

# Flight to the Goldeneh Medina

by

Betty Baker

## Prologue

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*My dear Fannie,*

*I am the child of immigrants, brought up on the rich stories of Yiddishkeit, sitting around the kitchen table, sipping a glezeleh tey and munching on a shtickel bobkeh. It was to your home that the rest of our relatives came, when they sought refuge in America, the Goldeneh Medina—the Golden Land.*

*I have long admired your courage and fortitude in leaving all that you held dear to venture out into the unknown in order to forge a new life. My heartfelt thanks for giving me your youngest son in marriage. I never had the honor of thanking you personally, because my husband was orphaned when he was just 13 years old. However, I did briefly get to meet your wonderful husband; my parents called him “the gentleman.” You raised four fine, handsome sons and endowed them with your love of family and education. I want you to know I have worked to impart your values to your grandchildren, as they have, in turn, to your great-grandchildren. I have always felt you and I were kindred spirits. Your gemultichkeit lives on today.*

*Your loving daughter-in-law,*

*Betty*

*Betty (Bailkee) Baker*

## Chapter One

It is fall in the year 1905. A young girl sits by a railway carriage window clutching her mother's black knitted shawl around her shoulders, as much for security as for warmth. Watching the unfamiliar landscape slip by, she lifts the material up to her nose and breathes in its lingering mint-hyssop fragrance.

“Mama,” she whispers.

“This train is going so fast, I feel like I am flying,” she says under her breath in Yiddish. Outside, the brown-stubbed fields slide past in a blur. “In America, everything is different.” Only 16 years old, she has the unmistakable look of an immigrant newly arrived from the old country. “Even I am different now. They tell me I am to be called Fannie.”

The girl shifts in her seat and straightens her long, black woolen skirt, the hem still bearing traces of encrusted mud. Her well-worn ankle-laced boots seem too heavy for such a slip of a girl. “Almost they would better suit a farmhand,” she thinks, reaching up to secure a pair of amber combs in her thick brown hair. The combs are meant to tame an unruly mass of waves into smooth wings on either side of her head, but it is a losing battle. Thick strands of hair escaped from the heavy braid hanging down her back frame her ivory face like a cameo set against her dark clothing.

The late-afternoon sun sifts through the dusty window making her squint and she holds up a hand to shield eyes that still ache from harsh handling on Ellis Island, just a few days ago. She wipes away a tear forming at the corner of her eye with annoyance. A pink flush rises from her neck to color her high Slavic cheekbones as she sets her chin against the curious stares of passengers across the aisle.

The woman reading on the seat beside her—her mother’s cousin—yawns, lays aside her book, and closing her eyes is soon fast asleep. Fannie unties her shawl and lays it gently over her kinswoman, her lifeline to this new world. Leaning back against her high-backed seat, she marvels at how amazing a thing it is to be speeding through a foreign country in a modern train beside a woman she has known for no more than three days—and with all that, to feel safe. Safer than she has ever felt in any part of her short life.

The girl closes her eyes and allows the rumbling music of the train to lull her into a dreamless sleep.

“Fagela, give a look outside!”

Passengers were crowding around the windows, pointing excitedly upwards at the magnificent sight—a seemingly endless flock of migrating geese blanketing the sky. The cacophonous honking and barking overhead mesmerized her and Fannie was suddenly back on that overcrowded ship in mid-Atlantic. Once again, she was immersed in a sea of sound; the steady throb of the ship’s engines, the waves and wind, and the incessant clamor of a thousand human voices, packed like cattle in steerage, rising and falling like the ocean swells.

“Those geese; they are my fellow travelers to a new home. In their voices, I feel the heat of their strength and courage.”

“Fagela, darling, you don’t have to be afraid anymore.” Her cousin was holding her hand.

“Yes, *Kuzineh* Channah. In America, it is different.”

“Hattie. My name now in America is Hattie,” she reminded the girl, “like yours is now Fannie. It will be easier for you here that way. A new home, a new name.”

Hattie had been called Channah when she lived in Fannie’s little *shtetl* in Lithuania, and her aging mother, Etkie, lived there still. Hattie and Fannie’s mother, Rochel-Leah, had been

inseparable when they were young. But Channah had married first and had left with her husband for America long before Fannie was born. So, except for her mother's nostalgic stories, Channah—Hattie—was almost a stranger to the girl.

Rochel-Leah had remained in the little village of Diffenishek after her marriage to Chaim the tailor. They had planned to emigrate too, but the children started coming and there was never enough money.

Fannie called Hattie's mother her other grandmother, and she thought herself lucky to have two bubbies—Bubbie Malkie (Rochel-Leah's mother) and Bubbie Etkie—to love and pamper her.

*Ess, ess mein kind!* Bubbie Malike would say. "Another *creplach* in the soup. You are too skinny yet.

"Fagela, you'll come taste my *latkes* I just made. I need your opinion." Bubbie Etkie would call from her window as Fannie passed by.

The two women were always in each other's houses, gossiping, reminiscing, telling stories. And as often as she could manage it, little Fannie would be there, absorbing it all. So long ago now it all seemed.

"Oy," Bubbie Malkie began. "How can you forget the day they burned the *shul*? Like animals, wolves, they came—a pack of drunken peasants—they bolted the doors and burned it to the ground! My *Zaydeh* was inside *davening* the evening service." She lifted her apron to wipe a tear. "Oy vay iz mir!"

"*Shvaig!*" shouted Zeydeh Itchkie, her grandfather, banging the table with the flat of his hand to quiet the women. "*Shah!* You will frighten the girl with your *bubbie maisehs*, your old wives' tales. It is a new world now! The old Czar is dead, *Gut sudanken!* They are saying this

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new one, Czar Nicholas, is even letting *di Polisheh* teach their own language in their schools now. You'll see, it will be better for Jews, too."

But it did not get better for the Jews; it got worse with virulent anti-Semitism seemingly the law of the land. New edicts came down to hammer the Jews with further restrictions and deprivations. Denied the rights of citizenship, they were forced to live in squalid, ghettos apart from the gentiles. The *shtetl* was their frail island, offering little protection against the stormy sea of hostility that surrounded them and the bloody pogroms that periodically swept through their small world.

Fannie absorbed it all.

Before and after prayers, the men argued in the *shul* over what was to be done. The younger men were in favor of leaving at once, seeing no future but poverty and fear for themselves and their young families. But the older men could not see running away, tail between their legs, like a *lemeshkeh*.

"God will watch over us!" Fannie's grandfather bellowed from the *bima*.

"Since the Diaspora, "Rabbi Dovid said, "our people have always lived here. Our great Yeshivas are here; not for nothing has Lithuania been called the Jerusalem of the North."

"My mother and father are buried here, "added Velvel the butcher. "Who will care for the cemetery if we run away, I'd like to know? You saw what the *chazerim* did! Those Cossacks, those swine! *Ah shvartz yor ahf dem!*" he cursed. "Last year they came and knocked over all the stones... And the next day, laughing as we had to clean up all the mess from their horses. *Ah, choleryah ahf dem!*"

"No!" shouted Fannie's father, Chaim. "We don't have to live like this. Here are letters from Rochel-Leah's cousin, Channah, in America. They say for me to come work in their store.

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Look here in this letter, *Rabbi* Dovid. Channah's husband, Yankel, says I can earn money to send for Rochel-Leah and the children. My son Fievel is almost seventeen years already. What life can he have here? I must leave now before the Russians come to take him into the Army as fodder for the cannons."

That was all two years ago now, and Chaim was not the only man to leave his wife and family to fend for themselves. Five of his neighbors chose to leave with him. Like so many other immigrants, they settled in New York City. But Chaim continued on to Cleveland where he did find enough work in Yankel's dry-goods store to send a bit of money home each month.

With Papa gone, Zaydeh Itchkie became the bright light in her life. Dark as were the times, he could still dance and play the violin, but mostly he would sing and spin stories. Everyone said he should have been a cantor. He taught his little grandchild along with any other children who would listen (and there were many) all the old Yiddish folksongs and Bible stories, but always with his own special twist.

Bubbie Malkie did not approve. "Itchkie, the *Chumash* does not say Esau sold his bowl of kasha to his brother for a profit. And when God banished them from *Gan Eden*, Adam did not buy Eve a beautiful new red dress because she had nothing to wear."

But Fannie would beg him, "Tell me again how you first met Bubbie Malkie," just to see if she could spot any further embellishments on the tale.

"Well, to begin," he would say, leaning back to take in the evening sky, "my father of blessed memory, left me his horse and wagon, so I naturally enough became a peddler. I would buy a few odds and ends from a Ukrainian fellow—a good man—who owned a store. You know, some needles, a few bolts of cloth, a pot or two, and maybe some plates. These I would pile on

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my wagon and then the horse and I would try our luck in *shtetlach* where the other *Yidden* lived. And everywhere I went, the people were happy to see me. Of course.”

“So now one day I was in Naganovitisky across the river, and I see this *shaineh maidel*. *Oy*, what a beauty! She was barefoot in her yard feeding some chickens and, Fagela, as I am sitting here, back then Malkie had hair as long and rich brown as yours. And then she turns to give me this look and, BOOM—*Oy vay!* Just like that, I knew this was the one for me. I needed no *shadchen*. It was *bashert*. I gave her then a piece of velvet ribbon to tie up her beautiful hair.”

“And so what else is there to say? I talked to her father and quick he calls the Rabbi to write up a marriage contract. In two days, it seemed, they had up a *chuppa* and the whole village came to the wedding. Naturally, everybody said my Malkie was the most beautiful *kalleh*. We loaded up my wagon with her *piranee* and the pillows she had made and came here to Diffenishek to live. But we had to wait a little while for you, little bird, to decide to fly down from heaven to see us.”

Fannie would wait by the road to hear his horse clumping home at the end of the day. But one day she waited until dark and still he had not returned. A neighbor found Zaydeh Itchkie bleeding and unconscious, lying beside the path he usually took through the woods. His horse was gone.

Later, when he could speak, he related how a band of Cossacks had ridden up behind him. When his horse had too little room to step to the side, they pulled him off the wagon, beat him and unhitched his horse. After that, her Zaydeh was not the same cheerful fellow. Long story short, by Rosh Hashanah there was an end to him. They buried him beside his parents in the village’s little cemetery. And there too was the end of music and story-telling in that house.

## Chapter Two

The last week of the last April in Diffenishek, the sun sent down its warming rays to melt the last of the snow. The massive drifts that had lain in overhanging folds on the village's weather-beaten huts had dwindled to tufts of cotton decorating the bushes. Winter was good and truly over, and Rochel-Leah threw open the shuttered windows to air out the house.

Fannie was eager to run down to the riverbank to see if the early flowers were in bloom. But her mother warned her, "Fagela, be careful. You must never walk alone, such a pretty girl you are."

Both of them knew only too well the stories of Cossacks raping young Jewish girls. "And be careful you don't catch the eye of a nobleman, either!"

All that week she helped her mother sweep and clean the floors, windows, blankets, and pillows. Everything had to be washed and hung outside to air after months of confined air soured with the heavy odors of indoor cooking and unwashed human bodies. But at night Fannie slept soundly, breathing in the sweetness of the outdoor air that came with her freshened bedding.

At last, Fannie could stand it no longer; she had to get out of the house, to run and dance in the fields. Down the gently sloping hill behind the village to the riverbank she flew, but careful to avoid the path bordering the woods. Undoing her braid, the wind grabbed her hair, wrapping it around her face. Delighted, the girl ran like a bird in flight.

By the water's edge, she bent to take off her shoes and stripped off her long woolen stockings, giddy to once again feel the cold mud oozing between her toes. Wildflowers were indeed beginning to peek their heads through the tall grass, and the blackbirds were in full voice, laying claims to their newly won territories. Fannie lifted her arms to the sky and, twirling like she did when Zaydeh Itchkie used to play the violin, she sang one of his favorite tunes.



The sun was making its way across the sky, and she was beginning to notice the chill in the air. She wished she had brought a shawl along with her. It was time to head back up the hill. Fannie picked up her mud-caked shoes and began to rinse them at the river's edge, smiling as she recalled the last time she had seen Yitzchak.

“Oh, he is so handsome! What a tender smile he has, and I do so like the way his curly red beard “accidentally” brushed my cheek when we were harvesting berries together last summer. Mama would not approve, I know, because he is only a *Yeshiva bochar* now. But he is in his last year of study and promised to write Papa, as soon as he is finished, to ask for my hand.

Fannie was shaken from her reverie by a peel of discordant shouts and laughter. Out of the woods they came singing, if you could call it that; a half dozen drunken soldiers, arms folded around each other shoulders, staggering up the path. Their wine-splotched white shirts were hanging out of their bright red uniform trousers.

“Cossacks! What should I do? Dear God above, protect me!” Snatching up her shoes and stockings she began to run, but the men caught sight of her and gave chase. In her fear, Fannie stumbled and fell. A hand shot out and caught a fistful of her hair, yanking back hard and cracking her neck.

“Oh ho! Look what we have here! A little Yid girl. Aha, I think she wants to play! Sasha, catch her quick before she flies away!”

The soldiers grabbed her and forming a circle, started pulling her this way and that, passing her from one man to the next, groping her breasts, lifting her skirt and petticoat, laughing and drinking all the while.

It seemed to carry on forever—the coarse laughter, the sweating, pawing hands, the fierce eyes dancing in their boorish faces. Then, suddenly an opening materialized. One of the soldiers

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paused for a swig from his bottle and Fannie was able to slip from his lax grip. Running with all her strength back up the hill to safety. To Mama.

They let her go, too drunk now to follow. But they called after her,

“We will play again, little Yid girl. We will be looking for you!”

Fannie collapsed in the doorway, sobbing hysterically. Her mother lifted her from the floor and cradled the shaking girl against her breast, rocking and stroking her hair, and lightly patting her back.

“*Shah, shah, mein kleineh maideleleh.*” Rochel-Leah held her daughter close, singing softly, “Fagela, Fagela, my little bird.”

When the girl finally stopped sobbing, she was led off to her bed and fell asleep almost on the instant. The last thing she heard was her mother’s voice,

“*Gut nacht, shloff gezuntahayt, mein kleine fagel.*”

Rochel-Leah and Fannie’s older brother, Fievel, talked far into the night. By a rare stroke of good fortune, their neighbor Pincus and his family were heading north the following week to catch a boat for America. The plan had been for Fievel to go with them on the three-day trip by horse and wagon to Klaipeda on the Baltic Sea.

“Fannie must take my place. I will find a way to go later.”

Going over to the big brick oven below the loft where Fannie slept, he felt around for a certain loose brick, behind which was hidden the small bag containing all the money Papa had sent home. Would there be enough?

\$34 for a steerage ticket to New York.

\$25 to prove to immigration officials that Fannie would not be a beggar.

\$75 for room and board in Klaipeda (estimated) until the ship came to port.

Papa's little pile of notes would cover that much with only a left over. It would have to suffice. The next morning, Fievel went to see Pincus about Fannie taking his place.

"Mama, I don't want to go! I don't want to leave you!"

"I know my child," her mother said, with a touch to Fannie's chin. "But Fagela, here it is no longer good for you. And you will like it in America with *Kuzineh* Channah. You will have a chance for a good life there. You will meet a nice boy and get married and someday have a house of your own. God was watching over you yesterday, Fagela. The soldiers will not be so easy with you the next time they catch you."

"But Mama, how can I leave you," Fannie persisted. "How can you get along without me to help with the cooking and baking and looking after little Mendeleh?"

"*Shah, tochter*. Be quiet. daughter."

Tears rolled down the cheeks of mother and daughter as they embraced.

"Mama," she whispered, "Yitzchak is planning to ask Papa for his blessing. We want to get married, but now I'll never be a *kalleh*. How could I marry someone else. I love him, but now I will never see him again."

"Little bird, it breaks my heart to see you cry, but enough. You have to be strong, now. Wipe your tears away, wash your face and get yourself dressed. We have much to prepare for your trip, and there are only a few days.

### Chapter Three

That night, Fannie lay awake in her loft bed, feeling the oven's heat from below feeding strength and resolve into her body.

“I will not be afraid, I will not. Mama knows best, and so I will go, for I must.” She fell asleep clutching the *piranee*, a token of her mother’s love, encased in rough red flannel.

“Fagela, wake up. Wake up, wake UP!”

It was little four-year old Mendeleh tugging at her shoulder. He had climbed the rickety ladder to her loft. “Fagela, tell me a story. I NEED a story,” he demanded.

Fannie pulled him under the comforter and snuggled his warm little body. She was missing him already.

“Once there was a fine, big boy, and his name was Mendeleh...” she began. And Fannie could feel Zaydeh Itchkie’s eyes smiling down on them as she told of the big brick house in America in which they would soon enough all be living together.

And as she spoke, the boy felt his own bare little house transformed into a majestic manor with shining wooden floors and thick red carpets, so thick you would lose your toes walking barefoot across them. And a glass roof that glistened like the icicles from the eaves in winter.

“And in this beautiful house, Papa is making everything ready for you, you little rabbit! Cleveland is the city’s name and there, the streets are washed clean every day and all the people are very kind. Everyone gets new clothes to wear on Rosh Hashanah, and they have wonderful, delicious things to eat—*gefilte fish*, *kishke*, and *taigelach* dripping with honey, whenever they want.”

“Every day is like *Shahbbos*, only better in Cleveland, isn’t it?” he smiled sleepily.

“Yes, Mendeleh, she whispered into his ear Yes, and Papa will send for you and Mama and Fievel very soon. Very soon. Very...very...” And he was asleep.

And very soon indeed, the week was over, and it was time to go. There had simply not been enough time to do all that needed doing. How can you say goodbye to everyone you love, knowing too well you may never see them again? But the sun was creeping over the bank of pine trees in the east and Mama was calling. Pincus and his family were on the way with his wagon and two horses. No time for a hot bowl of *kasha*.

No time! Too soon! Too soon.

“Here Fagela,” called Bubbie Malkie, bustling up, “I’ve made a basket for you with chicken, potato *kugel*, and a *challah* I baked yesterday. You shouldn’t be hungry; you can eat on the way.”

“Little bird,” Rochel-Leah was standing in front of her now. But there were no tears. Not just yet. “Fagela, take my black shawl, you will need it for your new *shul* on *Shabbos*. And I want you should take my bubbie’s candlesticks.” Her mother handed Fannie a package wrapped in the same red flannel she had used for the *piranee*.

“Mama!” she protested, “These are yours. What will you use for *Shabbos*?”

“*Shah!* You will have your own home some day and these are for my grandchildren, God willing. They should know they are Jewish.”

Mist was rising from the ground and dark clouds hung low on the western horizon. Fievel helped Fannie onto the creaky old wagon as Pincus’s two little girls, Sora and Rivkah, moved aside to make room for her. Mama handed up the basket of food which was to last until they reached Klaipeda. Mendeleh ran out of the house crying. To keep from breaking down herself, Fannie arranged her bundle of clothing as a cushion for her seat and pulled her heavy, black skirt over her feet to keep warm.

The horses stamped their feet, snorting spray into the cold, early morning air.

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“*Nu, cum shain!* So come on already, if you’re so hot to go!” he called to the animals.

But he did not yet snap the reins.

“We will take good care of your Fagela, Rochel-Leah,” Pincus’s wife, Gittel, called down to the now openly weeping woman as Fannie bent to clasp her mother’s hands in her own, perhaps for the last time.

“Thank you, Gittel and Pincus. God Bless you. “*Mit Gots helf, arumform in gezunterhayt!* With God’s help, travel in good health.”

“Fagela! Be a good girl, say your prayers, and keep the *Shabbos*.” A mother’s final words to her daughter.

Fannie hunkered down in the back of the wagon, surrounded by bulky packages of clothing and household merchandise. Soon it started to rain, and Fannie shared her *piranee* with the little girls, making a double layer above their own quilt to cover their heads. The hard-packed dirt path turned quickly into muddy rivulets, and it was only by dint of Pincus’s expertise that he was able to steady the wagon as the horses lost their footing.

To comfort the girls, Fannie told them the tales she had made up to calm Mendeleh when he would awake in the middle of the night. And when she exhausted her own small bank of stories, she sang the old Jewish folksongs she had learned from Zaydey Itchkie.

They had to pass through an uninhabited woodland to get to the coast. The forest had a bad reputation as home to wolves, thieves and worse. At dusk, the first night, Pincus stopped to unhitch the horses and pulled the wagon off the path into a small clearing. Fannie and the children were happy to get off the wagon. Gittel unpacked the baskets of food they had brought along, but they would not chance a campfire for cooking. No need to call attention to themselves. The exhausted troupe dined quietly on cold chicken and hard-boiled eggs.

Through the long, wet night, the adults took turns keeping an uneasy watch. Two evenings past in this fashion with no untoward event. Perhaps the moonless skies and dampness had cloaked their passage through the woods from malicious eyes. In any case, on the third day the forest receded and the dark line of the horizon took on a bluish cast. The smell of the sea stimulated the horses to pick up their pace.

“Oy, Pincus!” Gittel grabbed her husband’s arm. “Sora, Rivka, Fagela, give a look! Can you smell that? We are here! *Got sudank!*”

They went immediately to the docks to look for their ship. Pincus could speak a little Russian and asked a policeman of its whereabouts.

“It left last Tuesday but don’t fret, there will be another ship here next month.”

The stink of dead fish, diesel oil, and rotting seaweeds hung like a curtain over the port. Gulls circled overhead screeching their finds and warnings to one another, and a hodgepodge of people walked into and out of shops lining the streets leading away from the docks. Men with harsh voices called out their wares from pushcarts along the sidewalks and women in dark, heavy clothing clutched the hands of bawling children as they bargained with the vendors. From some of the windows, Fannie saw ladies with painted faces calling out to men passing below.

“*Nu, vos ken mir tawn ?*” Gittel asked her husband. “So what can we do?”

“I know the address of a Jewish lady who takes in roomers. We will go look for her; it will be alright,” he consoled her.

As the horses made their way haltingly through the mass of traffic, Fannie had to hold Sora and Rivka from jumping up and down in excitement, shouting to each other to take in all the sights. Never had they imagined such a turmoil of activity, and Fannie was glad she was not alone in such a wild place.

The horses stomped their feet and whinnied in protest at the delays caused by people and carts darting between the wagons to cross the street.

“Move on!” a policeman shouted to Pincus.

Sora started to cry and Fannie moved over to hold her. “I don’t feel so good, Fagela,” said Rivka, leaning against her other arm.

Pincus finally found the rooming house. The lady in charge was a large, beefy woman with thick hair fastened in a bun at the back of her head. A man’s shirt covered her large bosom and stocky body. She had roughened red hands and looked them over carefully with shrewd eyes before agreeing to take them in. Her name was Nachomkeh and she had three children.

Five years ago, her husband had left for Canada saying he would send for her and the children as soon as could save enough money for their passage. That was the last she ever heard from him. A sister in Ottawa wrote to say she heard that he had married some well-off widow in Hamilton.

But Nachomkeh was resourceful. To support herself and the children, she talked a Russian gentleman into letting her manage a rooming house he owned. Russian laws forbade Jews from owning property or operating a business, but the authorities usually looked the other way if it benefited them. And Nachomkeh saw to it the relevant officials benefitted by a few kopeks, every now and then, from their partial blindness

Despite her rough exterior, Nachomkeh had a kind heart and took a liking to Fannie. She gave her room and board in exchange for Fannie’s help in the kitchen and for taking care of the children when needed.

“Fagela,” she advised, “be careful when you go out into the street and also later, when go on the ship. You should keep your money pinned inside your *untervesh*. There are thieves here



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and they will steal everything you have if they see you have no experience in the streets. Never go out alone. There are men who look for young girls to take away and do—God knows what—with them.”

Fannie was more than alert to such dangers and heeded her advice, staying close to the house at all times. They lived in this way for not one but two months before the ship finally returned to the harbor. Then, there was so much excitement, with seemingly everyone in town running this way and that.

Fannie collected her possessions and pinned her money to the chemise under her heavy woolen blouse. Before leaving, she found Nachomkeh and fell into her arms crying and thanking her for all her kindness. The big woman said she felt like she was losing a daughter and cried along with the girl.

“Nachomkeh, I will not forget you. *Zol Gut dir benchen*, God bless you. Look for me in America—I’ll be in a town called Cleveland—if you ever come!”

## Chapter Four

The ship loaded and departed in sweltering heat on the second Friday of July. Standing in line with all her worldly possessions cradled in her arms, Fannie’s hand caught hold of one of great grandmother’s candlesticks and her thoughts flew back to Diffenishek and Rachel-Leah.

Fridays were for cleaning and cooking in preparation to welcome *Shabbos* into the home. Thursday would have already filled the evening air with the sweet yeasty smell of freshly baked *challahs* and *bobkas*. But Friday morning the house had to scrubbed from top to bottom. Fannie took pride that everyone said Rochel-Leah was a real *balabosteh*. “Her floor is so clean, almost you could eat off of it.”

One of Fannie's tasks was to polish Mama's beloved candlesticks so you could see your face shining back at you.

By mid-afternoon, succulent aromas you could almost taste filled the house with the promise of the blessings of a traditional Jewish Sabbath dinner—*chollent*, potato *kugle*, and *tzimmes*. Fannie would work along with her mother, preparing for *Shabbos*. If they were lucky enough to have a goose, she carefully plucked the bird's feathers, which Mama used for *piranee* feather-bed that would one day go in her trousseau.

Then, just before sundown, she would cover the table with a spotless white cloth and place the shining candlesticks at the head. Papa would come in with a clean shirt and his face and hands scrupulously scrubbed. The household quieted as the peace of *Shabbos* descended on the family. Rochel-Leah, her hair covered with a bit of lace, lit the candles. With cupped hands shielding her eyes from the splendor of the twin flames, she intoned the blessing to welcome the Sabbath Queen into their modest home.

In Papa's absence, Fievel chanted the blessings over the *challah* and wine. And then, "The dinner fit for a king." Afterwards, he would lead the family in the singing of *zemirot*.

"Too soon," Mama thought, "he has had to leave boyhood play behind to become the *mench* Papa needed him to be. And what of Fagela? So dear but such a handful."

In this patriarchal society, girls did not go to school. They soon learned their place was in the home—first their father's and then their husband's. But Fannie could not fully stifle her independent spirit and love of knowledge. Since she was a child, she was always asking questions. But it was not seemly for a girl to even want to go to school with the boys, so she had to find other ways to learn, especially to learn how to read.

Fievel's friend Hershel would often come to the house to study with him, and Fannie would place herself between the two of them at the table. For a lark, Hershel started to teach her the *aleph beys*, and was surprised at how quickly she learned the alphabet.

Soon, she was reciting along with them in the *Chumash*. As a present on her eleventh birthday, Hershel gave Fannie two of his old readers. But with all her chores, it was hard to find time to read while there was still light.

"At least there will be time for that much on our ship," she consoled herself.

Pincus and Gittel had already sold their wagon and horses. For Pincus, saying goodbye to his two long-time companions was one of the hardest things, and Gittel knew not to ask him about it. He had turned down two better offers before going with a fellow who seemed more honest and kindly. To shuttle their belongings to the pier where the ship was berthed, it was necessary to borrow a cart from Nachomkeh. Her son would come along to bring it back.

In her hand, Fannie clutched her precious "ship's card," her passport to a new life.

"Steerage," the officer barked when she handed over the ticket. This, she knew, was deep in the bowels of the ship where cargo—freight or human—was stowed. Few improvements had been made to accommodate the immigrants; there were no portholes or effective ventilation, and both privacy and sanitary conditions were woefully inadequate. But it would have to suffice. Fannie followed the throng down the dark, steep stairs to the compartments below. The reek from so many human bodies crowded together that greeted Fannie was overpowering and she gagged.

The women's' and children's' quarters were on the port side of the ship. There were 25 rows of metal bunks, three deep, attached to the wall. Fannie found an empty top berth, set her

bundle of clothing as a pillow and spread out her *piranee*, thankful she did not have to use the threadbare blanket the ship issued.

Lying on her hard plank bed, she listened to the babble of languages as mothers comforted their crying children in a wide array of tongues, most of which she did not understand. However, she did recognize the tone and concern of motherhood, which is the same in all languages.

So low in the belly of the ship as they were, the noise of the engines, combined with the ship's rocking motion and the overwhelming odors caused almost everyone to be sick. Some did little but cling to their beds the entire thirteen days they were at sea. Babies cried incessantly and many became ill. No few of them died.

People were scratching all the time from the lice. Fannie kept her long hair in braids, combing them out every day in vain hope of keeping them free of the hated bugs. With so many using the scarce facilities, filth inevitably built up on the toilets and sinks.

Once Fannie was finally able to keep a bit of food down, she began to think about exploring the foredeck. Although she was afraid to walk alone—the leering faces of the Cossacks were never far away—she could not remain cooped up on her bunk any longer. Her legs were cramping, and it was necessary to stretch them.

A blessing came on the fourth day at sea when two girls about her age came to ask if she would walk with them. Like her, Miriam and Chashkee were each from *shtetlach* in Lithuania and were traveling alone. The three quickly became fast friends.

In a familiar tale, Cossacks had stormed into Miriam's *shtetl* on a Jew-killing spree, a *pogrom*, at Easter. Fortunately, the villagers had been forewarned so things were not so bad as

they might have been. Miriam's mother had hidden her with two younger sisters in a haystack, while the older children and adults took to the woods, so no one was killed this time.

Deprived of their sport, the drunken soldiers made do with smashing furniture in the houses and stealing whatever they could lay their hands on. Miriam's family had some luck that day; at least their house wasn't burned down like some of the others. And so the girls walked arm-in-arm about the deck each afternoon, speaking of their families and sharing stories of their blessings, as well as their misfortunes, to relieve the intense homesickness.

Chashkee was worried she would not know her father at Ellis Island. It had been so long since she had last seen his face.

"If we cannot find each other, they will send me back home. But I cannot remember his face, even in my dreams. I was only three when he left us. Mama says he has a good job in a factory where they make men's suits. He sews on buttons all day and he takes work home, too. Two years ago he sent tickets for my brothers Mottel and Yoessel, and now they work in the same factory.

"They got away just in time before the Russians came for them. For a Jewish boy to go into their army is death! My own aunt, Tahnteh-Leah cries all the time. They took my cousin Shmuel and he never came back. Perhaps Papa will bring Mottel along when he comes."

There was a dining room of sorts where the girls began to take their meals and where they met other young people. Most were from Poland and Latvia, which bordered Lithuania. A Jewish girl from the Balkans spoke Yiddish a good deal differently, but Fannie understood enough to exchange stories with her. "They" had taken away her father's lumberyard two years ago, and he had left for America. Last year her mother had taken ill and passed, after which, her

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father had taken a new wife. She was going to New York to live with them. Everyone had their story.

There was a blond-haired boy from Poland who had walked all the way from Kalingrad, carrying an accordion on his back. When he played a polka, it was so lively that everyone started to sing in dance. It didn't matter what language you sang or how you moved your feet; for the first time, the young people seemed to sense a light at the end of all the darkness. Fannie and her friends danced with each other; they never danced with boys, of course.

With no land in sight, the days dragged on, and Fannie lost track of time. Thankfully they at least had not encountered any major storms and the girls had their afternoon walks to look forward to.

“America, America! America!” A boy had burst into the women's compartment yelling at the top of his lungs. Fannie woke up to a tumult of confused and excited voices all around her. Several women were screaming, not knowing what was happening and dozens of children were crying. She clambered down from her bunk and helped the mother in the berth below help with her daughter.

On the twenty-eighth day of July, just at daybreak, the ship entered New York Harbor with all of its railings crowded with immigrants gaping in awe at their first sight of the Manhattan skyline.

## Chapter Five

As the rising sun picked out the tops of the tallest skyscrapers, an awed hush fell over the crowd as if the sight were too sacred for words. Moments later, the silence was ripped apart by an explosion of shouting, cheering and joyous thanksgiving. Pincus and Gittel were there by

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Fannie's side, crying unabashedly at the sight along with the children, and giving thanks to God for the miracle of their deliverance.

*Di Godeneh Medina*, the Golden Land, looked every bit the part now, as ten thousand windows of the city reflected gold in the growing morning light

The immigrants stood on the decks transfixed, watching the ship maneuver its massive hulk into its berth on the Hudson River. A gangplank was lowered, and they were told to gather their belongings and prepare to disembark. A barge was waiting there to ferry them across the river to Ellis Island where they would be processed before being allowed to enter the United States.

Or perhaps not, God forbid. Giddy anticipation for a new world, a new life...and fear of rejection and shameful return to God knows what—after all this *tsoris*—was painted on every face.

There was pandemonium as families tried to stay together as they rushed one last time below decks to gather their belongings. Fannie was one of the first to reach the women's compartment and hurriedly pulled her featherbed and bundle of clothes down from her bunk. No time to lose, she placed one atop the other and struggled up the crowded stairs, hardly able to see where she was going.

Pincus and his family were nowhere to be seen in the mad crush of people, and she worried about the little girls, everyone was pushing and shoving so in their haste to get off of the ship. Fannie could not see Miriam or Chashkee either, and feared she would never see her friends again.

Fannie nearly swooned when she happened to glance at the water, far below, as she stumbled her way down the gangplank. And once her feet finally touched solid land, she found

she could hardly stand; the very ground seemed to roll and pitch beneath her. But there was no time to adjust for she was immediately jostled onto the waiting barge.

Ellis Island lay so low in the water that Fannie's first impression of the immense spread of its red brick buildings was that of a huge creature of the sea, rising up out of the water with octopus-like arms reaching out to gather the immigrants into itself. The steeped towers topping each corner of the main building filled her with dread for they gave it the appearance of a church, a place no Jew must ever enter.

When the barge moored at the island, two policemen barred their exiting. No one came to explain the reason for this and, weighted down by tension and exhaustion as much as by their belongings, panic spread like a wildfire among the trapped immigrants. A confluence of different dialects implored,

“What is happening? Are we being sent back home?”

For two hours it went like this before the police let them disembark. It was to be their first of many lessons in waiting they were to experience that day.

Inside the main building to which they were led, uniformed men who looked like soldiers to Fannie, hung an identification card around each immigrant's neck. Numbered and lettered, they were herded onto the Custom's Wharf. Few immigrants could speak any English, so the officials resorted to pushing them into various lines for processing. Afterwards, Fannie was directed to stand in a circle with a group of other frightened people. Nobody had any idea of what was about to happen until a translator came by to explain the next step—an inspection.

The translator took them to a baggage room where they were ordered to leave all the belongings. Fannie saw piles of featherbeds, trunks, and bundles lying about in disarray on the



floor. There was no one watching over them. and she prayed that her precious *piranee* would still be there on her return.

Then he led her group to a long, wide stairway going up so high Fannie feared she might lose her balance. On either side of the stairway, men in white jackets stood watching their progress up the flight of stairs. Just in front of her, an elderly man stumbled, and she stooped to help him to his feet. As she did so, she saw one of the watchers write something down on a pad he held. At the top of the stairs, the old man's back was marked with a piece of white chalk and he was led away to another room.

At this, his wife started to yell and cry, and they allowed her to go with him.

“Hurry along! Go! Go!” the uniformed men shouted as they prodded the immigrants into long lines partitioned off with metal railings. Like cattle waiting by an abattoir, they stood dumb and uncomprehending, waiting their turn. The harried inspectors were allotted two minutes for each person; 5,000 to 10,000 immigrants had to be processed that day. All sense of humanity was sacrificed in the rush.

At one station, a man in a white coat took a long-handled buttonhook and, without warning, used it to flip back Fannie's eyelids while bending forward to peer into her eyes. With a shriek she tried to jerk away, but he had placed a hand behind her head.

“No trachoma,” he said, passing her on quickly to the next station. Her eyes hurt for two weeks after that treatment. Before she knew what was happening, another white-jacketed man was pounding on her back and apparently listening to her innards with some sort of tube plugged in his ears. After that, it was her nose, mouth, tongue, and ears.

“Hurry along! Go! Go!”

Fannie was conducted to a room with some women and a few older girls like herself. She was ordered to take off her blouse so that a woman—thank God—in a white coat could listen through one of those tubes to her chest. Even though there were only women in the room, she was deeply embarrassed to disrobe in front of total strangers. The only thing that made it bearable was that all the others seemed equally abashed.

It took all of the day to pass through every line. The final inspector was in a room set off from the rest of the building. After all the tumult of the past hours, it seemed disquietingly quiet. The inspector was a large, imposing man and he sat behind a big desk while a smaller fellow stood beside him to translate his questions into Yiddish.

Following her long-standing practice to lower her head when speaking with an unknown man, Fannie addressed his first question while looking down at her feet.

“*Ich cum fun Diffenishek,*” she began. “My Papa will be here to take me to Cleveland, Ohio where I will live with my cousin Channah and her husband Yankel. I will be a maid to their family,” she said softly.

“Speak up, child! We can’t hear you! And look at me as you answer my questions.”

“I have money; I will not be a beggar.” She turned around to take out the \$25 dollars she had pinned inside her blouse.

The inspector nodded and jotted something on a piece of paper which he handed to the translator.

“*Zayer gut,*” the little man said. “Fannie Davis *iz deyn Americaner nomen itst.*” He gave her the paper on which the inspector had written, and told her to keep it in a safe place.

She walked out of the room in a daze, unsure of what to do next and was surprised to find Chashkee sitting against a wall in the hallway, all in tears.

“Fagela, they took Miriam away! She was right in front of me when one of the white coat men wrote a big mark on her back and then they took her away. I don’t know where she is for certain, but I heard someone behind me mention a hospital. *Oy vey!* Her father is coming tomorrow. He is losing a day’s pay to come and get her; how will he know if he is to come or not? And what of poor Miriam?”

At five o’clock, the inspections ended and the lights in the main hall were turned off. All remaining immigrants were led to the dining room for a modest dinner and then to dormitories on the second floor to spend the night. A matron took their clothing away to be deloused. The green shifts they were provided were threadbare but clean. The two exhausted girls thought the thin pallets covering their cots felt soft as clouds and, despite their fears for Miriam, were soon deeply asleep.

The next morning, they arose early to walk the balcony overlooking the main floor.

“Will I ever see you again?” Fannie asked, hugging Chashkee tightly.

“Only God knows that, Fagela. I will live with my sister Esther and my brother-in-law Izzie in New York. Esther says it is on the East Side, if that can help you find me some day.”

At 10:00 that morning, Chashkee’s relatives came for her. One last time, they threw their arms about one another. “I will write you!” they called out as they parted.

By 2:00 in the afternoon, Fannie’s name had still not been called. She did not move from the reception area for fear she would miss her father’s arrival. The whole time on the ship, she had worried about this moment. “What if no one comes to meet me? What if Papa had the wrong day in his head or if he had trouble on the way from Cleveland? Will I be sent home on the next boat? How will I get back, all by myself, to Diffenishek and Mama?”

And so she sat on the floor watching other people being collected by their families, hugging, laughing and crying all at the same time. Each time, Fannie hoped her name would be called next.

Finally, just after 3:00, she heard her own name. At the reception desk, an official said a Mrs. Davis was asking for her. Instead of Papa, there stood a plump little woman with a fur piece around her neck and a stylish red feather standing proudly from the middle of a soft black hat.

It was *Kuzineh* Channah, and she looked much like Rochel-Leah might have looked if she'd been, maybe, fleshed out a good bit. Fannie remembered people saying that when the cousins were young, they'd often been mistaken as twins. She had the same olive coloring and dark brown eyes, and they were now sparkling with warmth and vitality.

For a moment they stood a few feet apart, simply looking at one another. Just looking.

The next moment, Fannie was swept up in a explosion of emotion, with hugs and kisses and tears. And suddenly, there was nothing else. No immense red brick building, no overcrowded women's quarters in the bowels of a ship, no sorrows, no fear. Fannie understood that in some magical way, both she and Channah were enfolding themselves once again in the loving embrace of Rochel-Leah.

"Oy Fagela, how beautiful you are! You are the picture of your mother when she was young!"

"*Kuzineh* Channah, I am so glad to see you." She could not make herself let go of her cousin.

"Fagela, darling, in America my name is now Hattie. *Oy*, let me look at you some more. You are all grown up, almost! Thank God you got here safe. *Gut Sudank!*"

"*Kuzineh*, my Papa—is he alright? Why did he not come for me?"

“Your Papa doesn’t have his citizen papers yet, and his English is still not maybe as good as it should be by now. So it was decided I should come instead. Yankel and I know New York City better than him, also. Yankel comes for business, and I to shop and visit family while he is at the wholesalers.”

“My brother Mosheh lives in Brooklyn. We will stop there before we go home—the *mishbochah* want so much to see you!”

“So now her name is Hattie,” thought Fannie. “Such a strange sounding name. And even though she could be Mama’s mirror—alright, she is a little more round in the middle—she does not dress like a respectable married woman in *di haim*, with a high-neck dress, long sleeves, and a marriage wig. And now look! See how she talks without even a blink to the immigration officer!”

Channah—Hattie—seemed to speak English like a real *Americaner*. She was not afraid to speak to the man and did not even lower her eyes. “How strange her ways seem. I wonder if she has forgotten all about her old life back in Diffenishek.”

But when they were finally alone for a bit, Hattie lapsed easily into the comfortable, singsong style of Yiddish that both she and Fannie had grown up with.

“*Lamir geyn itst. Voo zenen dayn kleyder?* Let us go, now. Where are your things?”

They both breathed a sigh of relief on finding her *piranee* and bundle of clothes at the end of the room near where she had left them. They had been moved to the side, but they had been otherwise untouched.

Outside, they fell into line with others waiting for the ferry to carry them back across the river to Manhattan. It was the same barge that had brought her to Ellis Island in what seemed like an age ago, although it had only been one day. Once again, the transport was crowded with

newly arrived immigrants whose excited jabbering voices contrasted sharply with the emotionally drained group waiting to depart the island.

## Chapter Six

The ferry eased itself into the slip at its assigned wharf. Coming ashore, the sights, sounds and smells of the busy port were enough to confuse the most seasoned travelers—something the thieves and con artists knew very well.

Fannie thought she saw Pincus and stopped for a moment as Hattie walked on. A little man in an oversized black coat approached her smiling. In Yiddish, he presented himself as a bank official, there to help her change her money into American dollars.

“*Gonif!*” Hattie yelled as she came charging right at the little man. “Thief! You should be ashamed of yourself!” and she grabbed Fannie by the arm, dragging her away.

“Fagela, here there are robbers and pickpockets, just like in Klaipeda. You should not talk to anyone you don’t know. Now, stay close by me. There are also men who look for young girls to steal away. Here, put your bundle under your other arm and with your hand, take hold on my arm. I’ve got your *piranee*.”

“*Meh ken geharget veren daw!* A person can get killed here,” Fannie cried.

“Yes, Fagela. You must have eyes also on the back of your head and on both sides. This is not Diffenishek!”

The horse-drawn carriages in the street waited for no one to pass, and one had to be especially careful on stepping into the road—and not just because of the speeding traffic.

“Oy!” Fannie yelped, jerking her foot back suddenly and trying to scrape the revolting muck off the sole of her boot. “*Fairdlach!*”

“And under your chin, too” added Hattie, with a smile.

“Be careful going down the stairs, Fagela, they’re very steep.”

For a moment, Fannie couldn’t fathom what Hattie was referring to. She had been disoriented by a sudden blast of hot air from a broad opening in the pavement of the sidewalk—her first taste of the underground world of the subway.

At the bottom of the steps, Hattie dropped two nickels into a turnstile and pushed Fannie through, into a crowd of people standing in what appeared to be a large cavern beside a pit with railroad tracks running along its length and into a black tunnel at either end.

Within several minutes a train rushed into the cavern with a nearly unbearable roar of rushing air and screeching brakes. Most of the crowd now moved toward the carriage doors that suddenly opened, and Fannie started to follow along.

“No!” Hattie pulled her back. “That one is not ours. Let’s sit on a bench to wait for one that says Flatbush.”

Fannie could not envision a train saying its name, but in any case, they did not have to wait very long before Hattie jumped up yelling, “This is it. *Lamir geyn!*”

Grabbing Fannie’s hand, she ran to get in line. When the doors snapped open, they rushed in and Hattie pushed the girl into the first available seat. Rather than seating herself, the older woman stood protectively over the girl, hanging on to an overhead strap and hugging the precious *piranee* with her free arm.

“Welcome to America, Fagela,” she laughed.

It was her very first ride in a train. Who had the money—or the need—to travel in such style in Diffenishek? Later on, she would write to her mother, “I still cannot believe a train goes under the ground in black tunnels, although I, myself, have done so, now, three times.”

After a ride of about forty minutes, Hattie pulled her cousin off her seat as the train slowed for their stop. Fannie barely escaped the slamming doors as they exited. They climbed up a flight of stairs into a world of tall apartment buildings, pushcarts, and children playing in the streets.

It was not a long walk to Moisheh's little hole-in-the wall dry-cleaning shop. His wife, Sonia, was waiting there with him and she welcomed Fannie into her arms with a squeal of joy.

"So this is the *maidel* we've all been waiting for?" Moisheh said, almost giggling with pleasure. "*Tahkie*, Hattie, she looks just as you did when you arrived here, how many years ago! What a beauty!" And he wrapped his scrawny arms around the both of them.

"Moisheh, you'll close the store now" Sonia ordered. "We'll go home to celebrate Fagela arriving safely after such a trip, and all alone.

"I was never alone, *Kuzineh* Sonia. Not really ever. I thought I would be when Mama first said I was to go, but everywhere I went I found kind and good friends." As Fannie spoke, she realized for the first time the truth of what she was saying. She thought of Pinchus and his family, huddling in the wagon under their blankets as the rain came down that first night. And of Namchomkey, giving her sound advice as together they diced carrots for the evening's meal. Once again, her vision blurred with tears as she recalled walking arm-arm with Chashkee and Miriam on the ship's deck.

"Miriam! Poor Miriam, what has become of her?" and she was finally able to cry for her friend, and also the old man who stumbled, and all the others, God bless them, who for whatever incomprehensible reason, failed the test that was Ellis Island. For a time, right in front of these warm-hearted and generous people, Fannie let it all wash over her, and her deep, body-wrenching sobbing was both painful and a great release.



She was gently guided to a little stool behind the counter, where she was left to weep, whether it be in sorrow for leaving Rochel-Leah and Diffenishek, the hazards of her long travel or for the simple joy of having herself survived to be once again among family. They knew.

They knew because they had, each in their turn, been Fannie. Her emotions were a tangle of relief in having achieved the seemingly impossible dream of having crossed an ocean to a haven of safety, and guilt at having done so, when so many of those whom she dearly loved remained in peril. They knew this because they drank of the same compounded cup of joy and grief every day, even now.

And so, she was left to cry until she had done. It had been necessary and expected.

Their obvious affection for her enveloped and comforted Fannie. After Moisheh had drawn a fence across his shop window and door, and double-checked the lock, Fannie followed them down Albany Avenue, still clutching her bundles, to the apartment building where they lived. It was difficult for her to believe that so many people all lived together in such a place. Up three flights of stairs they climbed, stopping to catch their breath at each landing—all the way to Apartment 301.

“They’re here! I hear them coming!”

“Certainly, you are right. You could hear Moisheh’s clomping shoes a mile away, *schlepping* up the stairwell!”

And suddenly, there was such a throng of aunts, uncles, and cousins once and twice removed surrounding them on the stairs, embracing both Fannie and Hattie, and starting the party before they had even reached the third floor landing. It was here on the stairwell that Fannie learned the full meaning of the word, *mishbochah*. Family, yes, but here—so far from all she had known and treasured during her youth—on this crowded stairwell, something more. It is the

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greater family founded on common experience. One's relatives to be sure, but also, and in some ways just as importantly, those who had once lived in your tiny village, or perhaps even just known of it. *Mishbochah* are those with whom you could share—anything.

Everyone was some type of cousin, aunt or uncle, apparently, whether or not they were actually related to anyone else in the tiny apartment. Cousin Bessie brought her famous *lokshun kugel* while Cousin Sarah, not to be outdone, made the most delicious *blintzes*. The four Wishman girls (not a one of them under fifty) unloaded *latkes*, sour cream, apple sauce and herring—enough by itself to feed them all a *Chanukah* feast—on the groaning table. *Tahnte Chalah* and *Feter Manny* owned a bakery, so they brought along their special-for-Rosh Hashana honey cake and *taigelach*.

Cousin Esther's strudel and her daughter Doris's *rugalach* had to be set on a side-table, along with *Tahnte Goldie*'s freshly baked *mandelbrot*, there was so much food. Cousin Hymie, the widower and his friend and fellow landsman, Aaron, rounded out the banquet with some *kimmel* rye and *kichel* they picked up at a local deli.

"It is a *yontif*, my little cousin has come to be with us in America," Moisheh began, and he started to sing in a rich baritone:

<i>Tzu mir is gekumen ah kuzineh,</i>	To me came a cousin,
<i>Shein vi gold iz zee geven, "di grinneh,"</i>	Pretty as gold was she, the "green one,"
<i>Bekelech vi royteh pomeranstsn,</i>	Little cheeks like red oranges,
<i>Fiselech vos hebn tsum tansn.</i>	Little feet that beg to dance.

And his brothers Label and Nathan began to laugh and sing along with him, clapping their hands so everyone might join in. Even though "*Di Grine Kuzineh*" is a comic song about how the hardships of an immigrant's life in New York eventually wears one down, it so tickled their very

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Jewish taste for ironic humor that no one thought it too callous for their new “greenhorn”. And Fannie laughed right along with the rest of them.

How everyone fit into that little three-room apartment was a wonder to the girl. Most of them were people the Mama had grown up with in Diffenishkek. “*Oy*, if only Mama could be her with me to see them all again, how happy she would be.”

“*Nu*, so when are Rochel-Leah, Fievel and Mendeleh coming over, Fagela?”

“What do you hear from your Papa in Cleveland?”

“Is Rabbi Dovid still pounding the *bima*, people should quiet down?”

“Did you see from today’s paper? The war between Russia and Japan is over, *Gut sudank!* You have to wonder how many of our Jewish boys drafted into the army did we lose in fighting their *farshiltn* war?”

“Fagela, have another *shtickel kugel*, you’re so thin.”

“But first you’ll try a taste of my strudel and then a piece from my daughter’s *rugalach*. Your mouth has never tasted such a treat!”

“Hattie, you’ll take some home for the family.”

*Mishbochah.*

## Chapter Seven

They awoke to the hearty smell of coffee and the clink of crockery as Sonia prepared breakfast. Fannie’s first tentative sip of the aromatic black fluid, however, did not go down well. “I know, Fegela,” Moisheh, chuckled, “with your first taste you think how can anyone stand it? But in a little time, you’ll see. For now let us share a *glezeleh tey*.”

By eight they all headed out the door, fortified with Sonia's bagels and *lox mit a smir*. Moishe took the morning off to escort them to the New York Central Railroad Station in time for their eleven o'clock departure. Saying goodbye to her hosts was difficult, but at least she knew another visit was possible, sometime in the future when...

"When what? When I'm married with my own children? Will such a thing ever be?" And not for the last time, she remembered the feel of Yitzchak's soft beard on her cheek.

"Come visit with us this summer, if you can spare a couple days," said Hattie. "It would do you good to get away from the *hitz* in the city. We'll have a picnic in our backyard." She kissed her brother and sister-in-law. "You'll bring Roselie and Sheldon. My children are looking forward to seeing their cousins, and don't forget we're having a *bar mitzvah* in June."

At the station, they said their final farewells. "Goodbye, and thank you so much for everything. I'll write to Mama how wonderful you all are."

Moisheh handed Fannie the new(ish) suitcase for her clothes that the relatives had given her. There were more hugs and kisses. Hattie was waiting on the steps of their carriage with the precious *piranee*. A porter helped settle them on a double seat by a window, after which Hattie gave the man a coin.

"Why did you give money to a strange man, *Kuzineh* Cha-...Hattie?" she asked.

"In America, this is how some things are done," patting her hand as she explained the concept of tipping. Fannie listened intently, bewildered at how much there was to learn if she was to become a "real" *Americaner*. How would she ever manage it all? "But I suppose if *Kuzineh Channah* has done so, why not me?" And that was a comforting thought.

Hattie took off her coat and the hat with the red feather and made herself comfortable. Fannie chose to keep her shawl wrapped loosely about her shoulders, and they settled in for the long trip to Ohio.

“Oy, it is good to sit still, finally,” Fannie sighed. After a while, Hattie set aside her book and turned to her side for a nap. The girl removed her shawl and covered her cousin with it.

Fannie thought she was far too excited, herself, for sleep. She could not imagine what the future would hold for her in Cleveland. “And there will be Papa! I will squeeze him so until his eyes pop out of his head!”

The warmth of the Brooklyn relatives had revived her spirits. She loved meeting them all and hearing them speak to one another in Yiddish. It was such a relief to be with one’s own, and to be able to understand what they were saying. On the ship, the mixed voices of Russians, Czechs, Poles and other immigrants had blended into a cacophony that had rivaled the churning of the ship’s engines. Even some of the dialects of Yiddish were difficult to follow.

But the harsh, guttural English of the policemen and officials barking at her on Ellis Island—that was the most unsettling of all. She shuddered remembering how helpless she had felt as the white-jacketed men had poked and prodded and uniformed men had pushed and shoved.

As Fannie watched the peaceful, sunlit fields slip by through the window, she felt the cloud of confusion from those days lifting. She was safe now, sitting beside her cousin who seemed to radiate comfort and security. Safe.

“Fagela—Fannie—we should be home by morning. Look, I want to show you something.” They had been traveling now for some four or five hours, and Hattie was feeling

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chatty. She searched among the bundles on the floor for her big paisley handbag and took out an envelope from a side pocket.

“Give a look. Here are pictures of Yankel and the children. This is my Sarah; she is six years old and already she goes to school. Doesn’t she look like your mother?” But Fannie had lost track of the conversation at Hattie’s casual mention of the unimaginable thought of a young girl being permitted to attend school.

“And this is our little *pistoyl*, Becky. *Oy* is she a *teivel!* Here she is sitting still like a statue for the camera, but usually what a wiggle-bottom! She turned three last month. So here are the twins, Joey and Morty. It will be their *bar mitzvahs* in June,” she said, her eyes glistening with pride.

“Fannie—Fagela—you’ll see how much our little girls and the boys are eager to meet you.” She shook her head. “Boys, what am I saying? They are almost men, already. Before you know it, they’ll be out of knickers and into long pants. But darling, you will still be like a big sister to them and another daughter to me.”

As the train clattered along, Fannie listened contentedly to her cousin describing her new home to be.

“We live in a big house on a nice quiet street. The homes are shaded by tall trees on both sides of the street, which is called Elm Street because that’s the name of the trees. Not only are they tall, but the top branches bend over the road to shake hands with the trees on the other side. So when it’s raining, at least if it’s not coming down in buckets, you can walk down the street without even getting a drop on you.”

“Our house has dark green shutters on all the windows, upstairs and down. And we have a coal furnace in the cellar that heats the whole place, even the bathroom on the second floor.”

“A cellar? A furnace? A second floor? *Kuzineh* Channah, I mean Hattie, you did not tell me you were so rich!” Fannie was even more astonished on learning she was to have her own room, and dumbstruck a moment later when Hattie made it clear there was not only a tub in the bathroom, but a flushing toilet like in the red brick building on Ellis Island. And also the sinks in the bathroom and kitchen gave you hot water you didn’t have to heat first over the stove.”

“I cannot believe it, Hattie! I will be like a princess there. Does the toilet go with hot water too?”

“Darling, here is the plan. You will go to a school at night to learn how to speak English, just like I did. Once you do that, you can become an American citizen, but that will take a few years. Even your Papa still has to wait another year.”

“During the day, a lot of the time you will do the housework and take care of the children because Moisheh needs my help in the shop. Rochel-Leah wrote saying you are already a *balabosteh* so I know you will be a big help to all of us. My Yankel is especially looking forward to some of the special *Yiddisheh* dishes his mother used to make, but I don’t have the time for anymore.”

“I shouldn’t mind such work,” Fannie thought, “And it will be even better because I will be with family.”

Hattie went back to the book she was reading, and Fannie contented herself with watching the scenery through her window. The rolling hills provided a beautiful setting for the well-kept farms and small woodlots—so different from the forested wilderness Pincus had driven them through on their way to the seaport in Lithuania. The little weathered dwellings back home were drab and dingy things compared to these handsome farmhouses with their enormous barns close by.

“There must be many rich landowners in America, Hattie. A poor man must turn over almost all his harvest to the Squire to pay for the right to work his land.”

“Fagela. We have no peasants or aristocrats here—all these farms, they are owned not by noblemen but by the farmers themselves.”

During the trip, they made stops in many towns, both large and small, to take on and let off passengers. “Hattie, it is wonderful how the tracks go right into the middle of the cities and villages. I remember one time when Papa got permission to travel to Vilna. Mama said Zaydeh Itchkie had to hitch up his wagon and drive to a place in the middle of some field to wait for the train. Even then, they had to flag the driver to stop for him.”

“I know. I also remember how it used to be,” her cousin quietly mused. “You will see that Cleveland has a beautiful station, easy to get to from anywhere in the city. Of course, it’s not so big and the one in New York, but it is just as modern.”

“Next stop, Youngstown, Ohio,” a conductor came calling down the aisle. “Be ready to depart in fifteen minutes.”

“Fagela, we have to change trains here. The next one goes straight to Cleveland, but we will have a bit of a wait before that.”

Hattie stood up and stretched to her full four feet, ten inches. She checked a delicate little watch that hung from a thin chain around her neck. “It’s 11:30 now and we have to be aboard the next train at 4:30, so we have plenty of time for lunch. Yankel and I found a little restaurant nearby on our way back from our last visit to New York. Also, it will be good to stretch our legs and get some fresh air.”

Hattie checked their baggage into four lockers at the station and walked outside. Unlike the streets of Manhattan, there were no crowds of people milling about. A few horse-drawn cabs



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were waiting at the curb for passengers but Hattie waved one of them away when he approached and set off at a brisk pace.

Fannie had to trot to catch up, grabbing her cousin's arm so as to not lose her. But Hattie patted her hand and soothed, "It's alright, Fagela; you don't have to worry so much here. Youngstown is not like Klaipeda," and she gingerly extricated herself from the girl's iron grasp.

The restaurant was only a couple of blocks down the street and Fannie halted for a moment before following Hattie in. She had never in her life eaten anywhere but at home or the house of a relative or friend. But it was nice to sit quietly at the little cloth-covered table and to be served by a smiling lady wearing a frilly, white apron.

The restaurant wasn't kosher, so they couldn't have any meat. Instead, they chose to share a portion of farmer's cheese, a small loaf of hard-crust black bread and a couple of hard-boiled eggs. For a treat, they ordered a slice of apple pie. It didn't compare with Bubbie Malkie's pie, of course—it was too sweet—but Fannie felt like a royal princess, taking forkfuls of the dessert from a pretty dish and sipping tea from a matching cup with a delicate handle. A quite different experience than drinking from the heavy *yahrzeit* candle glass Sarah had provided at the party in Brooklyn.

Afterwards, they felt refreshed and took their time walking along the sidewalk and peering into shop windows along the way. A sharp train whistle pierced the afternoon quiet, and Fannie grabbed Hattie's hand to pull her back towards the station.

"No, Fagela, It is too early for our train. Many trains use this station, not only ours. We have time yet."

Fannie watched as the doors to the station swung open for people going in and coming out. Two well-clad gentlemen got into one of the waiting cabs and the sharp clattering of the horses' iron-shod hooves on the cobbled street was somehow soothing.

Several children burst out through the swinging door with their parents lagging behind, *shlepping* bags and suitcases. The youngsters, girls as well as boys, were chasing one other and yelling gleefully at the top of their lungs.

"America is so different," Fannie sighed. "*Kinder* seem so happy and free here. They are not working always. I will not feel completely happy until I see Mendeleh playing here, too."

By three, they were back at the depot. "*Oy vay*, I have to sit." Hattie grimaced as she pried a dress shoe off an aching foot. It had caused a blister from all their walking. Fannie looked down at her own worn but sturdy boots. "American women are not so strong in the feet as in *di haim*," she thought.

After retrieving their belongings from the lockers, they settled on a bench to wait for their train. Hattie groaned when a voice blared out on the loud speaker. "He says our train to Cleveland will be an hour late."

But the time slipped by and they were first in line to board their coach when the train finally showed up. They found a double seat in the front of the car with room to spare for their luggage. Hattie smiled and patting Fannie's knee said, "We should be home now in an hour or so. It's not so far to Cleveland."

"Home." Fannie looked out the window without really seeing the buildings of the town roll by. What happened to Miriam? Was she sent back across the sea? Maybe not. Why would the white coat men send her to the hospital if they were just going to ship her back? Did her father find her, and what about Chashkee? How are things with her sister and brother-in-law?"

“And what does ‘home’ mean to me now. I wonder?”

So much had happened since she had left Diffenishek. The little village was, almost against her will, receding in memory and suddenly here, through the window, was big, beautiful Cleveland rushing at her to take its place.

“Well, maybe not so beautiful, everywhere,” she considered, as the train was now moving ever more slowly through row after row of dingy, gray buildings. And then, finally, they were pulling into a cavernous pavilion. With a sudden jerk, the train stopped.

“Fagela, we’re here. You are home now.”

“Cleveland! Cleveland, Ohio,” the conductor strode down the aisle calling. “Please be sure to collect all your belongings if you will not be traveling on to Sandusky and points west.”

As they followed the other passengers out of the carriage, Fannie held close the bulky *piranee* that would be a comfort and reminder of home in the days to come.

Hattie called out to Yankel and Shimmon, his brother-in-law, who were waiting for them a few carriages down from theirs, and they came running up. Yankel was a light-haired giant of man. “What a pair Yankel and tiny Hattie make together,” smiled Fannie. Before any words were spoken, he had engulfed the both of them in a great bear hug.

“Come, it is too noisy here by the train,” said Shimmon. “We’ll go inside, the family have been waiting to see you a long time. Not only for years and years, but on top of that, it was an hour late!” and he laughed such a lovely, warm chuckle, it made the others laugh too. Even so, it was clear he was the boss. Dark and stocky—just the opposite Yankel—and quick to get people moving.

He was right about the noise. Fannie had to cover her ears to tone down the booming of deep masculine voices announcing train arrivals and departures, echoing off the towering brick walls and vaulted ceiling of the cavernous chamber.

“Fagela! Fagela!” Papa came running up and scooped her into her arms with a twirl like she was six years old again. “*Gut sudank, Gut sudank,*” he kept saying over and over. He was laughing and crying all at once.

The whole Davis family had gathered round them, but Fannie only had eyes for Papa. She could see a lot of gray in his hair that had not been there the last time he had held her. And she noticed as he ran up, there was something wrong with his left leg. But it was still Papa, and her questions could wait.

“Papa, we missed you so much, Mama and Fievel and Mendeleh. Here are hugs and kisses from each of them! There now, I’ve fulfilled my promise to them...but only for today!”

Hattie’s two little girls scooted into her arms to snuggle and kiss her face. She tried coaxing them to kiss Fannie too, but they shyly hung back behind their father, coyly peering at her from behind his trunk-like legs.

To kiss the twin boys, Hattie had to stand on tiptoe, they were so big. Almost as tall as their father, they solemnly stepped forward to shake Fannie’s hand.

Everyone was talking at once, explaining to Fannie how they were connected with her father, mother, uncle, aunt, cousin or to even a just a neighbor in Diffenishek. She wasn’t even trying to remember their names, and it didn’t matter. They were every one of them, *mishbochah*. There would be time for names later.

A tall woman with red hair asked her, “How are my brother Pincus, my sister-in-law Gittel and the two little girls?” Fannie remembered that Pincus had mentioned a sister named

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Ethel living in Cleveland. She had not only his hair color, but also the same smiling blue eyes, and she was drawn to the woman.

“Last I saw them was on Ellis Island, but they all seemed well. They are the most wonderful people and I love Sora and Rivka. You know they are headed to a place called Rochester to live with Gittel’s sister? I have the address somewhere if you need it.”

“And Fagela, do you remember me? A young man who had been quietly waiting his turn stepped forward. “I used to come to the house to study with Fievel. I still remember how you pestered us each day for what we had just learned in school.”

“Hershel! Fannie let out a yell and fell into his arms. “I am so glad to see you! I thought you had probably gone to New York City like so many others, and I did not recognize you without your scraggly beard. Goodness, you have gotten so tall and brown!”

“I’m working in the business with Yankel and Shimmon, now, and I live with Aunt Esther,” he said, with a light blush adding a bit of color to his tanned cheek.

Later, Fannie would recall that Hershel was Pincus’s son from his first marriage. He had left Diffenisheck after his mother had died, and Pincus had remarried within the year. It wasn’t from lack of love or respect for his departed wife; it simply would have been too much to manage his small dairy and household without a helpmate by his side.

Fannie had imagined Hershel to be much older because he always seemed so serious. But here he was now with a big, silly smile on his face. How his eyes sparkled with happiness when she remembered his name.

“Fagela, *azoy sheineh zakh far a kalleh!*” Papa sang out, clapping his hands when he saw the *piranee*. Again he wrapped his arms about her and planted a kiss on her forehead.

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“Papa, if only Mama could be here with us,” Fannie said, wiping away a tear with the back of her wrist.

“In time, in God’s own time, Fagela. We will all be together again.” As he turned aside to lay his cheek against her head, he added to himself, “Here, God willing, or in heaven.”

“*Nu, cum shain!*” Shimmon was eager to get a move on. “Enough already, I’ve got to get back to the store to close up for the night. We’ll have plenty of time to celebrate later.”

Hattie invited everyone back to the house. “Come, Fagela...Come, Fannie, we are going home now.”

With one hand, Yankel hefted both of Hattie’s and Fannie’s bundles onto a shoulder, and with the other picked up the suitcase. Papa beamed, walking beside Hattie as he watched Fannie walking ahead, holding the hands of the two little girls on either side.

Hershel carried her *piranee*.

*Dearest Mama,*

*You were of course right, all along. I have come to like America very much. Everybody here is very kind and we are family, just like in Diffenishek. Kuzineh Hattie goes to the store every day except Shabbos, when we all go to shul, and I wear your beautiful shawl across my shoulders. As you know, Papa is a boarder in Pinchus's sister's house, but he was able to spend a whole afternoon with us on the day after Yom Kippur. Last week, we lit a yahrzeit candle for Zaydeh Itchkie. Yankel and Shimmon own together a beautiful store. Kuzineh Hattie took me tere to buy some new clothes and shoes for Yontiff, and also a handsome coat for when it gets cold. They say it can get bitter sometimes in the winter, just like in di haim. So now I have not one, but two beautiful dresses for Shabbas and the Holy Days. At home I wear the same housedress most days, but it is nice too. Mamma, I miss you so much. I miss Fievel and Mendeleh, too. I am putting my money that I am paid for helping in the house in a bank, just like Papa. Yankel thinks we should be able to send for you all soon, and Papa already is looking for a place where we could stay. Please tell Fievel that his friend Hershel works in the store with Yankel and Shimmon and that he is a boarder in his Aunt Esther's house, like Papa. He has grown tall since last you saw him. I am trying hard to learn English, but it is not so easy. Often, Hattie and Yankel speak English at home and that helps some. I am excited that I am going to start night school soon. Everyone says that your English gets better more quickly then. There is a library not far from our house where Hershel says you can borrow any book for free. All you need is a special card, and he has promised to take me to there to get one as a reward when I have learned to write my new name, Fannie, and our address in English. Mama, you know I love you all. Everybody sends their regards to you and Fievel and Mendeleh, as well as everyone else in Diffineshek. Zei gezunt, stay well. I love you forever and always. Your Fagela.*

*Cleveland, Ohio, U.S.A.*

*10 October 1905*

Glossary of Yiddish Terms and Phrases as used in this Story

(These are many versions of how Yiddish words are spelled in English.)

Ah, choleryah ahf dem .....	A cholera on them! (They should burn up! A curse)
Ah shvartz yor ahf dem! .....	A (horrible) dark dream on them! (A curse)
Ah zay gait .....	So it goes
Aleph beys .....	The Hebrew alphabet
Americaner.....	An American citizen
Arumforn in gezunterhayt.....	Travel in good health (with good fortune)
Azoy sheineh zakh .....	So pretty a thing
Bar mitzvah.....	The coming of age religious ceremony when a boy reaches 13
Bashert .....	Predestined, fated
Balaboteh .....	An (impressively competent) female head of household
Bekelech.....	Cheeks
Bima.....	Alter in the synagogue or the podium on it where the Torah is read
Blintz.....	Thin, rolled pancake filled with cheese or fruit, then fried or baked
Bobkeh .....	A sweet, braided bread or cake, often with a fruit or cheese filling
Bubbie .....	Grandmother
Bubbie maisehs .....	Old wives tales
Challah .....	A braided egg bread
Chollent.....	A traditional stew for Sabbath of meat, potatoes, beans, and barley
Chanukah (Hannukah) .....	Jewish festival of lights, for rededication of the Temple in 165 BC
Chazerim .....	Pigs
Creplach .....	Boiled flour dumpling filled with meat or potato, served in soup
Chumash .....	The Torah in printed form
Chuppa .....	Wedding canopy beneath which a Jewish couple are wed
Di haim.....	The home
Di grinneh .....	The green one (greenhorn)
Di Polishes.....	The Polish
Ess mine kind.....	Eat, my child
Fagel.....	Bird



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Fageleh .....	Little bird, and a term of endearment when “eh” is added to it
Fairdlach .....	Horses
Far .....	For
Farshiltn .....	Moldy, rotten
Feter .....	Uncle
Fiselech .....	Little feet ((bisl fis is more commonly heard)
Gan Edan.....	Garden of Eden
Gay gezuntahayt.....	Go in good health
Gekumen .....	Came
Gefilte fish .....	A deboned fish dish made from whitefish, pike or carp
Gemultiket.....	A feeling of warmth and well-being
Glezeleh tey .....	A little glass of tea
Goldeneh Medina.....	The Golden Dream, a euphemism for America
Gonif.....	Thief, scoundrel; a disreputable person
Gut nacht.....	Good night
Gut Sudank(en).....	Thank God
Hitz.....	Heat
Ich cum fun .....	I come from
Itst .....	now
iz deyn Americaner nomen ....	Is your American name
Kalleh .....	Bride
Kasha.....	Buckwheat groats (minimally processed to remove their husks)
Kichel .....	A sweet cookie made of flour, eggs, sugar and cut into bowties
Kimmel .....	Caraway seed, commonly used in Jewish rye breads
Kind(er).....	Child (little child, children)
Kishke .....	Sausage dish of grain, chicken or beef fat, onions, celery, carrots.
Kleine .....	Little, small
Kugel.....	Baked casserole with noodles, eggs, and various other ingredients
Kuzineh .....	Cousin
Lokshun.....	noodle
Lox mit a smir.....	Smoked salmon (on a bagel) with a smear (of cream cheese)

Lamir geyn itst .....	Let's go
Latke .....	A potato (usually) pancake, typically served at Hanukkah
Lemeshkeh .....	A milquetoast, bungler
Maidel(eh).....	Girl (little girl)
Mandelbrot.....	Literally, almond bread. A biscotti-like twice-baked dessert
Meh ken geharget veren daw .	A person could be killed, here
Mensch.....	A man; but more specifically, an upright, honorable person
Mishbochah.....	Family, extended family or relatives, friends from the old country
Mit Gots helf.....	With god's help
Nu cum shain! .....	So come already!
Nu vos ken mir tawn? .....	So, what can we do? (What now?)
Oy vey!.....	An expression of dismay or exasperation, often abbreviated to Oy!
Oy vey iz mir! .....	Roughly, Oh, woe is me!
Piranee.....	A comforter, commonly quilted and filled with goose feathers
Pistoyl .....	Pistol
Pogrom .....	An organized killing of Jews, especially in Czarist Russia
Rabbi.....	Spiritual leader, teacher and head of the shul
Royteh pomeranstsn.....	Red oranges
Rugalach .....	A pastry rolled around nuts, poppy seed paste, chocolate or jam
Shabbos .....	The Sabbath
Shah, shah .....	Shhh, shhh
Shadchen.....	Matchmaker
Shaineh maidel.....	Pretty girl
Shain vi gold .....	Pretty as gold
Schlep.....	Awkward, clumsy person, often used as a verb: to move tediously
Shtickel .....	A little piece of something, typically of a baked good
Shul .....	Synagogue, temple
Shloff.....	Sleep
Shloff gezuntahayt .....	Sleep well
Shtetl, shtetlach.....	A little village(s). For Russian Jews, tantamount to a ghetto
Shul .....	Synagogue

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Shvaig! .....	Shut up!
Tahnte .....	Aunt
Tahkie .....	Surely
Taigelach.....	A small, knotted pastry boiled in honeyed syrup
Teivel .....	Devil
Tochter .....	Daughter
Tsoris.....	Trouble and suffering
Tzimmes.....	A traditional compote made of carrots and dried fruits
Tzu mir.....	To me
Untervesh .....	Underwear
Voo zenen dayn kleyder?.....	Where are your clothes?
Vos hebn tsum tansn .....	Themselves, ask to dance
Yahrzeit.....	Anniversary of a person's death commemorated with a candle
Yeshiva bochar.....	A student in Hebrew school, studying to become a Rabbi
Yidden.....	Jews
Yiddisheh .....	Language Jews in central and eastern Europe before the Holocaust
Yontif .....	A Jewish holiday
Zaydeh.....	Grandfather
Zayer gut .....	Very good
Zei gezunt.....	Stay well
Zel Gut dir benchen .....	May God bless you
Zemirot.....	Hymns often sung around the Sabbath table, often in Hebrew