True Immigrant Stories: Tanya at Ellis Island

Tanya Arden was eight years old when she came here in the early twentieth century with her mother, her older sister, and younger brother.  Years earlier, her father had left Russia to begin life anew in the United States.  The plan was for the family to join him in New York once he had saved enough money to pay for their steerage passage.

One night though, Cossacks invaded their settlement and, in their wild rampage, murdered anyone they could find.  Tanya and her family were in the upstairs loft, preparing to go to sleep.  Two Cossacks burst into the house, found her aunt and cousin who were still downstairs, and killed them.  Even as they heard the screams, Tanya’s mother instructed the children to climb down the ladder outside their house leaning against the loft window.

As the family—the children barefoot—ran over the frozen ground and the small river into the woods on the other side, the soldiers gave chase.  The family ran to a house where an elderly woman lived, the only Christian woman that Tanya’s mother remembered ever being kind to them.  This woman quickly hid them in the back of her house, offering blankets for warmth.

The soldiers soon banged on the woman’s door, asking if she had seen any Jews.  When she said “No,” one soldier threatened her, saying, “Old woman, are you lying?  I’ll kill you where you stand if you’re lying to me!”

The woman, lifted the cross on her necklace and said, “I swear by all that is holy about this cross that I cannot help you.”

Satisfied, the soldiers left, and the next day Tanya and her family fled to a nearby town and took refuge in a deserted synagogue, as did others.  A day later, Tanya’s mother pleaded with an aid worker, who was connected to the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) in New York City, to have someone there locate her husband, because he would not know where they were.  Fortunately, HIAS found her husband, he sent the money to them, and they made their journey to America.

As the ship entered the harbor, the passengers were on deck, cheering and crying.  Tanya’s mother pointed to Lady Liberty and said, through her own tears, “Do you see that statue, children?  Do you know what that statue means?  It means freedom.  Freedom!  Never again will you have to be afraid of who you are or of what you are.  Not in this country!  That’s what that statue means.”

Once their ship docked, Tanya, her family, and other passengers were transported directly to Ellis Island, the first American soil they trod upon.  As luck would have it, they were processed immediately, not having to wait in line as most immigrants do.  The speed of their processing, however, worked against them.

The trouble began when six-year-old Maximilian refused to walk with his mother to the uniformed doctor waiting for them.  Max was terrified of anyone in uniform; uniformed soldiers had attacked them in Russia, killing his aunt and cousin, and chasing them, with the intent to kill them also.  As Tanya’s mother pulled him to the doctor, Max dragged his leg in resistance.  Noting this, the doctor marked an “L” (for lameness) in chalk on Max’s coat.  Then, when the doctor saw the eyes of Tanya’s mother and older sister—still red and swollen from their crying at seeing the Statue of Liberty—he marked their clothing with an “E.”

Only Tanya passed the medical exam.  This meant that, despite the family’s crying protests, she went alone to the dormitory, while her family was sent to the hospital for overnight observation.  Alone, afraid, and sobbing, Tanya lay on her back in her bunk and placed the covers over her head.  Sleeping restlessly, she awoke late in the night when she felt something moving on top of her.  Peeking from under the covers, she saw a rat and screamed, awakening the other immigrants.  No one else saw anything, dismissed the incident as a child’s nightmare, and fell asleep again, except for Tanya, who sat up in bed until dawn.

That morning the hospital medical staff found Max running around the ward with another boy. It was clear the boy was not lame nor, as they discovered, did Tanya’s mother and sister have any eye disease, as their eyes by then were normal.  Cleared, they soon reunited with Tanya, who was overjoyed to be with them again.  Once more they entered the Registry Hall, where they encountered no difficulty in clearing their legal inspection.

After what seemed an endless wait, their father appeared to claim them.  The man seemed to be a stranger to Tanya until she saw her mother’s joyous reaction and her parents embrace one another.  Her father was not a demonstrative man, though, and he did not hug his children.  Instead, he smiled at his eldest, picked up Max in one arm, and extended his other hand to Tanya, saying with a slight smile, “Come.”  Without hesitation, she took his hand and walked beside him, with a happy feeling in her heart that, years later, she told me was one of trust and hope.

Those feelings subsequently proved accurate in the warmth and family stability of Tanya’s remaining childhood and teenage years in the United States.  Later, she would marry, raise two children who went on to lead successful professional lives, and then earn an M.A. degree in sociology in her seventies.

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