How We Became an American Family

a memoir

Meyer Levin

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Cascarra Publishing
Phoenix

The Life of Nathan Levin

1995

This is the year of 1995. I, Meyer Levin, am the oldest son. I'm 83 years old. My sister, Celia, four years my senior, passed away in 1970. Next is my brother, Philip, 71 years old. The youngest son is Mark, age 68. I am writing as much as I know about our father, Nachum.

My father, Nathan (Nachum), was born in the Ukraine province of Russia, in the town of Alexandrovka in 1880. His father was Mayer, for whom I was named, and his mother was Hodel. I know practically nothing of his childhood. In 1901, he was drafted into the Russian Czar's army. It was the law. It was during the Russo-Japanese War. He was stationed in the Caucasus Mountains. Evidently, he had an aptitude for percussion instruments and was placed in the drum corps. Everyone was compelled to serve five years. He was discharged in 1906. In 1908, he married our mother, Chaya-Adel Piatigorsky. Her Americanized name was Ida. No doubt, the marriage was arranged by a *shadchen* (matchmaker). The love came afterward. Today, the romance comes first, and 50% of the time, the divorce comes later, and the love never, never comes. From what our mother told my sister, Celia, and me, of

Mayer Levinsky, Meyer's paternal grandfather, for whom he is named

the longing and sorrow she suffered during the long years of separation from our father, we just know that they loved each other.

Nachum opened a fish store in Alexandrovka. It was never a financial success. They had three children. The first was my sister Celia. Two years later, a girl named Ethel was born, then me. Ethel, this sweet, unfortunate child, only lived three years. She died of pneumonia. Her last wish was a sleigh ride with bells jingling from the horses' harnesses. The doctor knew that she was dying, yet he told my parents to grant her last wish. She did die that cold winter night in her parents' arms. To this day, I feel their sadness. I was one year old.

The fish store was closed. Our father became an agent for the Singer Sewing Machine Company. That also had a dark side. Traveling by horse and wagon, he would display the machine to the peasant housewife. However, even though the woman wished to own one, Nachum had to close the deal with the husband, who was likely to be drinking vodka in the neighborhood saloon. He had to buy the drinks and drink along with them. At that rate, he would become a drunk sooner than a wealthy salesman. One cold winter day, his head spinning from too many drinks, he drove his horse and wagon, sewing machine, and himself off a bridge into the river below. Fortunately, nearby farmers came to the rescue. It took a team of oxen to pull the whole mess out of the icy river. That was the end of his agency with the Singer Sewing Machine Company.

It was 1912, and there were rumors of an impending war. Our father had already served five years in the Czar's army. It wasn't a picnic for a Jewish boy to bear the vicious anti-Semitism of those times. He wasn't anxious to repeat it.

Nachum and his sister Sarah's husband, Mottel Block, decided to leave their families and travel to America, send home some money, and in a short while, bring them to America. (To keep their son out of the army, Mottel's parents had one of his eardrums punctured. It didn't work. The army took him anyway and put him where he would suffer the most—in the drum corps). Little did they dream that the separation would last for ten years. Our father deposited us with our mother's parents, Favel and Pessie Piatigorsky, who lived in a tiny farm village called a *dorf* where there were never more than five or six Jewish families at any one time.

Bubbe Pessie Piatigorsky, Meyer's maternal grandmother

Zeida (grandfather) had a tiny store that served the modest needs of those very poor farmers. Now that there were three more mouths to feed, Mom had to become the breadwinner. She had a small sewing machine, the kind you operate with a wheel with your right hand and feed the fabric with your left hand. It must have been that the foot pedal was not yet invented. At any rate, she did quite well. She must have been a godsend to the peasant women who needed blouses and skirts. I do know that she worked day and night. Whenever I awoke during the night, there she was, busily turning that little wheel of the sewing machine.

How the two brothers-in-law survived in a strange land, not knowing the language and having no particular skills, is a heartbreaking story that could fill volumes. They took any job available. One job, my father told me, was the hardest he ever had. It was unloading gravel

from a train. They worked with wide shovels that weighed at least thirty pounds when full.

One thing worked in their favor. Eating was cheap. The breweries, in competition with each other, provided long tables with cold cuts, bread, and cheese, free if you bought a five-cent glass of beer.

They had a few cousins in Philadelphia who must have advised them to try living in Allentown, Pennsylvania, where the Jewish community was mostly engaged in the junk business, dealing in paper, rags, and scrap metal. They each had enough money to buy a horse and wagon and began visiting the farmers, who all had barns and were in the habit of storing junk to sell to these Jewish men.

By necessity, it was the custom for Jewish families to open their homes for boarders. That meant food and lodging. Both men benefited.

With everyone in the U.S. expecting war, junk became a much-needed commodity. Pop and Mottel (now Max) denied themselves as much as possible to send whatever they could to us at home in Russia and to save for our leaving for America.

In 1914, World War I began in a life-and-death struggle with Germany. At the same time, Russia went through a revolution to overthrow the oppressive Czarist regime. It was the bloodiest period in world history. The Communist army defeated the Czar's Cossack armies, who in turn vented their rage on Russian Jews. These were the pogroms, where we experienced widespread massacres and the hatred of our Christian neighbors.

The money our father, Nachum, so diligently sent to our mother literally went up in flames during the revolution. When Russia became a Communist state, America broke off all relations. That meant no more mail or any business between the two nations.

Meanwhile, in America, Nachum and Mottel read in the Jewish press about the slaughter, mentioning our own area of Russia, and they were sure that we had died. We stole across the Latvian-Russian border. In the city of Riga, there was an organization called HIAS of America (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society). They specifically searched for broken families. My mother applied for their help, although she had little hope

of finding her husband. After a separation of ten years and no communication for eight of those years, what were the chances?

But they found our father! A dream come true! He brought us to the magical land called America. He had a beautifully furnished home waiting for us in Allentown.

In real life, there is no such thing as "they lived happily ever after." My mother soon perceived that in this town, we newcomers would always bear the stigma of being "greenhorns" or "know-nothings." In a large city like Philadelphia, we had a much better chance of being absorbed.

We moved there in 1923. Mom, Celia, and I rode with the moving van. Our dear father drove the horse, Gertie, and the wagon these sixty miles on a cold and windy March day. It took him at least twelve hours. When he finally drove up, he was frozen stiff. With help, we physically lifted him and got him into our warm house.

Our poor father had to start over again—a strange city, a strange environment, no business, and no job. He moved, knowing all that. But he knew Mom was right. He respected and loved her.

Philadelphians did not save their junk. They threw it out on trash day, so Pop had to find something to do. He had a horse and wagon. He would get up at 4 a.m. each day and go to the wholesale fruit markets to try to learn what it was like. He started by buying bananas. Initially, he worked close to home and found the people were stubborn, offering him less than his cost. Farther away, in another neighborhood, he found the people were more receptive. He bought only the best grade of fruit and found that they were pleased customers. They waited for him, and he began to earn a living.

On May 4, 1924, little brother Philip was born. This is the Philip, who is the father of Scott, Jonathan, and their sister, Cathy. Philip named his son Scott for a fellow naval officer, Scott Julian. They both commanded minesweepers in Wonsan Harbor during the Korean War. Philip saw his good friend perish when his ship struck a mine and was blown to bits. He named his next son Jonathan for our dear father, Nathan. Recently, we were together with Jonathan, his wife, Susy, and

Celia, Phil, and Nathan, April 1943

their three-month-old, lovable, healthy son, Roberto Nathan, named after Susy's father, Roberto, and our father, Nathan, his great-grandfather.

Our parents, Nathan and Ida, lived thirteen happy years after we were reunited in America. In 1935, our mother's loving heart gave up the struggle. Philip was ten at the time, and Mark was eight. I, Meyer, was 23. My father loved his little boys. He and Ida were robbed of ten years of the best time of their married life. They only realized thirteen happy years together. Mom was only 49 years old when she died. Pop's years were mostly all downhill after that. He died at the age of 63.

I should mention that the highlight of their life together was the grand wedding they made for my sister Celia to the man she loved, Joseph Litvin, in 1929.