud. He is wrinkled and smiles, his white teeth big. When I float through to him he yells, "Good morning, my pretty little Miss Twinkles." Some mornings he calls me "Burdee."

Sara Bella, to tell you more, on our walk the sun not yet rise this make more private. He ask, "Did you find the rhyme word for orange, Rebekah?" I say, instead, "Oh come, dearest Emma, the roses is full blown, and the rich of Flora are lavish strown, the air all softness, and the chrystal the streams, the west is respently cloath in the beam." Is like like the cottige I see in nutshell boat.

Captain pat my shoulder and say, " America will be your whole new world, Rebby, a world just for you. As for the peoples, good and bad everwheres, no differences about that. Good and bad." I look out at the water look as far as it goes, look and look and look, and once again feel empty.

I tell him all about Papa, as you know, Sara Bella, Papa teached me to read and he give me Hebrew book. What you never know is that he teached me English. I can tell you now. Do you remember our talks with Bubbie, she angry that a girl is not teached as a boy no differ between boy's mind and a girl's mind, she tell Zadie. He tell her she still boss, read or no, she the boss. You remembers all the times we talked to Shara and to Bubbie about this. It makes me angry to think how we are not taught and wonder who can I hate for this because I DO hate! Who do we blame?

I hate a lot of this life, being here, how it is all over world, everthing mixed together.

Captain grip my hand and I think about Victor holding my hand, holding tight to me as we splash into boat at Ventspils. Victor gently lifting me into the boat. I want to cling to Victor, but I must let him go. I want to scream and cry and hold to him, please, I beg you to stay with me, Victor. You my friend and must protect us from the bullets and the baby killers. My loud screams stay in my throat. I do not cry or do not show scared. Victor's sad brown eyes. I look up and see the outline of Captain's lined face, his eyes distant, his thoughts far from mine. I look hard all around me for-- it was as if I was in Ventspils again.

Captain's hands are red and rough and narleed like Zadie's. Captain hold tight, I am glad his hands are old man's hands and that he hold tight and that his hand hurt like whiskers against my skin I know that he will not let go.

There is a great secret room behind our bunks where Captain take me to the giant engine the cogs and wheels go round, machine booms and thunder pounds and my head stab with each turn of wheel. The giant motors sploosh black and wet spitting oil under the machine onto the greasy floor. The hot room feels close with the heavy smell of old grease and sweat and I feel sick to breathe the musty odors and must breath slowly and force myself to think about how the *Phymouth* runs and think is how I have always looked at PEOPLE'S shapes and outlines and colors-- always the outside yet never the real. Through the steam I looked at the *shvartz*a with black skin, the engine, the cogs and wheel go round and round. I was sudden lost to the new around me and feared the new to come.

30

October 10 Night

Dear Papa,

I want you here with me and I love you.

Rebby

October 11, 1910

Today I ate a orange it was give to me by Captain Murrell. He say I must eat each day, and will give to Moma and Dovid and Sadie. I have heard before of a orange from Sara Bella, it unlike I could know from the telling. The orange smells almost like a flower also of the field and outdoors and is sugar and wet.

Captain Murrell tell me what is a poem the best of is "O come, dearest Emma! the Rose is full blown", by John Keats about singing in the night and soft air and clear water. The words match at the end of the line, is rhyme, and he tell me to find words to rhyme with orange. It good to be teached. This is what I have to say, I learn the American words and Captain is watching us. I love you,

October 12, 1910

Many give me candy and oranges and say I have big pretty blue eyes and beautiful black hair and am smart for my age. They ask me to speak and say is delightful. It is good to be told but more good to get candy and oranges I so hungry it burns a hole in my stomach. I hide the food in my apron pocket. I share with Dovid. A lady who also walk in early morning give me a red ribbon, I wear it all the time it makes me like a lady.

Rich passengers stare down at us, some throw sugar cubes and laugh as we race to catch. I hate them, their smiling slit eyes, their red amused faces, the way their boots lace and meets their white stockings, their big stiff sashes and bits of lace that match their gloves and hats and dresses. The worst is the little girls with the giant bows, I want to slap their laughing faces. I want NOT to run to catch sugar, but I will do almost anything for food. There is little black bread and potatoes which Moma say to share. I do not want to share, I hate the others in steerage, I have come so far so quick and have had my life taken, and now to suffer with hunger, is too much to ask. Always I give to my sister and brother, my time, my belongings, now to give to dirty strangers, this is more than I can stand. I can not tell Moma that I am so mad that I must rub my teeth together so that I will not yell out at her.

We live like animals crowded with sickness, the smell of disease sticks to us and the one room we all share is hot like fire. Is typhoid and cholera. Two old people die, one was in steerage. Our beds are built into the sides of the wall, three

high, splintered hard and so narrow that I can not turn. I sleep with Dovid my nose in his curls to breath in the soft new of him.

Yesterday we rush up the anthill steps to skip on the spotty deck and the bright sun hurts my eyes. I take in the newness--the wide straw hats with pink and white flowers piled on top, silver diamond and ruby broaches, gold chains hanging from men's pockets, carved walking sticks and ruffle parasols and shiny long curls with bows and petticoat frocks.

The cherry rail circling the deck is nicked white in splotes and scarred and burned black in specks all over is high up, to my nose, and smells worn, like sweaty hands. We hug to the chipped wood and stare down into the jumps of blue water spattered with brown-dotted oranges and carrots and cabbage leaves and strings of seaweed and swirls of fish. We stare at the sickness, the vomit and waste hooping ringlets like the little girls' hair.

I look up and standing over us is a very plump rouged lady (mother tell me not to say anyone is fat), she whispers through her foam of angry spit that we are children of the devil, to crawl where we belong. I did not think this could happen when I am going to land of the free, not now. I did not tell this to anyone.

What is about Captain is this--he has the face of a young man, but has lines on his face, as if he is squinting or perhaps he has many worries. His hair is the color of wheat, and he is square and short like Papa. There are seven glittery buttons on his jacket one like a bird. Moma tells me that Captain is a mensch, a brave man. When he smile his face is more lined, still, he remembers me of a child.

October 20 entry

Middle of night

English words are written backwards I draw the strange curl letters I am at least doing something to find some order in a world with none. The other times I care for the babies. We sing. Yet they seem almost like they are but one baby who mumble secret speech and cry and giggle together. Ahh-goo. They dance to music I do not hear. In some ways I feel even more alone.

I will be a "hand on deck," Captain say as he show me the men feed the steam machine, the man who cooks, is odd to see a MAN cook. He is small his wet shirt sticks to him, has a round face that is loose and has lines and yellow teeth and I can not say why, but looks like he has lived a troubled life. He stops chopping to speak to us, say to meet the morning in health. There are many who scrub the floor, and some steer *Plymouth*.

Yesterday when I walk on deck, I squint and see the cook man cower in the shadow. He calls to me, Rebbby to come here. His eyes look funny like a cornered rabbit he bends I think he is about to tell me a secret he leans his head against mine and puts his mouth so close I can see in like two rows of yellow corn with black spots and feel his quick breaths like fox panting against my lips and he pull me closer. I know what is and feel sick, queer unreal somehow wild. I did not know him only to see, and I need to escape. I pull loose and run fast to where is my family hear way back in his shadow a animal sound. I will only tell you, Diary, I think

Moma will be angry with me if she knows. I do not know why but I feel I am to blame. I wish I could talk with Shara.

October 21 or 22, 1910

Dear Diary,

I force myself not to swim, time stops. The angry wails of babies and childrens, screams even at their play, the harsh prayers of parents. Two day ago we listen to the strangled last breaths of the little Ukranian boy, Alex, him buried in the sea. We sit in steerage, watch his moma and sisters, none of us can do a thing but watch in quiet. Alex with the sweet little face and the squeeky voice, he run with us but was not Alex at the end. The wails of his family haunt me in the hot night. His quick breaths of panic. These I will never forget. I go up to the deck and the cold rain water on my face is relief.

October 23, 1910

Dear Diary,

Captain has little time for me, only morning. Sadie is red, hot, her skin dry, her eyes distant, and she does not suckle onto Moma. Moma stares in a frightening way I look at her blank face, the stoop shoulders. She is old now. I hate her for us being in this gray mouse hole packed with filth and for Sadie's sickness and for taking away my food. Hate her for taking me from my friends. She acts *mushugana*, crazy and is awful, awful. Forgive me!

I whisper to keep away the black soldiers in the night. I sing about Sara Bella and Chaim and snow shapes and fields. The song is "To Sadie, the littlest potato in the *shtetl*." Dovid sits quietly with Moma.

This was the day-- worry with Sadie, not leave her for one moment. In the night Sadie makes gurgle, her eyes roll back. I jump quick up the clang steps to Captain's room, run as fast as I can. I hold my breath until I reach Captain, he turn Sadie upside down on his arm get her spit out and breathes fast into her mouth and her nose both nose and mouth at the same time, she throw up her arms like she was about to fall. He squirts something from a dark green bottle into her mouth. He tell me to stay with Sadie and to sleep on his bed, he lay on the floor to keep watch on us. But I must return to Moma where I think now, here in the middle of the night, of the horror that turned to good this night. Captain is a mensch.

October 24, 1910

Sadie giggle today when I sing to her about the tiny potato. Eyes white
around edge *

* The remainder of the October 24, 1910 entry was torn from journal and is still
missing.

Samuel Stein, editor.

October 25, 26, or 27, 1910

Dear Victor,

Captain tell me our homes and synagouges taken by Tsar. Little boys on their way to synagouge are beaten by bigger boys. Old men chased in the streets by drunks and trampled to death. The pogroms reach out ugly arms and strangle. Our mind nobody can steal, Zadie say is better to be learned than it is to be king, he mean to say this for boy. This is my problem, it is shaming to be accused of having a head like a boy. Victor, I am talking to you, do you know this?

I miss you.

November 7, 1910

Dear Sara Bella,

We are here! Is like Captain said, a WHOLE NEW WORLD. The first thing I see here is the Model Tea, and it really DOES move without a horse! Is word on door "Tixi" where you climb inside. The box rattles, the horn like a goose and I think I am on a new planet. I can not even think that it would be like is.

We finally in New York and now that I am here, I CAN NOT say that I am comforted by this city. There is SO MUCH I can not begin to make you believe how. But, yes, I can say that I am happy for the changes, very happy. Still, I miss. This letter will be very long to reach you and will be good if it does. I want us to go to the forest. Hurry and come here.

I SAY we should to go into the forest but, Sara Bella, I have not seen any here! Is only buildings and concrete and markets everywhere, everywhere! The crowds make me want to hide.

On the *Plymouth* from all different countries but in the Lower East Side there is thousands of people all Jewish AND from many different countries. Do you remember how Leicher spoke? And how he teached us to say in English, "I am sweet girl?" I understand what the Americans are saying, but are SO many I do not understand, it makes me feel more alone.

This remembers me to the *Plymouth* where the men somehow understood each

others even with differ languages. THEY would gather in groups, all the men, all in hats, no matter from where, and they mumble together and made the decisions for all of us on the ship. All of us in steerage, I mean. Isn't that just like it?-- even in the middle of the ocean we are bossed !

Jews are packed in tenements apartments, many different families in each set of rooms. Is basement, a cold moist room below. Polish, German, and Italians live in many different parts of New York, or they go to states. Jews together like a family and still apart even here in this land of freedom where on ship I hear the streets are gold, but I have not seen gold streets only horse droppings and garbage and the fivvers from Mr. Ford, that is Model Tea I tolds you before. Do you remember Shara tell us? Here is what she did not know, that small children chase it in the streets, shaking fists to "Get a horse, get a carriage."

This is a maze of movement. From my apartment window (it is six stairways above the street) the Model Teas, the rattly carts, the tired horses are little toys, the shoppers and merchants dolls or sometimes like insects moving fast around in bunches.

Here the peddler is called vendor and are so many! The crowded streets are not mud or stone but is brick or what is called concrete slabs. Is not so dusty here because of the slabs and not as bumpy, not all our stones buried in road and no big holes. Shopping is inside with glass cases and ladies to help, wood tables and cabinets. Many shops are dusty-smelling and dim, filled with what we know, more of what we never see before. News shops where is large white pages peddlers carry

from Riga (before the laws). And papers like in Reb Haduska's green room, called magazeens but really is spelled like this--magazines. I am a good speller. There is smoke shops and dress shops with windows showing what is inside. There is a plumber who fixes pipes of water that is inside our apartment, also is commodes. There are customs that is improper to write about. You see for yourself.

Mr. Cohen deliver ice to apartments with with big paper numbers on the door that say how much. His horse is brown and tired and I kiss her wet, sweet-smelling face. Mr. Cohen gives us chips of ice, he talk like Captain Murrell, who I cry for when I leave the boat.

When I hug Captain goodbye, he tells me that there is no rhyme for orange. He wanted me to learn the words is all. I did learn other words trying to find the rhyme for orange. He was making a game with me, as if I a little girl but I am a woman too. I am like the orange, without a match, there is nobody to know how I feel. Maybe you, but I do not know anymore, why aren't you here? I do not even know you because do not know if you are still alive. But I will not think this is. How is Chaim?

I hope that you get this letter,

Rebekah

November 16, 1910

Dear Reb Haduska,

I wonder so much about you. Please try to send me a letter so I know that you are fine. Here is my address. I want to tell you. First, America is tall and crowded and there is the Statute of Liberty in the middle of the water so I know we are here but is a few hours until we leave the *Plymouth* to the little boat. For once, I cry and cry, sobs not stop. When I hug Captain, I realize I am leaving Latvia and all at once I hear and see Latvia. Is chickens singing the last song, fox rustling in the branches, Victor fading, yellow dog, his head down and eyes up, Mariska dancing up our lane, your brown pillowy chair, Sara Bella's cow bell ringing and ringing--tinkle and tinkle and ring until fades slow to far away echo. I want sweet noise to stay.

Our small boat floats around Ellis Island until we take our turn to go on shore. Many throw their belongings into the water, only rich are permitted more than one bag at Ellis. Tattered newspapers float on the water, a dead gull stares up at the sun, a woman's red hat bumps against the boat and for a moment I wonder if it is Shara's, I hope, I think maybe, she came in another boat. No. Captain say there are peasants murdered in Russia and I wonder if she is still alive. Do you think my writing getting better thanks to you?

After two days circling Ellis Island, we finally stand on American land was a dream, to be here was HEAVEN and truth is, even in my dreams would never know, that is the only way I can tell it. We see from our small boat family waiting, clutch

wilty flowers, bags of oranges and bananas.

Before we can look for Papa or Uncle Morris in the crowd, we must to Great Hall on Ellis. Sounds bounce off walls. We hold tight to our bags, Captain tell me not to let go, say that Ellis workers steal at any chance. Guards are dressed like General Drotsk, lead us to long line between rows of metal rails in a room so large it looks like we are outdoors with the iron railing over our heads up to sky. Huge round windows go all the way up where is a giant American flag hangs over. I thought I would feel like an American when I here, I do not know where I belong.

I wish Papa were with me, him so close now just outside the door. A guard with a droopy red mustache asks Moma questions, if she is married and who, are we in health, has she been in prison, how will she make an earning in United States, how much money does she have, is anyone meeting us. We follow the arrows to a room upstairs, Dovid must climb stairs also, guards look for the lame. We pass a window on wide landing with wires wrapped inside. I stretch my neck to look outside for Papa, but the window is too high.

There is a man side of hall and a woman side. A guard points us to the woman side and Sadie cries with hunger but Moma can not stop to nurse her. We must take off all clothing to our waist. Moma quiets Sadie with her milk in this big cold white room of naked strangers staring at the floor. Dovid stares and points . I cry silently, after all I have been through, and now, is one more shame. How much more?

We stand in line for an hour maybe more, I ache from sitting for so long in

boat, now hurt more standing. Here is three uniformed stern-looking women. Each hold colored chalk. A tall pale lady pulls down my lower eye lids with a hook to check for disease and she looks into ears. The second lady smiles a little as she pushes on my back and shoulders. The last lady watches.

In a corner of the room, children and women is crying, many have orange chalk letters on their clothing. Orange, the color and the fruit without a match and here is orange letter that means they are sent back to who knows what. Some childrens go back alone. The orange letter that changes lives forever. E for eye disease, H for heart problem, L for limp, X for mental defect. We button our dresses, I look away as we pass the orange letters.

Moma carry papers ("pass" is on the paper) given to us by the last lady who sends us down the steps where is a silent guard who look like a bumpy potato lean on rail he grunts and points us to a table in the far corner, to another long line. The guards are busy with many papers to say if we can stay. Words, none of my words make a difference, but these, all these papers from silent strangers, this is our future.

My sack is heavy, my legs and arms ache, Dovid tries to pull from me, and Sadie screams. We stand at the end of this line where finally Sadie sleeps in the spotted, stringy wrap tied to Moma. I want to run outside to Papa.

I look up and there a sea of black hats float above me, everyone wear his hat. I lose my thoughts in these hats, knowing we have to wait after all this long time. Papa so near. I pretend that inside these hats is magic and I can reach into the hats and get whatever I want. Captain tells me Harry Houdini do this, so why can't I? I

want to reach in and get a paper that says, " you can stay in America."

I look up, and the dark man sitting at end of desk stamps Moma's papers, say our name is now same as the one given Papa, is "Owens." I am Rebekah Owens.

Behind the desk is two doors. Captain teached me these words: "Push. To New York." At last, we are in the dusky sunshine of New York-- the first I see is a taxi (I thought it say " tixi" but I was wrong). There is movement like I could never know, and more people all crushed together, looking hopeful and calling out names. We search for Papa and Uncle Morris in the hats that fill the sky. I want to scream scream scream and just then Moma cries out and I hug so hard and I can not let him loose I put my head into his neck and I would know his Papa smell anywhere. Soap and salt. And a special smell all his with no words. In a way it is like I know him better than I know myself; hugging into Papa's neck is that part of me that I know and it is the safe part.

Moma and Papa give those looks they think I do not see. Look for a long time, and now that I am almost a woman I know what this look is. Cook man flashes quick in head a jolt I feel sick, I shake vision loose and lift Dovid who pull at my skirt I hug him hard. Papa remember their childrens are standing and he hugs us all again all together tight and tells me I am Shana Putum, and I think of Mariska's father, his whisker face.

Uncle Morris is like I saw him yesterday he still round but is rounder and bring us mint candy. A ferry boat take us to a big tent where is a streetcar is without a horse not the same as Model Tea to the East Side to Third Street Apartment with

many rooms. There is a central hall, and platforms in between the parts of the steps. This apartment is where we and many families live.

I can never tell you how it is here, but will try. To begin, there is no dirt roads and each market is as big as our whole village, there are many, each run by a different country, here is the world. You can not believe how even the sky seems higher, the buildings go up, up to a point, many windows shine the sun hits them, flags on everything, is good to be a proud American.

Reb, the best is the public school the boys and the girls sit in the same room. I learn how better to say and read English. You know how I like to read, if you wanted to find me all you had to do was look in your green room. I would not even look up when you come in, this was not nice.

Father works for his cousin, Benyomen, who owns a victrola and furniture store. Benyomen is mean and yells at everyone, at Blanche(who is his wife), at Papa, even at poor Sadie if she cries. Moma say she would like to kill him and does not understand why Blanche has not wrung his neck. Papa works, leaves early morning before we are awake for school and looks asleep when he drags in each night but he stops always midday Friday. I think of you across the world.

Love,

Rebekah

October 17, 1910

Dear Sara Bella,

I hope that Chaim is not teasing you so much. I can tell he tries not to smile at you when he calls you "Raven Hair", in truth he likes you, but does not tell you this. Do not be afraid of Chaim, what can he do to you? In Beltsy, we have choices taken from us, where we can pray, where we can travel, where we can live, when and where we are permitted to shop. Jews can not fight other Jews! Please visit Zadie and he will cheer you.

From me in New York to you, when you get this letter, I kiss it where your name is on top of letter, please to kiss here, too, when you get. I send across world. Please give the other letter I put with this to Shara.

Love,

Rebby

November 23, 1910

Dear Bubbie,

There is a holiday here, it is Thanksgiving, is not Sabbath but IS the same hats Zadio and Papa wear to High Holy Days, and also Abraham Lincoln. He was our president. Mr. Taft is now. The foods is turkey and stuffing and all families on Thursday have a party.

Mama tell me that you will come here before Passover. I hope you will forgive me for not kissing you goodbyes. I could not help. I bring my pearl combs brush ever night one-hundred times, Mama braid. I wear frocks made here is best to look American. I hope that you will understand this. Aunt Gittle tell me to look in the box, there was a RED skirt for me and also one with flowers.

There is much to know--the past of America called history and also numbers I know from market. Mama tell me market is destroyed like most of Beltsy. Please hurry here.

But it is not fear that I want to tell to you. There is Aunt Gittle, wants so to see you after these six long years. I had not remembered until I see her that she is your size and white hair and is a wonderful cook, Uncle Morris, he is even more plump!

Have you seen Shara or Reb Haduska ? Have you seen the man in rags?

Rebekah

July 7, 1911

My Dear Sara Bella,

It is the best news. Bubbie tells that you are untouched by the evil! She say that you visit in evening although is not safe to walk alone even in *shtetl*, and she gives you the news. I can not wait to have another one you know how I love babies, but will be so many in our three rooms. Papa say we will move to new place he is unhappy with Benyomen's store. Bubbie good to talk with about Chaim, she is very old, but still she understands the nature of peoples, even of the boys but she can be harsh, also. I hope she did not hurt feelings. She tells Zadie he is bothersome here in New Yorks we call "pesty." Boys here are! They call to us girls names, bird legs, and bush head, funny * teeth. There are some who are cruel one calls me Red Face because of Russia. At school they hide our papers and our lunch which I carry in kerchief. Many boys in my public classes are preparing for their Bar Mitzvah and since I am thirteen I SHOULD.

The boy and girl sit together in Rodef Sholom and we dance together! To see my parents dance Papa gets sweaty his shirt wet, and Moma's hair tangles, she young again. She can wear her hair loose in public. Moma not * (The word or words here are missing.) S. Stein, editor.

dancing since her news, Papa dance with us. Sadie is almost dancing her walk looks like it.

Rodef Sholom Synagouge is not Hasiddic, but conservative, we remain kosher.

What is most changed is that there is no separation of boys and the girls. Bubbie say it is the way that the Jews for centuries said should be, why take so long? Zadie tell her to know her place, and she calls him pesty, say it is a name made just for him. It is wonderful to have my grandparents live in New York, they move into our cramped apartment in time for Passover, but you know this. Dovid and me sleep in the kitchen in a corner on a mat and is much more room than on *Plymouth*.

This brings to memory. In past letter I write that we must live in Lower East Side, we had no choice. I was wrong. It is not the same as in Latvia, we are allowed to move to other places my cousins, Daniel and Avigail, move from East Side to Brooklyn. As save money can move from the Lower East Side to other places. I will send my address to you so that you can find me.

Have you seen Peter or Mariska? Papa say they are probably married, and that Mariska's papa is telling them to stay away from the Jews. Papa has returned the money they lend us, some extra for Victor and his family. Rabbi Bergman send the money. Say this is the only safe way to send to the names he has on a list. I do not know these names, I wonder if one is Shara.

Your devoted friend forever,

Rebby Owens

July 7 or 8, 1911

Dear Diary,

I want to tell Sara Bella the secret from Bubbie, but I could not send this. The red bird in Ventspils forest was not a bird but Shara, who was sent by Victor. He told her the plans. He and Peter arranged that Starpol was in his shop when Shara come to talk soft and pet to him into going to the forest where is soldiers. Now I can see how this was, Shara knowing how to be to get her way. Starpol go to Ventspils most nights so Shara made sure that she was with him. She tell the general that she and Starpol pass some boys hunting, was the noise that heard, but in real was Victor and us. Starpol was so happy to have Shara on his horse, she play with his ears and blows soft into his neck, he was not sure what was in the woods, boys or no.

September 12, 1911

Victor,

I did not send letters to you for fear you to be in association with my family after our escape. I wish I had been able to tell you.

Bubbie and Zadie eyes red in dim of kitchen when I come from the library. They read in newspaper at Rodef Shalom. You thrown into a grave with Pinkus and Simma, his round sweet-face wife. Simma's two little babies, one still breathing when covered with dirt.

You are a star in Heaven watching over us. In this I find comfort. I love you, who saved us and pray that this horror will end. How can this be?

My heart, it is a knife to it.

Rebekah

September 12, 1911

Dear Diary,

In the newspaper was about Reb Haduska the drunks beat him dead in his tavern. The world is falling down.

October 1, 1911

Miss Silver waits for me inside the door, through the glass is wavy leaning against the side she has her glasses pushed down on her nose. My teacher look hard into my eyes and says in soft voice that my name is a greenhorn name, I have hear this word, but not understand. She looks down away from me and with a sigh in her voice tells me, Rebekah is old lady's name, so now I am to be called "Beatrice." This time I know I must tell. Moma red and slaps the table. I do not know what to do run to the outside hall, she follow and frightens me she holds me to her against her round stomach cries into my neck, and call me her sweet baby. She hold me close is nice to be held as a baby.

I remember, she and Papa hold my hands in the sunshine at Letski Park where peddler sell iced sweets from his cart with a bright red-stripe cover over his head. As we near the cart, I see something blue in the dirt , it is a dead bird. My lips tremble, I choke with tears. Moma and Papa look at one another, and then to me, Moma say, "Rebby, you always loved the animals, you so sweet and caring to the world, that's special about you." But, in truth, it is not the bird alone who I cry for, it is that I am for once with my parents, only me, nobodies else, and the feelings are so strong I do not know how to feel them. That is what I again remember as I stand on the apartment landing, that same strong feeling. Being loved so much it is painful. Moma hugs angry and cries.

I hear the adults around the night table, spoons hitting cups, the jar of

preserves thud as it hits the table, the noise muffled by the old piece of lace, I imagine the look on Bubbie's face as she slams the jar. I can hear Uncle Morris, his words sound like he sing them, go up at the ends like in New York, he talk in a hurry. Says teachers try to make it easier for foreign children, that Miss Silver want to help me to fit and say it is very important to be an American. I listen as they argue over their tea they think I am doing lessons. In one quick moment of silence, Bubbie bite into her sugar cube.

They murmur soft and drink tea late into the night. Rabbi and Rev are coming to New York, Reb Haduska had given Rabbi a great amount almost a year ago, knew Rabbi give to those in need. Rabbi stayed as long as he could to help others. Papa tell this last night.

Of Shara, Leicher, and the beggar I hear nothing more. I have written to Shara, but have not heard from her. Falik's family has gone to Canada and Bubbie say Sara Bella's family moving to Johnstown, Pennsylvania where she has an uncle. Miss Silver's aunt lives in Johnstown, when I tell her about Sara Bella, she shows us where is shale, limestone and coal on map.

Bubbie's sister Rose lives in Johnstown. The adults smile and call her "the gypsy." She married Uncle Harvey when she was twenty-nine, almost an old lady. Before she left Beltsy with Aunt Gittle she wore red and yellow flowered *babushkas*, had long bushy hair, walked on her toes, always in a hurry, like she was dancing, and she sing to me, this is how I learn to make up the songs for Sadie. I listen closely when the adults think I am asleep. They say that a few years ago Aunt Rose and a

man who gambles go to a game house where she was a goodtime girl. At times I pretend that I am in a gambling lodge with the man, and I am Aunt Rose, with quick laugh, we drinking vodka and I am the center star.

She did not have to cut her long hair when she married as women in Latvia must. Moma's wavy hair is growing, she no longer wears a wig on the Sabbath, but can now pin her hair back, it is that long. Do the men here not look at women as they did in Russia? The women appear feminine here with no fear of tempting men into sin.

Rodef Shalom is much larger than Beth Zion, the *bima* so big that ten men can stand on it. The Torahs are protected with covers of velvet and decorated with silver and gold. Zadie sits on the east side where is for important members. Papa wants to sit with us at Sabbath, he does not have the chance to be show off his children and his child-to-be enough to suit him. He joke with Moma that "Look what that Abram can do!"

January 17, 1912

Dear Sara Bella,

It is so good to write to you in Pennsylvania! That your family is safe and we will be together is wonderful! Papa got your Johnstown address from Rabbi Bergman. My little brother was born right before Chanuka, two months now and he is Victor Louis.

I want to hear about Beltsy, I know from my parents that nothing is good still I need to know how are my friends. Have you seen Shara? Did you get your gold combs and the red velvet box?

Here is a library, close to our apartment. Is the most magic place. I visit as often as I am allowed and is here that I lose time and place. Read about Americans Anne Blackwell, the first lady American doctor and Davy Crockett in the woods. I hear that many are shot and buried in our forest.

To tell you about my library. Does Johnstown have one? I would go ever day, but only can two or three times a week the other days I hurry home for chores. Is stone like the house of the widower merchant, but the doors are always open for anybody. There is a yellow-haired lady who speak in soft voice and has a shiny desk. She wears lace collars, sometimes I can barely see the lace under her two chins. She knows me and Says "Rebekah" as if I am an grown-up. I am not called "Beatrice" since Bubbie talked to Miss Silver, she tell her to leave my name alone, they talk for long time on Friday after Miss Silver try to change my name.

The library room has black and white speckled floor call lenolum, but is really spelled "linoleum." Is new words and ways to spell, but I smart to know fast. The windows top part has glass of many colors with fruit in it which is stained fruit. There is a small house that sits on a table in the corner called a doll house, has minikin sofas and tables, even little doll people in this house. The dolls look happy and peaceful, they never worry about being hungry or killed. A light shine in the parlor. I lean my head on the table and study every detail in this house. Is Shara still making hats?

There are long dark wood tables and shiny wood chairs that are quiet when they are moved. The tables and the books, too, smell old, like Zadie's home, a warm smell like beets and potatos getting out of the earth.

Most of all, is the books on the shelves, books packed tightly in rows, the shelves stack on each other to the ceiling, I have to climb on a sliding ladder to reach many of the shelf.

There is my public school in the day and the chores in night. Sadie is a lively baby, not really a baby now, but is almost two years old. Dovid study Talmud. Best is the library and it does not cost me a penny.

Papa is working long hours to save for us to move away from the Lower East Side and to open his own business. He and Benyomen do not speak unless they must. Papa tells Moma he can not stand it one more day. He would like to run a tavern, which is like Reb Haduska's inn. Uncle Harvey say would be shrewd if Papa moves where is coal miners and many new businesses. He and Aunt Rose own a tobacco

shop called Eisenman's. I will write soon. Maybe we can move to Pennsylvania with you.

Your Friend,

Rebekah

August 12, 1912

Dear Shara,

There is much to tell you. I have thought about you at every turn. It is too bad that I did not get your letter when I was in New York because I would not have worried about you all these months, is GOOD that you are well. But my Aunt Gittle sent it to me here when it finally turned up. Yes, I went on the train to answer your question in letter to me. It IS fun, isn't it? I remember you and the old man who is now dead (your husband) you won't let me use his name, that you rode with him and were like a queen on the railroad.

We moved from New York to Pennsylvania on the train. What I have to tell you is we are here with Sara Bella, here is my new address to you. It is too happy for words to tell even though New York is a world all itself that opened for me. Bubbie and Zadie are still there they moved to Bronx to be near her sister my Aunt Gittle. Uncle Morris died of a heart attack and there is a voice missing with my Uncle Morris, he always want what is good.

The other about moving to Johnstown is, Aunt Rose and Uncle Harvey live here in Moxham where there is gardens in what is called yards which is small fields around the houses. Aunt Rose and I look at the yards. Moxham and Westmont are neighborhoods called "boroughs." In Westmont we have a big white house with a wide porch, and many windows. Are elm trees that Papa say are even older than Bubbie, is a shed in the back with pigeons that Dovid and I raise to sell. We keep

their waste it is good for the tomatoes and beets because Miss Lewansowski says it has nitrogen. Is garden near the the shed. There are lavender trees, apple pie trees, current bushes, our zinnia, peony and rose flower garden is full of bright pink, grapey purple, red, white, ever color you could ever want. The flowers are near where is a walk through a trellis that has fat purple Concords. Mr. Pastorek makes Papa wine. There is a metal box on our front porch, and you will not believe this, but a man comes and brings letters, the address I send you, I guess you will see it is on Green Street and does not go to one main place, but is like the fairies from John Keat's "Emma" poem brings cards in the middle of the night, but not really, Mr. Kucic comes in the day. I call our garden Emma's garden. It is nice to go to the library down town (I ride the Incline Plane near my house to the library) and get a book of Keat's poems. Mr. Kusic drinks lemonade and teaches me the song "Dinah, won't you blow your horn?." He does not like all the dogs, people here have dogs and they are treated like children, even some in the houses!

There is a basement here, I write to you what is that, like the hiding place in Starpol's shop everyone know about even though Starpol thinks it is his big secret. In this basement are rooms where Moma dills pickles and going down from the outside is a step that lifts like in our house. I mean Beltsy.

Sometimes when I am at the step I hear clucks in the cold that follow, Alex's wild gasps, Pincus baby chocking, cookman croaking in the shadow to come here, Rebby, the screams, those loud hopeless animal screams of those left behind. Why was it me who lived, maybe it is to tell here about the screams.

In my bedroom where is again the branches, the branches that in Russia calmed me, in bed in the dark with the tree scratching, I SEE the horror. Why did so many suffer and so many perish and what have I done that was so nice to live yet babies should smother? Shara, I try to think this but the more I try NOT TO, the MORE IT IS THERE.

I will come back to this letter, will help Moma with the children you should see Victor Louis, he is a beautiful baby with the longest eyelashes.

I am back from petting Victor's back to burp, is strong baby. He is the newest here and Sadie and Dovid grow like weed, Mr. Pastorek say. I read again this letter, now to finish.

Shara, you must not think I am always unhappy. I am mostly peaceful here in this little borough. You ask in long ago letter to send picture postcard of New York, but now that I am here, here is my Johnstown house, it has the tree in yard. Mr. Jacobs at the news stand handed Papa this and said "Does he know this house?" I pleased to see us on a postcard, especially to send to you. I tell you what is like, not like any other place. We live in what is some call the Hunky District, most of us are from Slovenia, Poland, Russia, Hungary, and a few Greece and Italy. The Americans are from Germany and Scotland and Ireland. Even the Jews have separated. The Reform German Jews do not even keep kosher and we from Eastern Europe are Conservative.

What is the best is that I am really getting to know our neighbors who are all mixed together but in houses apart are so friendly to sit on our porch and drink beer

(not me I have to wait but sip wine at holidays) and bring us stuffed cabbage what Mrs. Pastorek calls *halupke*, and they eat *kielbasa* it is like *knish*. Mrs. Pastorek hugs me and say I am one of her babys to please come to her oldest's, Mary's, wedding. Mrs. Pastorek fills up the chair in her kitchen and she stirs current preserves into the hot tea Moma sit in her kitchen with Victor he pulls on the fur of their white kitten she is Fluffy.

Sara Bella is still my best, and there is Carol Pastorek who is fourteen with us we go to Slovak Jednota Hall to Mary's wedding reception at night. It is in the Eighth District near the steel mills in a dark part near downtown's foreign district (where is the churches and businesses of the new Americans, us East Europeans), is always cloudy in the air and the Cambria Steel Company mills go on and on, never stop smoking, take over one whole part of town, the flat black buildings behind the wire fence, and from my look spot on my rock in the slate hills, they are so many. The smoke blunts the sun, there is whistle at the mill, and I sit on my rock, a queen looking down at the green ruffle of woods following the edge of the furnaces and the district.

To tell about both parts of the wedding, the ceremony and then party after. They do not stand under a *chupa* and they don't break a glass at the end. The men who dance with Mary gave her money and she put them into apron she wear over her big bride dress! There was a table covered with many kinds of bottles where the grown-ups gathered and tables filled with so much food of *halupkes* and *spaetzle*, more than can be imagine. And one whole table just for a giant wedding cake.

We danced with the bride and with Frankie and really, with everyone all together, mostly in a great wide circle the polkas. We squeeze tight, laughing and laughing for long time into the middle of the night I guess tired but laughing and dancing so fast we did not stop to think of it.

That is mostly what I have to tell you in news of where we live. They are like family here and yet I still think of Beltsy as my home as much as Johnstown is now my home. And of course, I miss YOU and the stories about the men. I am glad that you are safe you will never know how glad. It is good that Reb Haduska gave you extra money that will help bribe even though you hate to have to live like this. You are one of the wisest I have ever know and that is the truth.

Love,

Rebby

September 28, 1913

Dear Zadie,

I am so glad you and Bubbie come for Rosh Hashuna and that David looked for Elijah at the door he thinks he is a big boy him having the honor. I have never seen a BOY carry on with a baby so much. He thinks Victor belongs to him and him alone, he was even going to take Victor to his class on show day! And Victor would have happily gone.

Yes, to answer your letter, I am still your Shana Putum.

There is a boy, Bill Rabinowitz, who works for Papa at his tavern after school and on the weekends. He was born here and helps with language. We go for long walks, sometimes all the way to the mill, and guess what. He bring me a brown spotted dog I call Mrs. Lilly Ann Rex. I wanted a dog named Rex, but Bill say is boy name, so I make her Mrs. Lilly Ann. Of course, I will call her how I want, so she is "Rex." Bill and I take her everywhere. Papa asks me when is our wedding and to name the first after him, even if is a girl. He is SO funny.

I feel grown now, but Bubbie makes me feel small. I did not mean to cry when Bubbie say I am becoming too American. She still can say the very thing to hurt. Mostly I think I am both--this is my life HERE, and my past I will not deny THERE. Instead of feeling like I have NO PLACE that is home (I think Bubbie feels like this), why can't I have two places? Maybe that is what it is, I think of myself as both--someone from East Europe (a Hunky some call us)--and a Jew, I am

not ashamed of either. It goes both ways, Mr. Pastorek came to Harold Greenburg's Bar Mitzvah and he wore a *yarmulka* same as the others. I know that everyone feels different about it, being American too much or not enough. There is not any right answer.

We ARE NOT American enough for some. That same hate which followed Leichel from Memel followed me across the world. Mark Walchesky from Venango Street spit in Dovid's face and call him little traitor and call me a dirty Jew. Being a Little Zadie, I yell hard at him and pinch him and twist on the soft inside of his arm and warn him he'll get worse if he comes near Dovid again. He pull away and yell that it is right what the crowd in Georgia did to Leo Frank. I can not think of that spit on David's cheek without feeling ill.

There is the truth to it. That is how people are all over the world. Captain say is good and bad, good and bad everywheres.

Your Loving Granddaughter,
Rebekah

April 20, 1914

Papa is all the time at Owens Place happy being his own boss. I wash glasses and mugs in the soapy tub behind the bar, watch over the top of the counter at the half smiles of the sleepy district laborers. They call to me, "Are you back there hiding, little one?" I fry them hash potatos and *perogies* with crispy dough, cheese filling their favorite. Bill mostly sweeps and mops, scrubs dishes, he straightens the green and brown shiny bottles so the scrolled parchment labels with pink princess faces and farm scenes face us, the bottles stand together on high-up mirrored shelf. The mirror reflects between the bottles the fallen dark faces of men who talk familiar and low.

Amanda and Hank live in the large, almost empty room over the tavern, move here twenty-three years ago, right after the flood carried away their children, August and Nina. Nina a baby, August only three-years-old. August yelling for Mommy to come get, yelling until the big wave lifted the floor and throw him under. Like yesterday, the way Amanda talks. She now watch the city from her bare room and this tavern is home we sit with them in the sticky oak booths where my feet do not reach the floor. Amanda and I were born on the same day she say we are two peas together, and yesterday she surprises me with a pair of tea cups, has delicate flowers painted on. Her gift is more wonderful than she ever knows.

November 7, 1914

Dear Diary,

I hardly ever hear the screams at the step now, not like when I first moved to Green Street. I am finally beginning to feel more safe here in Pennsylvania. Here is my school I walk to, my Emma garden, Carol Pastorek's porch, the library near the Incline Plane, and mostly is Great Slates in Brownstown where is my look rock and fossils.

Rex and I walk down the dark lane of Brownstown Hill, light blocked out by elm branches which thicken near the bottom of the grassy hill. We walk into the hollow where five houses keep watch on us from their perch they look like they were born when is dinosaurs. There is no sign of life at these houses, except, of course, the houses themselves. It is getting colder and I warm my face in Rex's neck.

* * * *

Amanda and Hank lean into their booth to peer into my face. Amanda's gray hair falls defeated onto her shoulders. She props her head in her hands and in her soft voice she tells. Again. How Johnstown's waters claimed August and Nina. She pushes at her *perogie*, draws greasy yellow streaks on her chipped plate. She sips from her snifter.

November 20, 1914

Baby Victor clings and sobs deep into my neck, his unashamed sorrow makes me love him until it is a grief, a grief like that part of me lost in the snow fields and in the pines where his back disappears. The sun beams on Rex filter through white dust shimmers above the mill to my look spot. The foundry whistles steam is like in the ship engine room, is poems and oranges, later the minikin house with the parlor light and the smiles painted on. Mrs. Pastorek says to remember so that the killing will end. How can I stop the smothering, but surely it will stop. Mrs. Pastorek's house smells like warm cake and she hugs me into her soft skin. On my rock the sun beams, yet, there is a chill and an unspoken busyness falls over Johnstown, we sense the winter air. The miners drink whiskey now, not beer, in the dark part of town.

December 2, 1914

Johnstown is carved into these hills. Is my home now. My secrets are whispered in the mill clouds shrouding the valley, giant twisting armbranch-spreading maples and oaks and elms, strong and old, they cradle me in.

I have been forgiven so I can report the losses. I know I am forgiven. The screams have quieted, the silence protects me. I tell everyone how was Sabbath with our gold candle sticks in Beltsy, where a begger visit on Erev Shabbot, how was to sip hot tea with friends, and run in the mud with the horses, to read in a secret room; and the murder, the old men and the babies buried in the woods, this also, I will tell my children and my grandchildren. Where some neighbors turned and many others embraced. How it was in the dusty village when the markets alive and the foxes run and the stray yellow dog who trusted only me would keep his head down and his eyes up.

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