

Coming to America

Authored by: Dave Sitrin

My mother, Esther, born in 1905, was the youngest of eleven children, with nine brothers and one sister. Her oldest brother, to avoid serving in the Tsar's army, left the homeland (Ukraine) before she was born and settled in America. My mother's parents died in the influenza epidemic after World War I. As a teenager she was cared for by various of her married siblings, staying with each of them in turn.

By the time my mother became a teenager, her married sister's mother-in-law told my mother that it would please her greatly if my mother would agree to marry her next eligible son. The response was that she would not agree to marry anyone in the near future because she was determined to go to America. Only after that objective was achieved, would she even begin to think about marriage.

My mother, of course, knew that. her oldest brother, Zelig, whom she had never met, had gone to America. As a devoted son, Zelig, wrote many letters home, and one effect of those letters was to convince my mother that America was where she wanted to spend her future life. She had also seen numerous instances of anti-semitic behavior and actions in the Ukraine, to strongly reinforce her ambition to somehow or other make America her future home.

Quite frankly, Esther's chances for making it to America did not seem very good. By the time she was fifteen years old, the situation in the Ukraine was bad. The early post World War I period was one of lawlessness and confusion. My mother told me stories of pogroms she had witnessed where roving bands of Cossacks simply killed all the Jews they could get their hands on. One in particular I recall her telling me was about a Cossack who assumed my mother was gentile, bragged to her about the numerous Jews he had slain with the sword he was holding.

In addition, her personal situation did not offer much hope for her to achieve her objective of getting to America. Because her parents had died, Esther's married siblings took turns of caring for her. She would spend a period of time with one and then move on to another of her numerous siblings. But at one point, at the age of fifteen, she made up her mind that she had to take action to achieve her goal.

Esther told whichever sibling she was staying with that she was going to another one and simply left whatever home she had and started walking in the general direction of the Rumanian border. Apparently the situation in Rumania was less turbulent than in the Ukraine, so Esther set her first objective of somehow getting into Rumania.

How did she survive on this first leg of her journey? She would find the nearest Jewish town (“shtetl”) along the way and ask if they could feed and house her for the night. In this endeavor she was never disappointed. Indeed, she told me of one case in which the couple she stayed with tried to talk her into staying permanently with them.

Apparently, Esther was not the only Jewish refugee from the Ukraine heading for Rumania. As she got fairly close to the border she met a girl, Anna, her own age, who was traveling with her family to try to make it into Rumania. As a result of their shared experiences, Esther and Anna became lifelong friends, and I got to know her and her family quite well when I was a young child.

Once she met Anna and her family, Esther stayed close to them. The situation was that there was no legal way of getting into Rumania from the Ukraine. Separating the two countries was the Dniester River, a substantial body of water. Anna's family had made contact with someone who owned a small boat and offered to smuggle their family into Rumania for a price. When Anna shared this information with Esther, Esther asked Anna if she could accompany them and pose as a relative but not an immediate member of their family. Anna's family agreed, while making it clear that they could not agree to pay for smuggling Esther into Rumania also.

After making the necessary arrangements with the smuggler it was necessary for Anna and her family as well as Esther to wait for the smuggler to determine when would be an appropriate time to execute his plan. This waiting period lasted at least several days during which time Esther, not having any other place to stay, slept each night outdoors and close to the Dniester River.

It should be noted here that the Ukrainian government was opposed to the idea of any refugees leaving their country either legally or illegally. For this reason they maintained military patrols along the border. On one of the nights that she slept in the fields near the Dniester such a patrol found and confronted Esther. When they accused her of being a potential refugee seeking to flee the Ukraine, Esther thought quickly and came up with a good story. Since her fingers had become partially blue from working temporarily picking berries for local farmers, she said that she had heard that the waters of the Dniester would have a curative effect and restore her hands to their natural color. Fortunately for my mother (and me) the soldiers believed her.

When the time came for the smuggler to do his thing, there was room in his small boat only for Anna's immediate family, so he said to Esther that he'd come back for her and make another crossing. This he did. When, after dropping her off in Rumania, he asked Esther for his payment, she told him that she had to find her relatives to get the money from them and that he should wait for her where he dropped her off. He agreed, and that was the last time he ever saw Esther.

At this point Esther's situation was more tenuous than ever. She was in a strange country where she neither spoke nor understood the language. She had no resources whatsoever, and no means of support. She felt the pangs of hunger, her clothing had become ragged, and she was dirty with no means of cleaning herself up. But, she had one very lucky break which requires some prior explanation.

My mother's brother, Zelig, living in New York City had been instrumental in founding one of the so-called "landsmannshaften". That is, a society of people who had come from the same little town in the old country, to work for the mutual benefit of all of them.

Their society, named for Brahilov, the town of their birth, was called the First Brahilover.

Because of the severe anti-semitism and general disorder in the Ukraine, Rumania had become a major attraction place for Jewish refugees from the Ukraine. The First Brahilover (along with possibly numerous other similar organizations) had decided to send a paid agent to Rumania in an effort to locate any possible refugees from their little shtet'l.

The man chosen for this assignment turned out to be someone who had been a close friend of one of Esther's brothers and was very well known by her. By sheer happenstance, or perhaps divine providence, Esther, almost at the end of her rope, in her ragged clothes, hungry and dirty ran into this agent on the street of the first built-up area she came to in Rumania. She immediately approached him saying "I know you, you're my brother Simcha's friend, and said his name. At first, because he did not recognize Esther, he tried to extricate himself from her grip. But Esther kept talking and telling him things about his past that were true so that he finally realized that she was exactly the kind of person he was looking for.

Once accepted as a genuine person from Brahilov, my mother's worries were over. She was put in touch with her brother Zelig and the rest of her travel to America, the land of her dreams, was most pleasurable, courtesy of her big brother.